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Cross Crossings Cautiously: Uses of African American Vernacular English in American Literature

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CROSS CROSSINGS CAUTIOUSLY:
Uses of African American Vernacular English
in American Literature

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An Honors Project in the Macalester English Department

Advised by Daylanne English

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Abstract

This project uses sociolinguistics to theorize the use of African American Vernacular English (AAVE) in literature across three time periods: the Antebellum era, the post-bellum/Reconstruction era, and the Harlem Renaissance. Different dialects of English encode different power structures, and in order to interrogate those power structures I track how white and black authors represent the language of African American characters on the page and how audiences interpret that language. I find that African American authors tend to embrace the variability and diversity of natural language better than their white counterparts, whose use of literary dialect often falls into essentialist clichés.

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Introduction

In 1926, Anita Scott Coleman published the short story “Cross Crossings Cautiously.” While Coleman never technically lived in Harlem, the themes of her writing and the fact that she published several stories in journals associated with the Harlem Renaissance means that many do consider her a Harlem Renaissance author. The title of “Cross Crossings Cautiously” comes from the sign that Sam Timons, a job-hunting African American man, must puzzle out before walking across a set of railroad tracks. However, as Laura Barrett points out in her essay “‘Mark my words’: Speech, Writing, and Identity in Three Harlem Renaissance Stories,” the idea of crossing also refers to the racial dynamics of the text. Timons runs into a young white girl named Claudia who demands that he take her to the carnival because her parents are busy. He does, and his kindness is rewarded with some unnamed assault when Claudia’s parents learn what has happened. Barrett perceptively points out that the words on the railroad sign can also apply to race, and serve as a warning to both Claudia and Timons to be more cautious about their cross-racial interactions. Neither of them realize that an African American man walking off with a white child might provoke a violent response, and Timons pays the price for this lack of foresight. In particular, Barrett discusses the verbal elements of this crossing, noting that the semi-literate Timon’s struggle with the railroad sign emphasises the difficulty of crossing between oral (coded black) and written worlds (coded white). Yet this analysis can go one step farther- “crossing” is also a very specific term in sociolinguistics that denotes when a speaker switches into a language that is not their own. Whereas code-switching involves a

speaker transitioning between two or more of their own languages, crossing involves a transgression across some kind of racial, social, or ethnic boundary into linguistic territory not one's own. It is notoriously difficult to say where one language begins and another one ends, especially in closely related dialects, so identifying crossing and saying definitively that a speaker does not "own" a language is a tricky thing. However, in general crossing involves more mimicry than mastery of a language.

In the few pieces of dialogue in "Cross Crossings Cautiously," neither Timon nor Claudia speaks perfect Standard English. He talks to an imaginary overseer as he walks—"Just so it's work so's I can earn somethin'" - and she addresses him directly- "Lo -Mister... Gee... Mister, you 'fraid of me?" (Coleman 170). While there is not enough evidence here to determine if they are actually speaking the same dialect, their speech clearly differs from the narration around it, and they do share a tendency to drop initial and final segments of words. Claudia's might genuinely speak this language, but readers- both when the story was published and today- have been conditioned to see Timon's speech as genuine and Claudia's as atypical. In other words, literary dialect of this kind is more associated with African Americans than with white Americans. Therefore, we can see Claudia as engaging in a kind of crossing here. Yet in the end, despite the fact that her language stands out as non-standard just as much as his does, and the fact that she was the one who instigated the trip to the fair, Timons is the one who is punished. Claudia may safely cross these lines, but for Timons even the smallest infraction may lead to lynching.

In the history of American literature, authors of all races have used literary dialect in order to achieve their different artistic and political goals. Furthermore, as a written representation of an oral phenomenon, literary dialect blurs the line between oral and written forms of literature. These complexities mean that the use of literary dialect is inherently fraught with crossings of a linguistic, racial, cultural, oral, and written nature. My project is to track the literary representation of different dialects, especially African American dialects, across three different time periods- Antebellum (1830-1865), post-bellum/the Reconstruction period (1865-1910), and the Harlem Renaissance (1910-1940). I will investigate what different author's use of literary dialect reveals about their works, and how the use of literary dialect has changed over time. Because representations of dialect on the page differ from actual spoken dialect in some key ways that I will discuss below, I use the term "literary dialect" to differentiate the written form from spoken varieties of English.

I have chosen to focus on the above time periods in particular because they encompass some key historical events- the rise and fall of dialect literature as a genre, the drastic sociopolitical changes of the American Civil War and the Reconstruction, and the first great flowering of African American arts and culture. My focus on African American speech in particular comes from two facts-first, it is by far the style of speech most often represented in literary dialect, which gave me no shortage of evidence or research materials. Second, the language encodes a society's values, attitudes, and power dynamics. As James Baldwin puts it, "Language, incontestably, reveals the speaker. Language, also, far more

dubiously, is meant to define the other..." (Baldwin). Understanding how Americans have historically thought and written about the powers of language can draw our attention to how we do the same today.

The use of literary dialect in American Literature is the *topic* of this project, but the central goal is the application of sociolinguistic theory and a linguistic attitude towards language to literary analysis. While lay people might think that, because they both deal with words, the studies of literature and linguistics must overlap, in many ways the materials and theories used in each discipline are incompatible. Linguists generally study natural, spoken language using quantitative tools, while literature is usually a qualitative process focused on written language. The greatest issue here is that written and spoken languages are very different beasts, both in how we perceive them and in the kinds of data that they carry. However, I believe that in this specific case each field can assist the other. First, I will show that theories from sociolinguistics (the area of linguistics that focuses on how society shapes language use), especially crossing, code-switching, and performativity, can bring fresh and interesting insights to these literary texts. Second, an analysis of literary dialect reveals how people think about and respond to language and language ideologies, two questions vital to the study of sociolinguistics.

When I say that I wish to apply "a linguistic attitude towards language" to the study of literature, I refer to a point of view that embraces variation and change in speech, one that is descriptivist (describing language for what it is) rather than prescriptivist (the belief that only language that follows proper

grammatical rules are valid). The general stance among linguists is that all dialects, all forms of language, are valid.¹ They assign no hierarchy of value to languages- the only power that a language has is the power we give it. A quote frequently attributed to sociolinguist Max Weinreich sums up this belief nicely: “a language is just a dialect with an army and a navy.” In other words, the dialect with the most political, social, or financial influence claims the title of “language” for itself, despite the fact that competing varieties may be almost identical, or even have more speakers. *Power* makes a particular linguistic characteristic the standard, not any inherent value. Of course, that doesn’t mean that this power isn’t real- it has real effects on the way that we speak and listen to language. It is therefore the job of the sociologist to uncover these power dynamics, and to determine how they influence language and how language use influences them. In general, I hope that scholars of linguistics reading this project will reconsider the usefulness of literary texts in their research, and that students of literature will pay closer attention to how they respond to language variation in literature.

While the use of literary dialect as linguistic evidence is not common, there have been several studies in recent years that have applied tools of linguistic analysis to literature. Most of these involve some kind of quantitative analysis of the use of different dialectal forms in the text. The most extensive of these has been Lisa Cohen Minnick’s book *Dialect and Dichotomy: Literary*

¹ Admittedly, this belief is not universally applied and there are some subtleties to it that I’m not going to go into here. However, for the purposes of this paper we can definitively say that linguists consider AAVE and SAE to be two equally valid dialects of English. As sociolinguist Walt Wolfram points out in his essay “Language, Ideology, and Dialect: Understanding the Oakland Ebonics Controversy,” during said controversy the Senate subcommittee charged with determining what role AAVE should play in the classroom could not find a single linguist willing to testify against AAVE (Wolfram 111).

Representations of African American Speech, which uses the tools of computational linguistics to look at a handful of texts written between 1880 and 1930. Minnick, like Allison Burkette in “The use of literary dialect in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*” and Diana Dial Reynolds in “Signifying in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*: Harriet Jacobs’ Use of African American English,” compares the linguistic feature that different authors use with the features that linguists believe would have been common in the relevant time period and location. Their focus is on whether or not the depiction of dialect is accurate.

I did not engage in a detailed quantitative analysis like this for two reasons- first, because I did not have the time or technical skills to do so when I began this project, and second, because I believe that an analysis that focuses only on linguistic accuracy reveals little of interest about a text. Major errors may reveal something about the engagement that an author actually has with the community they are representing, but in general I am less concerned with the ability of an author to recognize phonological or syntactic difference than with how they actually choose to represent that difference on the page. Furthermore, to find accurate historical linguistic information for every single text that I consider would be next to impossible, especially since many of the early texts predate the development of audio recording. As Philip Leigh pointedly states in his linguistic analysis of literary dialect in plantation fiction, "...the very urge to celebrate or condemn authors on the basis of linguistic accuracy is hindering our ability to borrow responsibly from linguistic and computational tools..." (359). His analysis focuses on actually describing the ways that different authors use literary dialect

instead of attempting to make simple “binary verdicts” about accuracy. While my analysis lacks a quantitative element, I have tried to focus less on how well a particular text approximates AAVE and more on where and how they choose to differentiate it from SAE.

Because the function of this paper is in part to analyze the relationship between language and power, I have thought long and hard about the terms that I use. The two kinds of English that I spend the most time on in this paper have been called many different things by many different people. The first is the English taught in schools, spoken on newscasts, and the language that most literature is written in. In my readings I have seen it referred to as General English, Mainstream United States English (MUSE), the Language of Wider Communication (LWC), and Standard American English. I have chose to use the last of these, Standard American English (SAE), for two reasons. First, it is one of the most commonly used and widely understood term in most linguistic research today. Second, I believe that the word “standard” denotes the fact that SAE is in fact the dialect of power, while at the same time emphasizing the fact that it has *been standardized*. It is the standard because it has been made that way by very specific social and political influences, and I believe that it is important to keep the deliberate nature of that process in mind.

Next is the dialect spoken by many, although of course not all, African Americans in the United States. This language has been called Ebonics, Black English, African American Language, and African American Vernacular English. I have chosen the last of these, African American Vernacular English (AAVE)

largely because it is the mostly widely used and most respectful term. I also must note here that AAVE is not monolithic. While speakers of AAVE often share several distinctive linguistic features, such as the use of double negatives, consonant cluster simplification, fortition that turns word initial [ð] (the voiced ‘th’ in words like ‘that’) into [d], and the realization of the word final “-ing”, [ɪŋ], as “-n”, [n], many, many regional and personal variations exist. Therefore, when I identify something as AAVE in this project, this means that it belongs to the wide continuum of dialect features that different researchers have identified as originating in the African American community. In order to identify these features, I have used the summary of common AAVE features provided by John R. Rickford in his book *African American Vernacular English*, as well as several shorter essays that I will discuss as they become relevant, as the basis for my analysis.

However, in this paper I have also occasionally followed the conclusion drawn by Scanlon and Wassink in their research of middle-class AAVE speakers in the Pacific Northwest- that "...an African American identity may be demonstrated linguistically as differentiation from the local norm"(206). They make this claim because they want to avoid categorically equating certain features with “true” AAVE, and to avoid the implication that “speakers who display variable use of core [AAVE] forms or limited use of only a subset of forms are less ‘black’” (206). The ways in which speakers (and authors) can claim a specific identity are subtle, and I want to be open to all of them. This view of AAVE is also useful in my study for a more particular logistical reason- because literary dialect is a

constructed approximation of a specific spoken dialect, it cannot capture all of the things that make a language unique. In fact, any attempt to perfectly transcribe every single linguistic element would likely render the text unreadable. Authors make deliberate choices about which features to include and which to ignore, and those choices do not always match up. Therefore, to demand that all depictions of AAVE contain some minimal set of markers would lead to errors in both my linguistic and my literary analysis.

The final term that I would like to specifically define is “dialect.” I use this word throughout this paper as a linguist would- to denote a particular variant of a language within a wider language continuum. While some people take offense to their language being referred to as a dialect, I must reiterate that in the world of linguistics the word does not imply hierarchy, but variation. According to this definition, both AAVE and SAE are distinct dialects of English.

This study is divided into three chapters, with each focused on a specific era. Obviously this is a long period of time, just over 100 years, and there was no way for me to include every relevant text. Notable absences include the works of Joel Chandler Harris, Paul Laurence Dunbar, and most of the Harlem Renaissance. In order to keep the scope of this project manageable, I focused on reading texts that were especially popular or influential at their time of publishing, texts that are particularly representative of a certain genre or theme, and texts that do something unique or exciting with literary dialect. I do not pretend to have done more than scratch the surface of each era, but I hope that I have still managed to be thorough in my analysis.

In her discussion of “Cross Crossings Cautiously”, Laura Barrett also points out that crossings call to mind chiasmus, a literary device that Henry Louis Gates Jr famously identified as one of the central parts of the African American literary tradition. Chiasmus, which literally means crossing, entails the repetition of two concepts in reverse order. Broadly, it is a device of reversal and subversion, of establishing two extremes then blurring the lines between them. As Barrett puts it, crossing “simultaneously signifies adversity and attainment, obstruction and hybridization, opposition and reciprocity, erasure and signature, misunderstanding and mark, duplicity and truth, interdiction and intersection” (67).

While in this short story Claudia’s crossing reinforces power dynamics, crossing also has the potential to act in a more chiasmic way- blurring lines, questioning essentialist assumptions, and pushing at the edges of racial and cultural boundaries. Dialect in American literature must navigate the lines between black and white, oral and written, intent and result, and expected and unexpected. In my analysis, I find that white authors tend to not walk the line as dexterously, and often fall into essentialist cliches when representing African Americans. Their depictions of AAVE lack variation- for them the language you use reveals who you are, with no room for variation or agency. On the other hand, African American authors tend to embrace variation and inbetweenness and blur the line between spoken and written. In “Cross Crossings Cautiously” Claudia can cross linguistically and challenge racial boundaries with no consequences, but Timons’ crossing likely results in his death. The public’s historical response to crossing and literary dialect mirrors this dynamic- white authors have historically

been more respected and received more praise for their use of literary dialect, while African American authors have often faced criticism on all sides, even from other African American authors. To cross is not an easy task, but it is almost always an interesting and productive one.

Chapter I: Code-Switching in the Antebellum Period

Since the birth of sociolinguistics in the 1960s, one of the key topics of study has been code-switching- “the use of two or more languages in one speech exchange by bi- or multilingual speakers” (Bailey). Researchers have investigated what parts of language code-switching involves, in which circumstances it occurs, and what might motivate it. Generally, they have found that this process is complex, and that factors not limited to class, race, gender, and situation all may come into play when an individual code-switches. For example, in Michael Scanlon and Alicia Beckford Wassink’s study, “African American English in Urban Seattle: Accommodation and Intraspeaker Variation in the Pacific Northwest”, the researchers looked at changes in the vowel quality of one individual, called JH, across conversations with 18 different speakers.

In general, they found that vowel changes associated with African American Vernacular English (AAVE) appeared to a different degree and with a different frequency depending on the race of the speaker, JH’s familiarity with that speaker, and the degree to which that speaker produced the shift in question. Scanlon and Wassink emphasize the fact that it is impossible to correlate the shifts definitively with any one of these variables. Furthermore, they also claim that “When considering authenticity in [AAVE] speech... sociolinguists should consider not just “categorical” (or even high-frequency) [AAVE] feature use as the only evidence of authentic use—we should also attend to speakers’ fluctuations, qualitative changes in the use of forms, and the effectiveness of these

in the interaction” (220). In other words, they call for a greater acknowledgement in the diverse ways that African American speakers may use features of AAVE, and argue against essentialist or deterministic theories of code-switching that presuppose the linguistic character of a speaker based on certain characteristics. I find that an author’s willingness to adhere to this advice, to embrace variability and linguistic ambiguity, is the factor that differentiates a positive depiction of African American characters and AAVE from a negative, racist one. The difficulty in the Antebellum period is that, as we shall shortly see, one of the key literary projects of this time was the development of a new American national identity, an effort that required stereotype and the flattening of complexity. As Jane Tompkins puts it in her groundbreaking book *Sensational Designs: The cultural work of American fiction 1790-1860*, stereotypes are what allow novels “to operate as instruments of cultural self-definition... they convey enormous amounts of cultural information in an extremely condensed form... as the telegraphic expressions of complex values, stereotyped characters are *essential* to popularly successful writers” (xvii).

In these three decades before the American Civil War, the rise of the Old Southwestern humor tradition brought a new kind of literature to American readers. This hugely popular genre focused on the rural frontiersmen of the American Southwest, with an emphasis on their decidedly nonstandard speech. Their malapropisms and exotic phonology were sources of humor, but their creative use of idiom and insightful observations of life, especially the lives of pretentious city dwellers, were framed as something to admire, something

eminently American. Indeed, it is no coincidence that this genre emerged at the same time that Andrew Jackson's political populism began to place a strong emphasis on the importance of the (white) common man to American identity and politics. The six presidents preceding Jackson were all members of the revolutionary elite, and he took pride in being a departure from that upper class tradition. Much of his rhetoric targeted what he saw as the continued aristocratic nature of the American government—for example, in his veto of a bill continuing the Bank of the United States, he expressed his regret that “the rich and powerful too often bend the acts of government to their selfish purposes” (Jackson).

A more tangible representation of this culture shift was the mass repealing of state laws that limited suffrage to property owners and taxpayers. By the middle of the 1850s almost all adult white men could vote, putting political power into the hands of the common man in a very literal way. The United States of the early nineteenth century was increasingly proud of its small-town, rural character and impatient with the educated, aristocratic elites who dominated its politics. The rise of dialect literature at this time was just another manifestation of this trend.

American dialect literature of this time. It “reflected an attempt at a democratization of literature, or at least a rebellion against more genteel literary forms that had been popular earlier in the nineteenth century and abroad” (Minnick 4). Previous uses of literary dialect in literature, most of which came from Britain, used dialect as a source of humor, mocking their subjects for an inability to speak “the king's English.” While Old Southwestern literature

sometimes did slip into a similarly mocking tone, it was just as frequently a celebration and recognition of these speakers.

These decades also saw the formation of Standard American English (SAE) as a recognizably distinct entity from British English. In David Simpson's book *The Politics of American English, 1776-1850*, he claims that American English was well recognized by the 1850s but this process already would have been well underway in the 1830s and 40s. Thanks to the efforts of thinkers like Noah Webster, who worked extensively on a standardized orthography for SAE because he believed that "...a *national language* is a band of *national union*..." (Webster 87), Americans increasingly identified themselves with this particular variety of English. Of course, identifying the pure American spirit with a particular dialect of English meant that anybody who did *not* speak this dialect threatened the national character. Many intellectuals warned that drastic variation among speakers would lead to national disunity and intellectual downfall. For these prescriptive grammarians, dialects were corruptions of a pure language, and their critiques often had a certain moralist tone, describing dialects as perversions or degradations. One anonymous author in *The Knickerbocker* declared that "The greatest danger of corruption to which [the English language] is exposed is innovation... When a language becomes substantially settled, innovation must be considered a kind of literary treason.... Language is the common property of those who speak and who write it... No single man, and no small body of men, have a right to interfere with the common property of all"

(215). For this author, the use of any dialect other than SAE speech is tantamount to treason; it is willful destruction of public property.

However, despite the outcry of watchdogs like these, dialect literature and its plain-spoken challenge to the educated elite were hugely popular. Many speakers embraced regional variants as expressions of the national spirit- to them, the inventiveness and independence of these forms of English were the purest expression of America's enterprising nature. Consider this praise of Sut Lovingood, one of, if not the most popular characters from the Old Southwestern tradition: "Few persons who have reached the age of manhood have neglected to read the yarns of Sut Lovingood... Every lover of true original wit, everyone who loves mirth, loves Sut Lovingood and honors him as one of the greatest humorists who ever lived" (Denison Daily News). Sut, an illiterate laborer from the Appalachian backwoods, speaks in a nigh indecipherable dialect and plays pranks on his neighbors and family. For readers of this time some degree of independence and originality in language was to be admired and celebrated because it also represented independence and originality of character.

The works of humorist George Washington Harris, the man who created Sut Lovingood, are quintessential illustrations of this. Despite the fact that the title of the collected Lovingood stories calls Sut, a "nat'ral born durn'd fool," neither his foolishness nor his thick use of heavy Appalachian dialect stop him from speaking out against the pretensions of the educated "aristocracy"; indeed, in some ways they aid him in this mission. The introduction of *Sut Lovingood: Yarns Spun by a 'Nat'ral Born Durn'd Fool'*, takes the form of a dialogue between Sut

and the author. In it, Sut makes his stance on literacy plain: “Sumtimes, George, I wishes I cut read an’ write, jis’ a littil; but then hits bes’ es hit am, fur ove all the fools the worild hes to contend wif, the edicated wuns am the worst; they breeds ni ontu all the devilment a-gwine on” (Harris ix). At first glance the reader is overwhelmed by the many ways that this dialect differs from the SAE narration around it. Not only does it represent genuine phonological changes like the deletion of the word-final consonant in the word “and” (a common process even in SAE), Harris also uses heavy eye dialect. Eye dialect is the technique of spelling a word incorrectly, but not in a way that changes its pronunciation. It does not represent any kind of auditory reality, but rather adds a certain flavor or tone to the speech. In the quote above spelling “sometime” as “sumtimes” and “ones” as “wuns” are examples of eye dialect. Because of the level of detail in this representation, readers might at first struggle to simply interpret the language. It takes a moment for them to realize that they have been implicitly insulted by Sut’s dismissal of the literate. In this moment and in many others, Sut gets away with potentially incendiary or scandalous comments by masking them in literary dialect.

When Harris starts suggesting an assortment of flowery dedications for the collection, things like “DEDICATED TO THE MEMORY OF ELBRIDGE GERRY EASTMAN... GRATEFUL MEMORY DROPS A TEAR AMONG THE FLOWERS, AS AFFECTION STREWS THEM O'ER HIS GRAVE” (xiii), Sut mocks him and instead dedicates the book “TU THE MAN UR 'OMAN, HUEVER THEY BE, WHAT *DON'T* READ THIS YERE BOOK,” (xv) i.e. to

the illiterate like himself. Despite the fact that the power in this situation is ostensibly in the hands of the literate author, Sut more often than not succeeds in mocking that author's poor understanding of the 'real' world and in getting his own way. His lack of an education represents authenticity and honesty, not inadequacy. While Sut is perhaps not somebody that you would want to invite over for dinner Harris still presents him with humor and a degree of respect. This dichotomy is apparent in his first description of Sut- "a queer looking, long legged, short bodied, small headed, white haired, hog eyed, funny sort of a genius" (19). He is uncivilized, grotesque in appearance, and sometimes downright cruel in his pranks, but the text still claims that he has a worthwhile voice and wisdom to share.

Sut is not the only one to speak in a unique dialect in this text, however. In the short story "Sut Assisting at a Negro Night-Meeting," the attendees of said meeting speak a dialect distinct of their own: "Missus kill me shuah yu lib, ef I totes *dis* stink home wid me. Hu got eny sinamint draps?" (165). Just a casual glance at the shape of this sentence will reveal that it is in a language totally different from Sut's. For example, the voiced dental fricative /ð/ changes to the voiced alveolar stop /d/ in 'this/dis.' This particular word-initial change is very common in many dialects of AAVE but not at all present in Sut's Appalachian dialect.

Of course, the voices and actions of these speakers are not graced with the same undercurrent of approval and admiration that Sut is given- the whole plot of the story sets them up only as a slapstick punch-line to Sut's trickery. For no

reason other than his own amusement he sets off stink bombs in the church, then unleashes hordes of angry hornets upon the congregation when it retreats to a nearby barn. Of course the plot itself is astonishingly racist in the way that it turns physical assault of the African American characters into a source of comedy, but the descriptions of the voices and bodies of those characters add a whole new level to the bigotry. Sut's speech may be nonstandard and his actions unsophisticated but he is still the 'hero' of the story. We are supposed to laugh with him, not at him. Here, the narrator describes the African American character's voices as animalistic and sub-human: "Sich nises - screechin like painters, cryin, hollerin, a few a-cussin, an' more a-jinin em, beggin, prayin, groanin, gruntin, nickerin, an' wun or two fool wuns singin" (167). Most of the noises described in this passage are non-verbal (groaning, hollering, crying), if not straight-up animalistic (grunting, nickering, screeching). The fact that praying and singing, key parts of the slave night meetings, are included in this litany marks the whole of African American oral culture as subhuman. The descriptions of their bodies only support this image. The preacher's nose is a 'snout', when he smells the stink bomb Sut says that he smells the air exactly like an old steer, and that "he shook his hed till his years slapt like a hog's when he's a-gittin mad" (162). When Sut releases the hornets one man flees on all fours, a woman yowls like a hound, and another man runs "rat-like" into a closet.

While Sut celebrates the uniqueness of the American voice, it is clear that not all American voices are acceptable to Harris. The features that endeared Sut Lovingood to his audience- a distinctive voice and physical presence- do not work

the same way for African American characters. While the audience may forgive Sut's less-socially acceptable features because of his 'genuineness' and critical insights about the world, black bodies and voices are stripped off individuality and divorced from empathy. They exist primarily for the entertainment of the white man; Sut treats them like toys to be manipulated and discarded. Despite the intense violence and physical harm that Sut's hornets cause (Stampeding farm animals catch several people in their carts and harnesses, dragging them behind, and one man gets locked in a cupboard with a large part of the hornet swarm), he never expresses any concern for their safety or indeed, any emotion other than derisive amusement towards them. Here, cultural and dialectal differences are signs of inferiority, not regional pride. Their divergent speech and grotesque bodies do not represent the growing nation's vision of itself, and therefore are not celebrated as Sut's voice is in this text. To look for examples of code-switching or differentiation between nameless characters, is laughable. Linguistically, this text is composed of easy answers and clear symbols.

In many ways the dialect tradition to which Sut belongs is the inverse genre or mirror image of another popular form of the time- the sentimental novel. Works like those of George Washington Harris celebrate the masculine, uncouth figures on the fringes of society; they laugh at, even celebrate the wild and often amoral actions of their subjects. Sentimentality, on the other hand, is a genre focused on the feminine experience. As Tompkins puts it in *Sentimental Designs*, this genre is a "monumental effort to reorganize culture from the woman's point of view" (Tompkins 124). It celebrates religion, domestic stability, and purports

to give moral guidance to society as a whole. However, both genres emerge from the same cultural landscape and as such they both work to build a national mythos based on value of the “common person” rather than on the power of the upperclass. The difference between them is that one roots its exceptionalist doctrine in the image of the rugged frontiersman, the other in the cult of domesticity and the ideal of republican motherhood.

The paradigmatic sentimental text is Harriet Beecher Stowe’s novel *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. Not only is it deeply sentimental, it was a certifiable phenomenon in its day- it sold over 50,000 copies in six months and was translated into a dozen language (True Republic). Contemporary reviews not only praised its moral and literary value, but it’s national spirit as well: “Nine-tenths of the good books written in this country might, for all we can see, have been as easily written in England or on the continent. Only the tenth book bears the stamp of an American grown and is... born of the soil. Such a book is this of Mrs. Stowe" (Christian Inquirer). Another proclaims that they would spread it “till every family in the land had read it; till Northward and Southward, Eastward and Westward it had become familiar, (as thank God, it bids fair to be!) as household words” (The Independent). Its is impossible to overstate the influence of this novel on the popular imagination of the time; it inspired plays, songs, toys, visual art, and even souvenir spoons. Stowe’s vision of America resonated deeply with her readers, and her characters entrenched themselves in the popular imagination.

Although not as extensively as Harris, Stowe also frequently writes in literary dialect. Despite the fact that *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* is an abolitionist text and

ostensibly against the blatant racism seen in “Sut Assisting at a Negro Night-Meeting,” the images that we get of the black body and voice are in many ways just as static and dismissive as Harris’ work. Stowe’s goal is to transform blackness into something more sympathetic and palatable for her white-middle class audience, but she attempts to do this merely by adjusting the connotations attached to the image, not by disrupting the essentialist nature of the image. As we shall see, despite her attempts to humanize them, her African American characters are still primitivist caricatures created for the pleasure and edification of the white, middle-class gaze.

Uncle Tom is “a large, broad-chested, powerfully-made man, of a full glossy black” with a face of “truly African features” (Stowe 19-20), and he uses AAVE. In other words, between his size, his skin color, and his speech, he is everything that white Americans are taught to mistrust and fear. As alarming as the physical threat is the cultural threat- his use of AAVE rather than SAE represents a symbolic divergence from the values of mainstream American society. As established above, Americans of this time were especially conscious of the link between language and nation, and Tom’s nonstandard speech is an implicit rejection of that nation. To Stowe’s credit, however, one of the novel’s central projects is subverting and challenging the images her readers have of black bodies and voices by deliberately targeting certain negative stereotypes in her characterization and plot. For example, Tom may be large but his is gentle and always conscientious. After describing a physical form that her audiences might find threatening or alien she goes on to say that his face is “characterized by a

steady good sense, united with much kindness and benevolence. There was something about his whole air self-respecting and dignified, yet united with a confiding and humble simplicity” (20). His speech, too, is humble rather than ignorant: “the simple, hearty, sincere style of his exhortations might have edified even better educated persons. Nothing could exceed the touching simplicity, the childlike earnestness, of his prayer” (27).

Instead of laughing at Tom’s speech or treating it as morally degenerate, Stowe uses it to characterize him as genuine and honest. Essentially she takes the primitivist fascination that Harris utilizes in his Sut stories and filters it through a sentimental lens. Like Sut’s Appalachian dialect, Tom’s AAVE is a sign of authenticity- it shows that he is untouched by the amoral society that Stowe frequently mocks for its corruption. He is closer to a state of nature, and therefore more pure. These supposedly “simple” men can see through the pretensions and hypocrisy of more cultured citizens- Sut calls out the ostentatious language of Harris’ dedication for the volume of stories and Tom calls out a supposedly Christian nation for its treatment of slaves. Most readers would not have wanted their neighbor or children to talk like Tom does, but they can still respect the qualities that his speech represents.

Of course, while Stowe’s use of dialect does challenge racial assumptions in some ways, it also is a method of control. By framing Tom’s speech as childish and simple she takes control of African American bodies and voices and redefines them in a way that makes them less threatening to white readers. Indeed, these readers adored Tom; one reviewer describes him as an “ebony statue of Christlike

patience” and claimed that no human heart can refuse him (The National Era).

This strategy means that all representations of African Americans and AAVE in this novel are crafted solely in response to the white gaze. Stowe is not interested in writing deep and diverse characters who speak a complex realistic language. she wants to create easily decipherable symbols that her white middle-class readers can learn lessons from.

This results in a disturbingly generic use of dialect, one that includes only one single case of African American characters code-switching. Otherwise, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* features a perfect correspondence between the use of AAVE and skin color. The speech of Tom, Chloe, Topsy, and all of the other dark skinned characters is full of dialect markers, but George and Eliza Harris' light-skinned family speak SAE. George, for example, “...talked so fluently, held himself so erect, looked so handsome and manly that his master began to feel an uneasy consciousness of inferiority” (12). This standard speech represents the embrace of middle class values and domesticity. ‘Look,’ Stowe is saying, ‘clearly these people are not so different from you and I.’ Damningly, the only example of African American characters code-switching is when Eliza and George say “mas’r” instead of “master” several times. In this novel the use of this form is clearly racialized- the only white character to use it is Mr. St Clare, and even then his used is directed at his slaves and seems decidedly self-conscious: “Here, you all— Mammy, Jimmy, Polly, Sukey—glad to see Mas’r?” (140). Despite the fact that George and Eliza are largely assimilated into the educated middle class this marker of servitude still creeps its way into their vocabulary to mark their social

and racial status. Aside from this one racially charged instance, every other African American character in the novel speaks only in the dialect Stowe assigns them.

This blanket, essentialist treatment of AAVE is even more striking when compared to how Stowe treats the speech of her lower class white characters. For them, there is no absolutist moral correspondence between dialect and character or dialect and class. For example, Mr. Symmes, the man who helps Eliza up after her escape across the icy river, does not speak in SAE “Yer a brave gal, now, whoever ye ar!” (52). In his mouth this nonstandard speech is a marker of humility and instinctive morality; like Tom, he has not been corrupted or miseducated by society. Contrast him to the slaver Haley, whose speech is described as “free and easy in defiance of Murry’s Grammar”(3). In this case his nonstandard speech goes hand in hand with his moral failings. The villainous Simon Legree also occasionally slips into dialect when speaking with his field hands: “I’d a flogged her into ‘t...only there’s such a press o’ work, it don’t seem wuth a while to upset her jist now. She’s slender; but these yer slender gals will bear half killin’ to get their own way!” (300-301). This is remarkable because when he is speaking with Cassy or George Shelby he uses SAE- he code-switches. The most despicable character in the novel has more agency and flexibility in his speech than any of the African American characters.

An examination of Stowe’s use of dialect gives special insights into the political and social work done by *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, and of the national image it seeks to develop. Stowe’s America is religious, free of slavery, and all of its

African American characters fit perfectly into a colorist racial hierarchy, one that does not threaten the hegemony of white society. These “figures of speech” exist only as white America wishes them to exist- they are either dark-skinned, earnest primitives or well-educated middle class mulattoes. There is no room for complexity or variance, no room for choice or code-switching. In this text, AAVE is nothing more than a gimmick for white ears.

Published in 1861, nine years after *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* and at the dawn of the Civil War, Harriet Jacob’s autobiographical novel *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* enters into a fascinating dialogue with Stowe’s work. This semi-autobiographical novel tells the story of Linda Brent, a slave from North Carolina who escapes the sexual harassment of her master by entering into a relationship with another white man. After giving birth to two children she hides in a garret for seven years before finally escaping to the North. In recent years scholarship on the novel has praised Jacobs for her simultaneous embrace of and subversion of literary conventions that seek to limit her. Foremost in this work is the classic essay “Loopholes of Retreat: Architecture and Ideology in Harriet Jacobs’s *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*,” in which Valerie Smith argues that the rules of sentimental fiction that seek to confine Linda actually represent sites in which she can exercise some measure of freedom. Her apparent submission to the sentimental expectations of her audience allows her to challenge social conventions in other spaces and gain some unexpected agency. For example, when she admits to entering into an extramarital relationship with Mr. Sands, something that would be unthinkable in most sentimental novels, she famously

states that “in looking back, calmly, on the events of my life, I feel that the slave woman ought not to be judged by the same standards as others” (Jacobs 71).

While she follows the conventions of sentimentality by expressing shame in her decision, she also takes this moment of concession to make a bold claim about the corruption of slavery as an institution.

As we shall see, Jacobs’s work with literary dialect uses similar tricks- she may occasionally speak in Stowe’s ‘language,’ but it is almost always for her own benefit, and she never wholly bows to Stowe’s vision of what African Americans in sentimental literature should look like. Her use of AAVE, like many other authors writing in the antebellum period, reveals an attempt to define what it means to be an acceptable American and a properly categorized racial figure.

While she does maintain some of the value judgments and moral calculi that Stowe worked to establish, she almost always uses those in a strategic way, and they are by no means universalized. Her openness to variation and change makes her use of dialect more subtle and fine-grained than Stowe. There is humanity and agency in these voices to a degree not present in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*.

The first instance of AAVE that we see in Jacobs appears in the speech of a woman whose seven children were all sold away in a single day: “Gone! All gone! Why don’t God kill me?”(19). Here we have just one small grammatical change- the use of “do” when we might expect the second person verb “does” in SAE. This however is standard in AAVE, many dialects of which don’t inflect present tense verbs for person. The simple and succinct nature of this utterance is striking, especially when compared to the sentimental grandstanding that makes

up most of the maternal dialogue in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Instead of using dialect as a tool to augment the pathos of the scene, Jacobs lets the tragedy largely speak for itself. The dialect seems present here because it comes authentically from the speaker herself, not because the author wants to shape her character or the audience's response in a certain way.

That isn't to say that Jacobs doesn't ever use dialect in a sentimental fashion. Uncle Fred's speech could have come right out of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, both in the thickness of the dialect and the sentimental tone. "You nebber gibbs me a lesson dat I don't pray to God to help me to understan' what I spells and what I reads. And he *does* help me, chile. Bress his holy name!" (92). Fred, much like Tom, is pious, plain-spoken, and almost painfully earnest. He is meant to tug at the reader's heartstrings, and his dialect only serves to augment the emotional effect. However, Uncle Fred is no Uncle Tom; he doesn't hesitate when Linda warns him that education among slaves is illegal. He is willing to break the rules and defy the law to gain literacy, something that Tom would never do. In general, Jacobs allows her AAVE speaking characters to be morally ambiguous in a way that Stowe does not. Jenny, another enslaved woman, acts as a minor villain- in the early days of Linda's concealment she is concerned that Jenny will come looking for her. Later in the novel there is a high possibility that that Jenny has seen Linda in Aunt Marthy's storeroom, so Linda is forced to flee because she knows that Jenny will immediately report her presence to Dr. Flint. Jacobs does sometimes use literary dialect to mark moral superiority like Stowe does, but it can also just *be*.

Jacobs also complicates Stowe's static image of AAVE by challenging the genetic nature of her depiction of dialect. While light skinned characters are still more likely to speak SAE than dark skinned characters, there is still room for variation within a family, or even in the speech of a single individual. For example, Fanny, the woman who escapes to the north with Linda, speaks SAE, but her mother speaks AAVE. More strikingly, Linda's Grandmother, known to all as Aunt Martha, demonstrates a few instances of minor code-switching in moments of high emotion. While she normally speaks SAE, when Dr. Flint comes to harass Linda in Aunt Martha's house she snaps back: "I tell you what, Dr. Flint...you ain't got many more years to live, and you'd better be saying your prayers. It will take 'em all, and more too, to wash the dirt off your soul" (106). Similarly, when Jenny might have seen Linda in the storeroom Aunt Martha panics and sends Linda off: "The boat ain't gone yet...I ain't got another word to say against it now..." (195). In these moments of anger and fear she code-switches so that her speech is somewhere between AAVE and SAE- she uses 'ain't' several times, and replaces 'have' with 'got'. These small details imply a life history and a degree of linguistic diversity that is wholly absent from the work of Stowe and Harris. Aunt Martha's speech is not mandated by her race and class, it is a living thing that may change from utterance to utterance.

Of course, despite the variability present in the speech of side characters, we still must contend with the fact that Linda, the light-skinned heroine of the novel, speaks entirely in SAE. This standard speech differentiates Linda (and her immediate family) from the other African American characters in the book. First,

it is important to note again that not all African Americans speak AAVE, and, as Scanton and Wassink warn in their introduction, "...there is a danger in equating categorical or frequent use of core AAE features with expression of African American identity, because it implies that higher-status speakers who display variable use of core AAE forms or limited use of only a subset of forms are less "black" than speakers who deploy a full range of core AAE features (206). Additionally, this apparent snub to AAVE is actually a savvy linguistic move. One of the reasons that the middle class, white readers to whom this book is specifically dedicated are supposed to embrace Linda is because she speaks like them. Donald Winford, writing for the Linguistic Society of America, notes that "When groups perceive each other as different either in terms of power relationships or ethnic and cultural identity, language boundaries become more like borders which must be defended". By placing AAVE at the periphery and speaking to her audience in their own language, Jacobs deliberately breaks down some of the resistance that her racial difference might inspire- she avoids these linguistic borders altogether. This text is not meant to be a celebration of African American culture and language, it is meant to reach out to white northerners, and Jacobs centralization of SAE works to achieve this goal.

We see the flip-side of this strategy in the confrontation between a gang of white vigilantes and Linda's family during the turmoil following the Nat Turner rebellion. These lower-class whites, who are searching the houses of African Americans for any evidence of rebellion, speak in their own dialect: "What d'ye foller us fur? D'ye s'pose white folks is come to steal?" (84). While this dialect

does share many features with the AAVE in this text, it is not identical. For example, it features roticism at the end of some words (foller, yaller, oughter), and the reduction of the word “you” to “ye”, neither of which appear in Jacobs representations of AAVE. She also provides a translation for one of their more obscure dialect features, clarifying that “starves” means preserves. This translation, along with the heavy use of eye dialect in this scene, exotifies the speech of these white characters even farther, marking the speaker’s lower-class status and their great distance from SAE. Here, the use of a different dialect is clearly meant to be seen as a moral failing rather than a sign of independence, and it emphasizes the middle-class poise of Linda and Aunt Martha.

In summary, Jacobs challenges Stowe’s use of AAVE and literary dialect on several different levels. She breaks down the over-simplified, infantilizing association of AAVE with pure moral goodness by introducing a diversity of character types, she challenges the Stowe’s genetic use of AAVE by showing linguistic variation in the African American community and in individual characters, and she turns prejudices against non-SAE speaking communities on poor white characters rather than on African American characters. By using genre conventions and her access to the prestige language strategically, Jacobs managed to both engage and challenge her audience.

However, not all public figures at this time had access to the social power that literacy and SAE bestow. Sojourner Truth, who was one of the most influential and popular public speakers of her day, was also illiterate and reliant on white authors to record her language for posterity. Unlike Jacobs, as a public speaker

she could not veil her body in the written word or the enveloping white sheets of sentimentality; her genre required exposure and scrutiny. In the book *Doer's of the Word: Theorizing African-American Women Speakers and Writers in the Antebellum North*, Carla L. Peterson describes Truth's difficulty: "...the question facing Truth was whether it was possible for her to gain an audience, make herself heard, and maintain her authority while resisting commodification by the public gaze according to the terms and categories set up by the dominant culture" (46). In other words, how could she as an African American woman deal with white audiences who held very clear expectations of who she was and how she should act? Was there a way for her to challenge those expectations while under such direct scrutiny? Jacobs' use of AAVE was characterized by subtility and variation, but as a single speaker on an open stage, Truth had far fewer "loopholes" to retreat to. This difficulty is even more pronounced because, since Truth was illiterate, she was totally reliant on white authors to record her voice.

Not surprisingly, those author's efforts were frequently linguistically and historically inaccurate. In 1963 our old friend Harriet Beecher Stowe published an essay in *The Atlantic* about Truth entitled "The Libyan Sibyl." The title is a reference to a statue done in white marble by William Wetmore Story, and it is a fitting metaphor for Stowe's view of African Americans- they ought to be as static and easy on the eyes as a statute done in the classical Greek style. In this article Stowe depicts Truth's speech with the same AAVE markers that she uses in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, despite the fact that Truth was a native Dutch speaker who did not learn English until she was around nine or ten years old. Her voice and

physical presence combine to paint the image of a picture perfect primitive: “She sang with the strong barbaric accent of the native African, and with those indescribable upward turns and those deep gutturals which give such a wild, peculiar power to the negro singing...” (Sibyl). The imposition of AAVE into Truth’s voice is not Stowe’s only indulgence, however. She mistakenly claims that Truth was born in Africa, and many of the anecdotes in this essay come piecemeal from either Truth’s dictated memoir, *The Narrative of Sojourner Truth*, or from various published speeches. Using AAVE as a base, Stowe quite literally *constructs* this image of Truth, sculpting her into the person she believes her readers will best respond to.

This is not the only time that white women alter Truth’s voice. Today she is best known for a speech that she gave in 1851 at the Akron Women’s Rights Convention, a speech commonly know by the title “Ain’t I a Woman?” What many people don’t know is that this speech actually exists in two different versions, and that one of the main differences between these versions is whether or not Truth’s dialogue appears in AAVE. The first version was published in the *Anti-Slavery Bugle* just a month after the speech was given and is entirely in SAE, while the second was published in 1863 by the abolitionist Frances Gage and exclusively uses AAVE for Truth’s dialogue. Despite the triumphant and iconic “ain’t I a woman?” refrain in this latter version, her overall tone is less confrontational. For example, in the 1851 version ends with her sarcastic comments about man being between trapped between slaves and women, between a hawk and a buzzard. However, in Gage’s 1863 version Truth ends her speech by

thanking her audience for letting her speak, and Gage gets the final words of narration. Additionally, some of the details that Gage chooses to include reinforce the image of Truth as primitive and uneducated. She describes Truth as an amazon, and at one point in the middle of the speech she interrupts herself to ask the audience for help with a word. “Den ’dey talks ‘bout dis ting in de head- what dis dey call it?’ ‘Intellect’ whispered someone near. ‘Dat’s it honey’” (Norton 248). The attitude here is that her rhetorical greatness is *in spite* of her inability to read. Once again, white authors use AAVE to denote simplicity, innocences, and to make their white readers feel less threatened.

Because she must to rely on white women who often depict her in an inaccurate, linguistically essentialist fashion, Truth cannot use the same strategies of subversion as Jacobs. Instead, she takes the opposite path, embracing this primitivist image and turning it into a strength. Since authors obscure her linguistic identity and insist on her speaking AAVE, she elevates AAVE above all other forms of English. One of the great themes of Truth’s activism and ministry is that her faith and wisdom come directly from her illiteracy. Of course, claiming that she was to one to actively pursue this strategy is difficult to support because she never actually wrote anything herself, but there *are* a few moments in which we can see her directly making this claim. For example, a eulogy the *New York Globe* shortly after her death features a tribute from the abolitionist Wendell Phillips, who claimed that when people questioned her illiteracy she would respond by saying “You read books; God himself talks to me.” According to Truth, AAVE and its accompanying oral culture are not just more authentic or

honest than SAE, they are actually closer to God. Contrast this attitude with those of Uncle Fred in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* and Tom in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*- both wish to become literate largely because it will allow them to read the bible and become closer to God. Truth, however, can reach the Lord without the intermediary of a (white) education.

Furthermore, the written word is frequently inadequate to capture the power of her elocution. "The impressions made by Isabella [Truth's birth name] on her auditors, when moved by lofty or deep feeling, can never be transmitted to paper... till by some Daguerrian act, we are enabled to transfer the look, the gesture, the tones of voice, in connection with the quaint, yet fit expressions used, and the spirit-stirring animation that, at such a time, pervades all she says" (Gilbert 15). In many slave narratives of this time, the heroes must struggle to gain access to the privileged world of SAE literacy . By emphasizing the superior nature of AAVE, Truth avoids this struggle altogether. Ironically, by working with primitivist white expectations of African Americans and AAVE, Truth actually symbolically frees herself from the confines of SAE and the expectations of the white literary establishment. In some ways this strategy, embracing AAVE as an independant, valid literary form, is truly revolutionary. Instead of making excuses for her "mistakes," Truth and her amanuensis dismiss SAE altogether and embrace an oral tradition that, as Carla Peterson points out, might have roots in older African traditions. Unfortunately, this strategy also had the side effect of reinforcing white Americans conception of African Americans as childlike and simple.

In the years before the Civil War, America was still “becoming” and deciding what kind of nation it wanted to be. Like all nations, part of this debate played itself out on the battlefield of language. Authors put forth different theories of how Americans should act, look, and, of course, speak. In the words of Benedict Anderson, whose work also discusses the importance of language in creating a nation, they were imagining a community. White authors like George Washington Harris and Harriet Beecher Stowe used different depictions of AAVE in their works to create a racial and linguistic hierarchy- Harris putting AAVE and African Americans at the bottom, and Stowe attempting to elevate AAVE using the tools of sentimental literature. However, her essentialist, oversimplified use of the language and the frequent association of AAVE with the childlike, the simple, and even the animalistic painted an inaccurate and racist picture of this linguistic and racial community. These two authors, along with many of their colleagues, raised figurative scaffolding on which to construct the cultural and literary image of the nation, while black bodies literally built the homes, picked the crops, and created the physical infrastructure of the United States of America.

However, some African American authors and speaker fought back. Harriet Jacobs and Sojourner Truth responded to inaccurate depictions of their language in literature with two distinct strategies: Jacobs chose to subvert the white literary establishment from the inside by showing a linguistically diverse, code-switching African American community, and Truth chose to reject that SAE establishment altogether and draw power from oral sources. In response to the

simplified visions of African American life that white authors peddled, they introduced complexity and challenged expectations about their use of AAVE.

Chapter 2: Crossing and Minstrelsy in the post-bellum/Reconstruction Era

In her 1999 paper “You da man: Narrating the racial other in the production of white masculinity,” Mary Bucholtz examines the speech of a white, male high school student she refers to with the pseudonym ‘Brand One.’ In an interview, Brand One tells Bucholtz about a tense encounter he had with one of his fellow students. In the story this unnamed antagonist, who happens to be African American, tries to steal from Brand One’s backpack and verbally harasses him. Eventually Brand One sees two African American classmates with whom he is friendly and recruits them to help drive off the antagonist. The interesting thing about this story is that although his narration is almost entirely in SAE, Brand One’s reproduction of dialogue takes up and discards speech features associated with AAVE depending on the context. In the first half of the story his own dialogue is all in SAE, while the dialogue of his antagonist has several markers associated with AAVE. However, in second half of the story when Brand One meets his AAVE-speaking friends, he includes some AAVE markers in his own speech. Through this narrative choice, Brand One differentiates himself from his antagonist by creating two distinct racial-linguistic categories. By making the ‘blackness’ of another person clear, he can define and claim ‘whiteness’ for himself. Yet in the second half of the story, Brand One crosses the racial boundary that he had constructed so carefully.

Why is AAVE, and therefore blackness, suddenly desirable? To answer this question Bucholtz must look at *how* Brand One indexes this language once he has

established it in opposition to SAE. When reporting the speech of the three African American characters, Brand One uses a markedly slower speech rate and a lower pitch. In English, both of these features are associated with masculine voices. Furthermore, the dialogue of these characters also contains more swear words and other words that have aggressive or violent connotations. By using these features to contrast their voices with his own in the narrative, Brand One reinforces the conception of black men as hypermasculine and threatening, while at the same time constructing himself as “non-confrontational, reasonable, and white” (Bucholtz 251). As Bucholtz points out, whether or not these details are deliberately included or historically accurate is of secondary importance. What is important is how Brand One represents these voices after the fact, in a conversation with a white woman- he both constructs AAVE as other, and attempts to borrow some of the cultural associations of AAVE for himself. This use of AAVE is an example of crossing- code-switching that crosses conventional cultural or racial boundaries. This strategy, as we shall see, can act either to reinforce social stratification, or destabilize hegemonic biological and cultural essentialisms.

When white authors or speakers like Brand One cross into AAVE, it risks becoming a modern-day form of minstrelsy- a white man simultaneously appropriating and rejecting black culture. Despite making it clear that he is not part of this racial-linguistic community, Brand One still sometimes uses AAVE to his own advantage and he cannot resist the minstrel impulse to try on blackness on for himself. In this understanding of minstrelsy I follow the work of Eric Lott,

whose book *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class* discusses the contradictory but fundamentally linked impulses of racial dread and racial fascination. In his analysis of American minstrel shows, he concludes that a “cross-racial desire that coupled a nearly insupportable fascination and a self-protective derision with respect to black people and their cultural practices... made blackface minstrelsy less a sign of absolute white power and control than of panic, anxiety, terror, and pleasure” (Lott 6-7). The minstrel show is a two-way street: despite the fact that it undoubtedly gave white people hegemonic control over the ways that African American art and culture reached the public, the desire to embody the racial Other in this way still tacitly acknowledges its allure and influence.

While actual minstrel shows almost completely disappeared from the American stage after their heyday in the 1840s, we see from Bucholz's study that the sentiments behind them have not disappeared- they have just been transferred to different mediums. White Americans are eternally fascinated by African American culture, and eternally in denial about the many ways in which they have stolen and copied it. Jazz, rock and roll, hip-hop, many forms of modern dance, fashion, and a huge portion of English slang come from African American communities, yet white communities have all too often been the ones to make a profit off of them (that is, when they are not condemning them as immoral and uncouth). To give a very recent example, in 2016 a 13 year old white girl name Danielle Begoli, achieved viral internet fame after a video of her speaking in a caricature of AAVE made the rounds online. She has since turned that exposure

into almost \$1 million in profit and a potential reality TV deal. Clearly minstrelsy is still profitable, even over one hundred years after its heyday.

I argue that the use of AAVE in literature between 1865 and 1910 is one of the earliest permutations of the minstrel impulse- the desire to both embody and control African Americans. In these stories, authors use first person African American voices in an attempt to create and control the 'authentic' black voice. This usually resulted in the demonization or belittlement of African American culture, as we will see in the works of Thomas Dixon or Thomas Nelson Page. However, these white authors could not take off their borrowed blackness so easily. Even as they try to control African American characters, the most racist of southern authors cannot help but reveal their fascination with the African American voice, and its centrality to Southern culture.

Indeed, Lott points out that many Americans in the era of the minstrel show believed that it was the only purely American art form: "... the position favoring minstrelsy as a people's culture typically celebrates the minstrel show's folk authenticity, it's elevation of black types and black culture through blackface to a place in the national mythology" (31). Furthermore, in Constance Rourke's landmark study *American Humor: A Study of the National Character*, published in 1931, she identifies the "Negro minstrel" (along with the Yankee peddler and the backwoodsman) as one of the three archetypes of pure American humor. On the other hand, even those authors who attempt to use AAVE for the sake of realism or because they had genuine anti-racist intentions could not avoid slipping into a minstrel voice on occasion. As Lott goes on to say, the problem with this

national culture is that “it regularly slips into an indulgence of racist typing” (31).

The contemporary defenders of minstrelsy who touted it as authentic and American did not realize that they were enjoying an exaggerated, inauthentic derivation of black culture. Nobody exhibits this particular contradiction more clearly than Mark Twain, whose depictions of African American characters have inspired conflict since the day he first published them.

Twain is the perfect author with which to begin an investigation of post-bellum/Reconstruction literature because he represents a direct link between the Old Southwestern humor of the Antebellum period and the American Realism and Local Color movements that arose after the Civil War. While the Old Southwestern tradition focused mainly on the speech of the American frontier, the post-bellum years saw other regions and other dialects get their moment in the limelight- characters from New York, Maine, Missouri, and Appalachia all brought their unique voices to the page. In *Strange Talk: The Politics of Literature in Gilded Age America*, Gavin Jones identifies a cultural motivation for this new wave of dialect literature that is very similar to the one that Lott identifies for minstrelsy- concern and fascination with a linguistic and racial Other that was rapidly growing in size and influence. This Other consisted of both newly liberated slaves, and the 20 million (mostly slavic-language speaking) immigrants from Eastern Europe that immigrated to the United States around this time. Language was a hot topic, and Americans were obsessed with dialect of all kinds- reading tours by dialect authors packed theaters and grossed tens of thousands of dollars, and some authors made specific journeys to obscure portions

of the country in order to capture a new and unique dialect. This fascination helped drive the rise of American Realism, a genre that focused on the lives and struggles of everyday Americans. It's spin off, the Local Color Movement, attempted to capture the authentic speech, customs, and folklore of a narrow geographic region.

The growth of these genres explains Twain's infamous explanatory note at the beginning of *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*:

"In this book a number of dialects are used, to wit: the Missouri negro dialect; the extremest form of the backwoods Southwestern dialect; the ordinary "Pike County" dialect; and four modified varieties of this last. The shadings have not been done in a haphazard fashion, or by guesswork; but painstakingly, and with the trustworthy guidance and support of personal familiarity with these several forms of speech." (Twain 2).

Despite, or perhaps because of, Twain's scrupulous attention to detail, the dialect in *Huckleberry Finn* has sparked debate since its first publication. Early readers simply criticized it for being uncouth and rough, but in recent years critics have begun to comment more upon the escaped slave Jim and his speech. They claim his extreme dialect of AAVE, among other things, makes him nothing more than a minstrel show stereotype who wandered into a novel, a superstitious, comedic Uncle Tom with no authentic personality of his own. However, others point out that Jim generates profound sympathy, and serves as a surrogate father to Huck- Twain clearly intended him to be a likable, positive representation of an African American man. While both sides of the debate make excellent points, I

believe that a closer look into the literary genealogy of the novel presents a more holistic picture.

First, when we consider the use of dialect in this novel we must remember that Twain was deeply influenced by the works of the Old Southwestern humorists, and that he was particularly fond of the works of one George Washington Harris, the author of the Sut Lovingood stories. The ways in which Twain negotiates that creative debt opens a window into the racial and social politics of the novel. Old Southwestern humor, as previously discussed, changed the meaning of dialect in literature- instead of ignorance, it became a sign of authenticity. Non-standard speaking characters criticized the hypocrisies of 'civilized' society, and dispensed nuggets of folk wisdom to the standard speaking frame narrator. For the authors, and many readers at the time, the heroes of this genre represented the creative, independent spirit of America. While Twain continued this lionization of the plain-spoken, self-sufficient frontiersman, he shifts the American spirit of independence away from the stoic white man and relocates it in an empathetic child and an African American man- Huck and Jim. The core of the novel is about the two heroes escaping the rigid confines of SAE and unfriendly society and pointing out the hypocrisies of those who claim to be their betters. These themes emerge directly from the Old Southwestern genre. This argument is even more striking when we consider the similarities between Sut Lovingood and Pap Finn. Both are drunkards who usually get away with thumbing their noses at polite society and have a deep mistrust of the literate. Pap Finn's antics could come out of a George Washington Harris story- he tricks a

judge into thinking he is reformed, he goes on some truly spectacular drunken misadventure, and he is outraged that Huck has learned to read, which he sees it as a betrayal of the family. And while Sut is a striking example of the grotesque, Pap Finn might have him beat: "His hair was long and tangled and greasy, and hung down, and you could see his eyes shining through like he was behind vines. It was all black, no gray; so was his long, mixed-up whiskers. There warn't no color in his face, where his face showed; it was white; not like another man's white, but a white to make a body sick, a white to make a body's flesh crawl—a tree-toad white, a fish-belly white." (Twain 21). While the Old Southwestern humor genre had a respect for those on the edge of civilization, Pap Finn takes it too far- he is animalistic, his hair is a mess of a jungle. Even more remarkable is the fact that his whiteness becomes not mark of respectability or superiority, but the most alarming and grotesque thing about him. Despite the fact that Harris's influence and the spirit of the Old Southwestern genre infuse the novel, Pap Finn seems to be a repudiation of Sut himself. While he might occasionally inspire a chuckle, ultimately he is too destructive and downright villainous to be an acceptable America hero. A new generation and a changing society requires new representatives.

In passing the torch to Huck and Jim, Twain rejects overly-aggressive, grotesque whiteness and prioritizes Hucks compassion and Jim's insightfulness. While Huck is the obvious hero of this story and the literal descendant of Sut and Pap Finn's brand of Americanness, Twain also deliberately includes Jim in the inheritance. He is, for obvious reasons, even farther removed from society than Huck, and he

has the dialect and the mistrust of traditional systems of knowledge to prove it. While to contemporary readers Jim's superstitious habits might seem ignorant, we must remember that he is a heir of Old Southwestern humor, and that this genre made folk knowledge a kind of heroism, or at least a sign of respectability. This conclusion is emphasized by the fact that Jim is, according to Huck, "most always right" (79). His omens all presage actual events and he even teaches Huck a few tricks that allow him to live on the edge of society.

Yet even if we accept the fact that Twain attempts to use Jim's voice with respect and good intentions, he still sometimes fails to achieve this goal. This is due in large part to the contradictory influence of blackface minstrel shows. Twain was famously fond of these shows; in his autobiography, he declares: "if I could have the nigger show back again in its pristine purity and perfection I should have but little further use for the opera" (*Autobiography* 59). He particularly praises the use of "the broad negro dialect" as "delightfully and satisfyingly funny" (59). The impact that these shows had upon *Huck Finn* is unmistakable. Even though Jim does come out on top in some of the debates that he has with Huck, they seem like they come directly from the minstrel stage. Huck plays the straight man, questioning Jim on his enigmatic statements about King Solomon, money matters, and the French language until Jim provides the punch lines. It is scenes like these that inspire many of the modern day objections to Jim. No matter how much Twain enjoyed the African American voice, you cannot deny that even if he intended to make Jim a wholly sympathetic character he almost can't resist resorting to racist caricature.

Twain does this frequently in his 1894 novel, *Pudd'nhead Wilson*. At the very beginning of the novel Roxy, a white-passing slave, fears that she and her son will be sold down the river. To avoid this fate she resolves to commit suicide along with her infant child. This should be scene of heartbreaking tragedy, yet Twain cannot resist turning it into a bit of minstrel amusement by poking fun at the tackiness of her 'nice' clothes. He turns her into the minstrel show stereotype of the over-dressed northern dandy. Indeed, throughout the novel Twain's characterization of Roxy veers wildly between 'quaint humorous Negro' and 'vengeful African American force of nature'. She takes her son's fate into her own hands and swaps him with his white counterpart, she is the only intellectual equal to Pudd'nhead in the town, and she even defends a young slave from an overseer with direct violence: "All de hell-fire dat 'uz ever in my heart flame' up, en I snatch de stick outen his han' en laid him flat. He laid dah moanin' en cussin', en all out of his head..." (*Pudd'nhead* 231). Yet Twain also includes several other scenes similar to her attempted suicide. No matter how hard he tries to create full and life-like AAVE speaking characters, the power dynamics of this crossing twists his depictions into minstrelsy.

However, in yet another contradiction Twain uses this novel to question ideas of authenticity and racial identity, especially when it comes to voice and speech.

Andrea K. Newlyn describes *Pudd'nhead Wilson* as a "transracial narrative", a story in which characters do not just *pass* as a different race, but are actually re-racialized over the course of the novel. She claims that this process, unlike passing narratives, contests the conventions of the racialized economy and

questions the idea of an authentic racial self. In particular, *Pudd'nhead Wilson* “carefully demonstrates the failure of a logic that tries to read race on the body...” (Newlyn 50). One of the key ways that Twain does this is through his use of dialect- despite the fact that Roxy appears to be white, she still speaks in AAVE and that is what is important. As she puts it, “I’s a nigger, en nobody ain’t gwyne to doubt it dat hears me talk” (*Pudd’nhead* 215). Language is the ultimate identifying factor, the presence of Roxy’s AAVE overwhelms even the whiteness of her skin. However, Twain makes it clear elsewhere that this dialect is not innate, that it is due to nurture rather than nature. The fake Tom Driscoll never speaks a word in dialect, and the fake Valet de Chambers is unable to shake the language that he grew up speaking, even after he learns of his true heritage: “The real heir suddenly found himself rich and free, but in a most embarrassing situation. He could neither read nor write, and his speech was the basest dialect of the negro quarter” (301-302). While other authors of this time used dialect as a way to signal an authentically racialized character, *Pudd’nhead Wilson* questions whether or not there is a fundamental link between language and race. Even though ‘justice’ is served at the end of the novel and each character is returned to their proper place, the conclusion leaves the reader somewhat unsatisfied and questioning of the moral system that could have brought about such an ending. Like linguistic crossing, this transracial narrative destabilizes traditional racial categories by pointing out the places in which boundaries are not quite so clear. In both of these works Twain depicts AAVE speaking characters in a minstrel-like fashion, and these depictions undercut his attempts to criticize American

racial politics. His works however, are far more progressive than those that came out of The Plantation School, a subgenre of of the Local Color movement. These novels and short stories primarily celebrate the supposedly halcyon days of the antebellum south, lionizing the white landowners and casting even the brutality of slavery in a softer light. In these texts the inclusion of AAVE speaking characters was often strategy of social control, and the racial fascination that is so clear in Twain's work becomes more covert and begrudging. Most prominent among these authors was Thomas Nelson Page, whose short stories were instrumental in reshaping the nation's remembrance of the south and of slavery. As one New York Times critic puts it, "Indeed, it would hardly be too much to say that most people of the younger generation who live north of Mason and Dixon's line have built their conception of what the South before the war was likely largely upon the foundations furnished by Mr. Page's writings..." (NYT, 1907). Page's dream of the Old South is populated by southern belles who combine an iron-will with a delicate beauty, improbably faultless and heroically handsome young men, and docile, loyal slaves. It is an impossible vision, drawn through glasses so rosey they are almost opaque. Yet audiences around the country ate it up and took it as an accurate picture. How was Page able to effect such a dramatic transformation, to take the history of the south into his own hands and reshape it as he wished? Part of this transformation comes from his use of literary dialect. In his most famous collection of short stories, *In Ole Virginia, or Marse Chan and Other Stories*, all six of the stories feature some AAVE, and the first three, excepting introductions and conclusions from their frame narrators, are entirely in AAVE.

In these three, an unnamed narrator unexpectedly encounters a former slave, who cheerfully regales the strange white man with stories from the old plantation.

These stories drip with nostalgia for a supposedly simpler time, when life was easy for both slaveowner and slave. Page's attempt to convince his readers that life before emancipation wasn't all that bad is most transparent in the collections eponymous story. The narrator, Sam, recalls life before the war:

"Dem wuz good ole times, marster- de bes' Sam ever see! Dey wuz, in fac'! Niggers didn' hed nothin' 't all to do- jes' hed to 'ten' to de feedin' an' cleanin' de hosses, an' doin' what de marster tell 'em to do; an' when dey wuz sick, dey had things sont 'em out de house, an' de same doctor come to see 'em whar 'ten' to de white folks when dey wuz po'ly. Dyar warn' no trouble nor nothin'" (Page 10).

Absurd moments like this appear throughout the stories- slaves have the chance to run away but don't, freedmen stick around to care for the plantation graves even after the estate is deserted, and all of the slaves adore their masters. Most all of this comes to the reader in carefully rendered dialect, while the frame narrator provides some priming questions and the occasional ironic comment directed towards the reader.

Aside from the fact that dialect literature was in vogue and selling well at the time, I believe that Page had a more specific reason for making it so central to his stories. Consider the note that he opens the collection with:

"The dialect of the negroes of Eastern Virginia differs totally from that of the Southern negroes, and in some material points from that of those located farther west. The elision is so constant that it is impossible to produce the exact sound,

and in some cases it has been found necessary to subordinate the phonetic arrangement to intelligibility. The following rules may, however, aid the reader: The final consonant is rarely sounded. Adverbs, prepositions, and short words are frequently slighted, as is the possessive. The letter r is not usually rolled except when used as a substitute for th, but is pronounced ah. For instance, the following is a fair representation of the peculiarities cited: The sentence, "It was curious, he said, he wanted to go into the other army," would sound: "Twuz cu-yus, he say, he wan'(t) (to) go in(to) 'turr ah-my.'" (vi)

I have quoted this passage in full because I believe its length and level of detail are one, fascinating, and two, key to understanding Page's use of AAVE. In short, he fancies himself a linguist. Despite the fact that his phonemic and syntactic rules are incomplete and somewhat vague, some of them do mirror features that have been observed in certain dialects of AAVE. This gives him an air of scientific authority and objectivity, and it paints him as a keen observer of humanity. Of course, to extend these judgments to his social and historical observations requires only a short leap. If Page is accurate and honest in his representations of dialect, he gains authority as a narrator and as an authentic chronicler of southern life. The more 'authentic' his voice, the more authentic his world. Because the language of a place is the ultimate expression of its spirit, mastery of the language is mastery of its essence.

Interestingly though, he still claims that some sounds are "impossible to produce" and that they are also therefore impossible to transcribe. This has the dual effect of one, dismissing AAVE as supremely irregular and ungrammatical by implying

that it cannot be captured by the alphabet, and, two, painting Page as a uniquely-gifted translator. This is a power grab; Page set's himself up as the only legitimate authority on African American speech from this region. Furthermore, by putting this language into the mouths of former slaves, he encourages readers to forget for a moment that these sentiments come from the mind of a white man who benefited materially from the Peculiar Institution. If his white characters say that slaves were perfectly content to remain slaves there is room for skepticism, but if he puts those same words in dialect, in a former slave's mouth, the disguise gives them credibility. Page and his fellow Plantation School authors wrote the Old South into existence and their building blocks for doing so were constructed of minstrel show AAVE. In some ways this is a form of crossing, with Page and associates speaking AAVE through their characters. Once again, I turn to a contemporary reviewer for testimony on Page's influence and popularity: "Mr. Page stands, without a doubt, at the head of dialect writers. His plantation negro is a perfect delineation which will live always for its naturalness and truthfulness to life. He deserves our gratitude for having preserved a type now almost extinct" (Armstrong 1904).

Page's work, like the entirety of the Old South, relies fundamentally on the existence and labor of black voices and bodies. The heroes and heroines of these stories are white and wealthy, but they are only able to become so because of the presence of their slaves, who provide both a racial contrast to make them white and the labor to create their wealth. Because of his reliance on this labor he cannot help but acknowledge its influence in a tacit and inadvertent way, even as he tries

to imagine a society of perfectly subordinated slaves. Consider a passage from the story “Polly. A Christmas Recollection”, which reminds us how helpless the white aristocrats would have been without their free labor. Despite the fact that the Colonel constantly threatens to sell his manservant, he never does: “From tying his shoes and getting his shaving-water to making his juleps and lighting his candles, which was all he had to do, Drinkwater Torm was necessary to him. (I think he used to make the threat just to prove to himself that Torm did not own him; if so, he failed in his purpose—Torm did own him.)” (Page 189). While this passage provides another example of Page trying to make slavery seem downright luxurious for those who are enslaved, it also introduces the idea of reciprocal ownership, a theme that comes up several times throughout these stories. While white folk have legal possession of their slaves, Page implies that the slaves own a moral or emotional stake in their masters.

For example, in “Marse Chan” soon after the young master Channing is born the old master summons Sam: “I’m gwine to give you to yo’ young Marse Channin’ to be his body-servant,’ an’ he put de baby right in my arms...” (6). In this moment we see two transactions. The first is the rather surreal action of gifting a human being to a baby- the infant Channing now owns Sam. The second is the literal presenting of Marse Chan to Sam. While still a slave, Sam is now invested in his master. Page undoubtedly means all of these moments as touching examples of how the lives of slaves and their masters are intertwined in a paternalistic fashion, but this ‘investment’ doesn’t translate into any material benefit or tangible freedoms for Sam. Instead, it functions as just another mental shackle to keep him

tied to the plantation. However, this moment is still important because it reveals how Page built the Old South. His idea of reciprocal ownership and his representations of AAVE take actual power and agency away from African Americans, but they show how the antebellum era was fundamentally reliant on black voices and bodies. Indeed, there are several moments in Page’s works in which the wealth of a plantation or a family is measured not by land or money, but by the number of slaves that they own. This kind of paternalistic co-ownership was acceptable because the power was still consolidated in the white man’s hands. After emancipation, when these black bodies and voices no longer represented wealth for the white man, the attitude towards them changed fundamentally. As we shall see in the works of Thomas Dixon, the reliance and paternalistic affection for the black voice transforms into a twisted obsession.

 However, before we begin with Dixon I want to briefly return to Mary Bucholz and Brand One. One of the themes of her essay which I brushed over in the initial coverage is the close relationship between race and heterosexuality, a relationship that Mason Stokes investigates in his book *The Color of Sex: Whiteness, Heterosexuality, and the Fictions of White Supremacy*. As he explains, black men, “through the hysterical imaginings of white men, become the sexual threat and object of sexual desire that simultaneously threatens and buttresses the heterosexual expectations of whiteness” (18). Once again, we see the dual impulses of racial fascination and racial dread. White men are obsessed with black masculinity because of they define it in terms of threatening, yet alluring, hypermasculinity. In Brand One’s narration, there are several moments in which

this anxiety over black male sexuality emerges. For example, his reports of the antagonist's threats have elements of sexual domination- "What you gonna do you little punk ass white bitch?" Bucholtz notes that one of the early meanings of the word 'punk' was 'homosexual', and the word 'bitch' has connotations of femaleness and sexual submission. Furthermore, later on in the story Brand One says that if he had run away instead of confronting the antagonist he would have been a "pussy." Again, we see white surrender to black masculinity couched in sexual terms. In most of Dixon's writings, as we shall see, the white interest and cultural investment in African American voice and body slips into a sexualized obsession.

Dixon, like Page, wrote his own version of history into existence. Dixon, however, was less concerned with recreating antebellum bliss and more concerned with retelling his own inaccurate version of the years after the Civil War. In his Reconstruction Trilogy, the ineffective and limited Republican attempts to punish and control the South become indefensible acts of tyranny and the attempt to grant political and social equality to African Americans opens the door to anarchy. Dixon, whose father was a Klan member, paints the "knights of the fiery cross" as beset upon heroes who must take back control of their society from rampaging, lustful freedmen and greedy, manipulative carpetbaggers. This is, of course, a fiction. In *The Red Record*, a scathing report on the history of lynching, Ida B. Wells reports that well over 10,000 African American men were killed in the three decades after the Civil War, and that in that time only three white men were convicted and executed for their crimes. The jealous white man

simply perceived the approach towards equality as a threat, and mistrusted anything that took away from their own monolithic power. Unfortunately, Dixon's version of events soon gained traction, and the second novel in the trilogy even became the basis for D.W. Griffith's infamous 1915 film, *Birth of a Nation*. Yet despite Dixon's embrace of white supremacy, there are a few moments in which he too cannot help but reveal his fascination with and debt to the black body and voice.

In the very first few pages of *The Clansman: An Historical Romance of the Ku Klux Klan*, readers meet Elsie, the daughter of ardent Republican congressman Austin Stoneman. Despite the fact that she grew up in the north she works in a hospital that cares for Confederate prisoners of war, and she has learned to play Southern-style songs on the banjo for her patients. These songs are all African American (or at least minstrel show) in origin- they include "'O Jonny Booker Help Dis Nigger," "The Ole Gray Hoss," and "Hard Times an' Wuss er Comin.'" Furthermore, she engages in a bit of vocal minstrelsy in her performance: "with deft, sure touch and soft negro dialect she sang it through" (*Clansman* 12).

Clearly, part of the enchantment of these songs comes from their AAVE lyrics. Her audience, Ben Cameron, who will eventually become the Grand Dragon of the KKK, requests each song by name and savors her renditions of them: "No Yankee girl could play and sing these songs. I'm in heaven, and you're an angel" (12). Even if the freed African American supposedly threatens the very fabric of the nation, their songs still capture the soul of the south.

However, this voice is only acceptable in the mouth of a white woman. In *The Clansman* Senator Stoneman, the disfigured and fanatical Republican congressman, has an eerily seductive black mistress name Lydia Brown, "a strange brown woman of sinister animal beauty and the restless eyes of a leopardess" (79). Almost every time Dixon mentions her he includes a sensual adjective- she is sleek, haughty, cat-like, and extraordinarily beautiful. Despite this evident fascination he almost never uses her name; she is either the yellow woman, the brown woman, or the leopardess. Furthermore, even though she is the power behind the throne, the "first lady of the land" (90), we hear her voice directly in only one scene: "Her cat-like eyes rolled from side to side, and a smile played about her full lips as she said: "You will find him at Hall & Pemberton's gambling hell—you've lived in Washington. You know the way" (157). Interestingly she is one of the only African American characters in *The Clansman* or *The Leopard's Spots* to speak SAE, and Dixon portrays her access to this prestige code as a threat- it allows her to mimic the language of middle class respectability and infiltrate the home of a congressman. In fact, Lydia Brown is a paradigmatic of one of the "controlling images" that Patricia Hill Collins identifies in her book *Black Feminist Thought*. According to Collins, white America has created a number of stereotypes of black women in order to control them, one of which is the "the jezebel, whore, or 'hoochie'"(89). This image demonizes and polices black female sexuality in order to keep it under control, and away from the white domestic space. However, like minstrel shows, this attempt to exert power also reveals white obsessions with blackness. Dixon

provides so little of Brown's dialogue that he seems to be afraid to let her speak lest she seduce his readers as well.

While the SAE speaking Brown works behind the scenes to infiltrate the white household in a subtle way, the supposed menace of black masculinity lies in its corrupting physical and verbal presence. Above everything else, Dixon is afraid of miscegenation. In his first novel, *The Leopard's Spots: A Romance of the White Man's Burden*, one of his heroes reflects on the political situation in the south:

"Gradually in his mind for days this towering figure of the freed Negro had been growing more and more ominous, until its menace overshadowed the poverty, the hunger, the sorrows and the devastation of the South, throwing the blight of its shadow over future generations, a veritable Black Death for the land and its people" (*Leopard* 33). Dixon's obsession with the south's African American population overshadows even the desire for food or shelter, and this constantly growing "towering figure" could be seen as a case of phallic symbolism. In his chapter on Dixon, Mason Stokes identifies a dozen other moments in which white anxiety over the African American man is characterized with similar phallic language. Indeed, the most dramatic moments in the Reconstruction Trilogy feature African American men attempting to sexually violate white women- there are several of these scenes in each of his three books. When the white men of the South begin to politically organize "They declared there was but one question to be settled:-- 'Shall the future American be an Anglo-Saxon or a Mulatto?'" (159). For Dixon, sexually potent African American men, almost all of whom speak in AAVE, are a threat not only to white women but to the future of the nation.

While these Page and Dixon were incredibly influential and popular (*The Leopard's Spots* sold well over 100,000 copies in two years), contemporary African Americans did not passively embrace their version of events, and several authors wrote their own recollection of the Old South. Of those, the most stinging and best remembered response comes from Charles W. Chesnutt. Mostly known for his short stories in his time (though he also wrote several novels), Chesnutt used the conventions of the Plantation School to counter the racial and political vision it set forth. In fact, to go through his collection, *Tales of Conjure and the Color Line*, and list all of the places in which he directly refutes the theses of Page and Dixon would require me to quote virtually the entire book- instead of being a patriarchal guardian, the master is dismissive towards his slaves feelings and easily tricked ("Sis' Becky's Pickaninny"); the young heir is a lazy, dissolute youth and his manservant, whose initial sycophantic behavior and fear of abolition would make Page proud, is actually biding his time before escaping with his entire family ("The Passion of Grandison"); those who commit lynchings are not heroes of the south but drunken, mobbish vigilantes who operate on scanty evidence ("The Sheriff's Children"); white men assault African American women and do not get punished ("The Doll").

Of all of these subversions, one of the most interesting is Chesnutt's redefinition of the roles of the white frame narrator and the AAVE story teller. In Page, the frame narrator acts as a standin for the author, guiding the reader through their interaction with the storyteller. However John, who frames many of Chesnutt's stories, directly represents the *reader*. A white northerner with only a hazy and

stereotypical views of southern culture, he relies on the testimony of Uncle Julius, the storyteller, to gain an accurate picture of life before the war. However, Uncle Julius is no Sam. He speaks in thick dialect, but he is hesitant to tell his stories to John and his wife Annie until he realizes he might use this opportunity for his own benefit- maintaining his share of the 'goophered' grapevine, getting the old school building as a church meetinghouse, or taking the rest of the dinner ham home with him. In other words, the exchange of these stories is almost an economic transaction.

The meaning of this transaction is complex, but Chesnutt and Uncle Julius essentially buy into the minstrel economy. Chesnutt saw the white fascination with black voices and bodies, their hunger for stories of the antebellum south, and he gives them what they want on his own terms. He inserts himself into the conversation and claims some of the 'economic' benefits that had previously been exclusively reserved for white authors. Furthermore, while he does play into some of the stereotypes that white readers expected, he uses them as a cover for some deeply subversive commentary on race relations. As Gavin Jones points out, for many authors of this time "dialect was much more than a humorous gimmick: it enabled certain types of political criticism, especially among those who were alienated from centers of power, by creating another level of discourse in which deep ethical convictions could be safely represented" (Jones 37). When readers were distracted or amused by deciphering the thick dialect, they were less likely to question the subtlety of the politics in the background.

However, the question remains- did white readers actually register those deeper messages, or did they only read Chesnutt to laugh? We find a compelling answer to this question in a 1900 essay in *The Atlantic* titled “Mr. Charles W. Chesnutt's Stories: A review.” This short piece is by William Dean Howells, an incredibly influential critic known as the “Dean of American letters”- the views he expresses likely summarize the views of many at this time. In this essay he lauds Chesnutt not for the stories’ “racial interest”, but for “the wonder of their beauty... whatever is primitive and sylvan or campestral in the reader's heart is touched by the spells thrown on the simple black lives in these enchanting tales". In other words, he values these stories not for their political or historical truth, but for their rustic depiction of “authentic” black folk culture. He even goes on to object to Chesnutt’s more pointed political moments: "In some others the comedy degenerates into satire, with a look in the reader's direction which the author's friend must deplore." This is something of a culmination of the trends that we have seen throughout this chapter- readers associate representations of dialect in literature with pure realism, and to accept anything in AAVE as based in objective truth. However, they still have a hangover from Stowe and Harris’s overly simplified or racist images of AAVE, and cannot get past these images to find the deeper truth that Chesnutt’s use of literary dialect encodes. While Chesnutt’s subversions of the plantation genre are brilliant literature and he has excellent intentions, the tradition of literary dialect at this time was too entrenched for him to actually reach his readers the way he intended.

For white readers of the period, how you spoke correlated directly to who and what you were. To be true, a story just had to be in the correct language. We can see this in the obsession that many American Realist authors had with producing accurate and believable literary dialect- to them, mastery of a language equated to mastery of a culture and people. In this chapter I have focused on the theory of crossing because, although white authors did not usually depict actual crossing in the dialogue of their texts, their use of literary dialect in many ways is a form of crossing. By speaking AAVE through the mouths of their characters they attempt to establish a racial and linguistic hierarchy much in the same way that Brand One did in the Mary Bucholtz article. This crossing has many similarities with blackface minstrelsy in both the ways it seeks to exert control, and its fusion of fascination and fear. Due to the two-sided nature of minstrelsy and crossing, the twin desires to possess and inhabit blackness, the depictions of racial dynamics in this era were often filled with contradictions and confusion. However, as we shall shortly see, crossing does not always have to reinforce racial hierarchies- it can also be a powerful tool for breaking them down.

Chapter 3: Performativity and the Harlem Renaissance

Although code-switching (and sometimes crossing, as seen in the Bucholz article) is often considered to be automatic, subconscious practices, there are situations in which code choice is conspicuous and deliberate. In other words, while all speech, even subconsciously governed speech, is performative to some degree, in some circumstances the performative aspect is more conspicuous than in others.

Linguists call this kind of speech “staged performance,” and examples include public speaking and theater performance. As Richard Bauman, an influential figure in the field of linguistic anthropology and a leader in the field of performative studies, puts it, in performative speech “the act of expression is put on display, objectified, marked out to a degree from its discursive surroundings and opened up to interpretive scrutiny and evaluation by an audience” (Bauman 1). Although linguists generally seek out spontaneous, unselfconscious speech for their research because they consider it to be the purest form of a natural language (spoken or signed language that has developed, and continues to develop, organically), the study of planned, performative speech also has its uses. As linguists Allan Bell and Andy Gibson point out, this kind of speech deserves study because it generally involves a more creative, stylized form of language, and the dynamic between the speaker and the audience is more demarcated than usual. In most conversation all of the speakers are equal participants in a dialogue. Some may speak more often or with more authority than others, but they all basically engage with each other in the same way. However, in staged,

performative speech one speaker speaks *to*, not *with* the other. This dynamic puts a spotlight on the relationship between the participants, and heightens awareness about the language used. Because of this self-awareness, staged speech is an excellent resource for the study of language ideology- how a community thinks and speaks about language- and for studying how speakers deliberately use language to reinforce or challenge that ideology.

Erica Britt focuses on ideological performativity in her 2011 study, “‘Can the church say amen’: Strategic uses of black preaching style at the State of the Black Union.” In this study Britt analyzes a conversation-analysis (CA) transcription of several speeches from the 2008 State of the Black Union (SBU). Conversation analysis is the segment of sociolinguistics that studies speech in social interactions. In addition to studying phonological and grammatical features, CA also concerns itself with paralinguistic features like pauses, rises in intonation, added stress, aspiration, vowel lengthening, and volume changes (Britt 213). Britt chose a style of transcription that emphasizes these features because many of them are key elements of ‘black preaching style’, a form of speech that is distinct from both SAE and AAVE. In particular, it lacks most of the signature phonological features of AAVE (like consonant cluster simplification and the [ð] to [d] transformation), and differs from SAE in its emphasis on rhythm, initial slow rate of delivery, stammer and hesitations, call and response, and repetition. Some of these features do occasionally cooccur (Britt identifies several instances of consonant cluster simplification in black preaching style speech), but in general the lines between them are fairly distinct.

In her analysis of the SBU, Britt focuses on three speakers who code-switch into black preaching style at some point during their speech, a performative choice she calls “doing church.” Switching into this code allows them to borrow some of the respectability and high status held by black preachers in their community and sets them up as sources of moral authority. Furthermore, the interactive nature of black preaching style allows them to directly engage their audience in a deliberate way. Britt notes that in the code-switched segments of the presentation, the speakers request and receive verbal affirmation in the form “amens” and other exclamations. This positive engagement is important because Britt finds that all three of these speakers use black preaching style just before or after they make a controversial claim or revelation. In particular, one defies the request of the event organizer to remain apolitical in order to express his support for Barack Obama, and another admits to supporting Hillary Clinton. Their use of black preaching style softens this blow, and helps to foster a sense of racial community rather than combativeness. This is a clear example of a speaker using planned, performative speech to manipulate the relationship between themselves and their audience.

On one level all of the texts I have investigated in this project are staged performance of a kind because the author deliberately chose to have certain characters perform certain kinds of language. However, I believe that the concept of staged performance is applicable to a study of the Harlem Renaissance because works produced during this time feature a new self-consciousness about their staged nature. Although previous works I have investigated in this project were acutely aware of their audience, none of them address their relationship with their

audience in a critical way. For example, in the 1861 narrative *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, Harriet Jacobs directly addresses the white women in her audience several times. Thirty years later, Charles Chesnutt wrote in part to take advantage of the public's craving for dialect literature. While these authors do challenge their readers' expectations by playing with genre conventions, they never question or challenge the fundamental relationship that exists between an author and their audience—for them, the author presents, the audience absorbs, and that is all. However, during the 1920s and 1930s, artists in the Harlem Renaissance went beyond simple acknowledgements of their audiences as they began to question and manipulate the dynamic between author and audience in different ways. They introduced a new kind of dialogism that sought to play with the ways that the speaker/author and listener/audience interacted and thought of each other. This new awareness about performativity comes from the fact that, for the first time, African American authors found themselves at the center of their own artistic movement. Not only were they concerned with the art that they were producing, many were also hyperaware of the expectations and prejudices that their audience might have against them.

Authors like W.E.B. DuBois, James Weldon Johnson and Alain Locke were especially aware of this prejudice, and determined to use their art to fight against it. They emphasized the responsibility of an artist to work for racial uplift and to make sure that they did not hinder the development of the black community by reinforcing negative stereotypes white readers may have. As Du Bois put it, "...the net result of American literature to date is to picture twelve million Americans as

prostitutes, thieves, and fools..." (190). In order to change white attitudes, they believed that artists must deliberately present white readers with non-stereotypical, respectable African American characters. Du Bois and his associates especially wanted to discourage the use of AAVE in literature. In the 1930s many of the works of Thomas Dixon and Thomas Nelson Page were not even two decades old and Du Bois, who was born in 1863, certainly would have remembered their impact on the public. While many of these African American artists expressed a deep love for their language and pride in their culture, they also believe that the best way to fight stereotypes was to avoid them at all costs. They responded to the pressures of performance by trying to change the conversation, to force white Americans to associate African Americans with a different code. Opposed to this group was a younger generation of artists, including Langston Hughes, Zora Neale Hurston, Bruce Nugent, and Wallace Thurman. They believed that artists have the right to write about whatever they choose, regardless of whether or not their subject is appropriate for polite company. They negotiated their relationship with their audience by simply ignoring the audience altogether. These authors did not believe that it was their responsibility to account for the expectations, associations, and background that readers might bring to a text. Hughes makes this clear in his artistic manifesto, "The Negro artist and the racial mountain"- "If white people are pleased we are glad. If they are not, it doesn't matter... If colored people are pleased we are glad. If they are not, their displeasure doesn't matter either. We build our temples for tomorrow, strong as we know how, and we stand on top of the mountain, free within ourselves"

(*Negro Artist*). Instead of adjusting their literary performance to account for the prejudices of their audience, they wrote what they wanted without regard for social consequences.

These artists in particular embraced AAVE as a literary language. Part of their reason for doing so was that it offered a clear foundation on which to build one of the goals of the Harlem Renaissance- a black aesthetic distinct from the dominant white artistic forms. As Erik Nielson points out in his essay “A ‘High Tension’ in Langston Hughes’s Musical Verse”, many artists in the Harlem Renaissance felt that “one of the keys to breaking free of the ‘conditions from without’ was creating an aesthetic based on black vernacular forms” (166). These artists realized that AAVE was a vibrant, growing, artistic language, and that it could express the lives of African Americans in ways that SAE could not. Yet conflict over this subject continued. James Weldon Johnson argued that “the Negro poet in the United States... needs now an instrument of greater range than dialect... He needs a form that is freer and larger than dialect, but which will still hold the racial flavor” (Johnson 8). The role of AAVE in African American literature continued to spur debate throughout the Harlem Renaissance.

This debate is fascinating because it mirrors one of the key contemporary conflicts in the sociolinguistics of performance- how does an analysis balance the individual’s agency as a speaker with the communal nature of language? In other words, how does one acknowledge that speakers can use language for their own purpose and meaning, while still understanding that for an audience, every word in every utterance carries the weight of all of its past uses. An author’s artistic

vision may involve writing in dialect about disreputable characters, but how can they justify this choice when a large portion of their audience will likely use those characters to reinforce their racist images of African Americans in general? Should authors avoid using those languages all together and try to create their own new styles and forms not based on an historically misused language, or should they attempt to wrest control of literary AAVE from white authors, to change its context and challenge the assumptions of the readers? On one side we have authors like James Weldon Johnson attempting to create a new African American aesthetic by moving past the supposed limitations of AAVE, and on the other side we have authors like Langston Hughes and Zora Neale Hurston, who attempt to use AAVE to redefine relationship between themselves and their audience. In the following pages I will investigate the two sides of this debate and discuss how successful each camp ultimately was in breaking free from white influence. I will also review how white authors continued to use and abuse AAVE during this time.

James Weldon Johnson, in his short volume of poetry *God's Trombones* (1927), attempts to record the unique speech and rhythm of black preachers in verse by retelling several archetypal sermons he remembers hearing in his youth. Johnson uses many of the same features in his poems that Britt identifies as features of black preaching in her article- frequent repetition, an emphasis on rhyme and rhythm, and an ebb and flow of energy and pace. Also like Britt, Johnson is emphatic that AAVE is not the language of preaching- "The old-time Negro preachers, though they actually used dialect in their ordinary intercourse,

stepped out from its narrow confines when they preached. They were all saturated with the same phraseology of the Hebrew prophets and steeped in the idioms of King James English, so when they preached and warmed to their work they spoke another language, a language far removed from traditional Negro dialect" (Johnson 9). Indeed, according to Johnson putting the language of the cotton fields in the mouths of highly educated preachers would be "sheer burlesque". Johnson is also highly aware of the social connotations of dialect literature- in the introduction he famously states that dialect "is an instrument with but two complete stops, pathos and humor" (7). He proposes the language of the church, black preaching style, as the language of the new African American aesthetic.

These poems have other obvious resonances with Britt's work. It is easy to imagine that Johnson intended to borrow moral and cultural authority by using black preaching style in the same way the speakers in Britt's study did- to negotiate a position of respectability and power in the black community. Furthermore, like many who have attempted to write in AAVE before him, Johnson emphasizes the difficulty of the practice- "the intoning practiced by the old-time preacher is a thing next to impossible to describe; it must be heard" (10). Through this claim he makes his attempt to capture the language even more impressive and increases his authority on the subject. "The Judgement Day" also includes a subtle defense of the power of unusual speech styles in that Johnson specifically records the part of Exodus when Moses protests that he cannot be a prophet: "How can I speak to Pharaoh? I cannot speak well/I'm slow of tongue" (46).

Despite these efforts, Johnson is not entirely successful in creating this new aesthetic. First, he does actually include several instances of AAVE in the text- "They didn't make no sound" and "Noah'd done barred the door" (28, 36). Again, black preaching style and AAVE do sometimes overlap, but the inclusion of these deeply AAVE grammatical forms undercuts his claim that a new aesthetic can be built entirely upon black preaching style. He also does not challenge racially charged metaphors- in the collection's final poem he writes that during the rapture the holy will be "clothed in spotless white" and stand before "the Great White Throne," but that the sinners will fall into the "Big, black, red-hot mouth of hell" (55, 56). The preservation of these images without comment inspires skepticism as to how much he really has moved away from white aesthetic traditions.

Just two years after Johnson published *God's Trombones*, William Faulkner published *The Sound and the Fury*. This modernist/southern renaissance does not have strong connections to the Harlem Renaissance, but it does share one key feature with *God's Trombones*— it pays special attention to the role and speech of the black preacher. However, Johnson's image of black preaching is subtly but importantly different from the image that readers get in *The Sound and the Fury*. In the final segment of this novel Dilsey, the Compson family's long-time cook, goes with her family to Easter services at which a visiting preacher gives a fiery sermon. In the beginning of his speech, "...he sounded like a white man...", "...his voice was level and cold" and he was unable to engage the congregation. However, after a short time he changes his voice and starts again, this time with

Faulkner transcribing some of his speech in AAVE. This attempt is transcendentally successful: “And the congregation seemed to watch with its own eyes while the voice consumed him, until he was nothing and they were nothing and there was not even a voice but instead their hearts were speaking to one another in chanting measures beyond the needs for words, so when he came to rest against the reading desk... a long moaning expulsion of breath rose from them, and a woman's single soprano: ‘Yes, Jesus!’” (191-192). Faulkner assumes that the only pure form of black preaching, of black being, must necessarily include AAVE. Yet as we learn from the independent linguistic analysis cited in “Can the church say amen” and the first-hand experience in Johnson’s introduction to *God’s Trombones*, most preachers do not use many marks of AAVE in their performances.

This is not the only place in the novel where Faulkner uses AAVE- most of the African Americans characters speak this dialect with varying degrees of detail. To Faulkner's credit, he acknowledges the fact that this speech is often performative. While Quinton’s observation that “...a nigger is not a person so much as a form of behavior; a sort of obverse reflection of the white people he lives among” (57) is intensely racist, it does acknowledge the fact that racial identities are in some ways performative. Faulkner ties this performativity directly to speech in the character Deacon, a northern African American man who speaks in deep AAVE and dresses in “... in a sort of Uncle Tom's Cabin outfit” (64) when he first encounters southern students at Harvard, but gradually moves his speech towards SAE and improves his dress as time goes on. Furthermore, the novel’s

portrait of a white, aristocratic family in decline is clearly meant to be a subversion of the Plantation School of writing- recall that in the works of Thomas Nelson Page the fathers were always wise, the sons heroic, and the daughters pure. In the *Sound and the Fury*'s Compson family, the father is a drunk, the wife neurotic, the sons either cruel, suicidal, or developmentally challenged, and the daughter sexually promiscuous. Indeed, it is party Quinton's obsession with old southern ideals of chivalry that destroys his mental health and drives him to suicide.

However, Faulkner still does not manage to avoid all of the pitfalls that white authors face when writing in AAVE. One striking example of this is the fact that the black voice is *marked* whereas the white voice is *unmarked*. In other words, the black voice is the one that must be depicted differently on the page because it must stand in contrast to the white standard. From the text we know that Quinton, and likely his entire family, has a thick Southern accent because when he is out wandering he encounters a group of young northern boys who remark that "He talks like they do in minstrel shows" (79). This comment could be the result of these boys not being familiar with variations in Southern speech, or of the general inaccuracy of minstrel shows, but in any case they still notice that Quinton speaks a different dialect of English than they do, one with strong racial associations. Yet within the text their speech appears exactly the same, with no attempt at phonological or syntactic differentiation. As Mary Bucholtz and Kira Hall point out, because the white standard is unmarked, "its special status is naturalized and the effort required to achieve this status is rendered invisible" (Bucholtz and Hall,

372), making any attempt to comment upon or resist its hegemony difficult.

Because of this difference in markedness, it is clear that Faulkner's goal was not the accurate representation of all forms of Southern speech, but the differentiation of black speech from white speech.

This differentiation, the insistence on segregating dialects rather than letting them blend together and create something new and interesting, is one of the key things that set white authors white authors apart from African American authors during this time period. Instead of letting SAE and AAVE work together to create something exciting and new, white authors insisted on drawing firm boundaries between them. In fact, even Carl Van Vechten, a white author who engaged directly with the Harlem Renaissance and had first-hand experience with the diverse African American community of Harlem, uses language in this oversimplified way.

A critic, an author, and a photographer in his own right, Van Vechten was also a major financial supporter of many Harlem Renaissance authors. However, despite this support he came under fire from many when he published the now-infamous novel *Nigger Heaven* in 1926. Not only is the title offensive, the novel features heavy drinking, drug usage, gambling, sex, and frequent use of AAVE. Many were concerned that this novel painted an overly negative image of African Americans as a whole, and that its popularity would have a negative impact on how white people thought of African Americans. In particular, Du Bois called it "an affront to the hospitality of black folk and to the intelligence of white... I find this novel neither truthful nor artistic... it is a caricature" (Bernard 535). Du Bois

clearly felt betrayed that a white author who has been welcomed into Harlem by the African American community still had such a limited understanding of that community. There are many strange things in this novel, but perhaps none are more bizarre than the way Van Vechten chooses to represent AAVE on the page. While some of his transcription choices include perfectly regular elements of AAVE, he also uses strange eye dialect, writing ‘number’ as ‘nummer’, ‘Christ’ as ‘kerist’, and ‘polite’ as ‘perlite.’ Once again, like Faulkner, his goal seems to be making AAVE stand out as much as possible in contrast to SAE.

Van Vechten also seems to have a very limited view of where AAVE ‘belongs.’ In this text, it appears only in the mouths of working class or vaguely criminal characters. The heroes of the novel— well-educated middle class African Americans trying to make a living as librarians, lawyers, secretaries, or artists— all speak SAE. While there may have been an element of class in the distribution of these dialects, Scanlon and Wassnik, the authors of the code-switching study mentioned in chapter one, state that most of the linguistic research on middle-class African American shows that they variably use at least some core AAVE features. In fact the heroes of this novel, Mary, who works as a librarian, and Byron, a recent college graduate and aspiring author, apparently have only been occasionally exposed to AAVE. The one time that Mary does use AAVE, she and Byron treat it as a charming novelty, a fun game to play: “‘I’m not scolding you. Ah’m jes’ nacherly lovin’ you, mah honey.’ ‘I adore you when you talk like that. Makes me feel I’m your daddy!...Where did you learn that delicious lingo?’ ‘Out of Jezebel Pettyfer and Porgy’” (145; The original text

includes no quotation marks, but I have inserted them here in order to distinguish between the speakers). Not only did Mary have to study AAVE, she claims to have learned it not from the African American community around her but from two novels written by white men. Clearly, for Van Vechten *all* use of AAVE by the middle class is a kind of performance- these two dialects cannot exist side by side in his character's lives. Ironically though, one is definitively better than the other. When Mary attends a party in the home of the snobby, colorist Hester Albright, she observes that when a man there sings old psalms his voice is tepid, but as soon as he begins an old spiritual it comes alive. Interestingly, she specifically notes that "Even without the dialect, the song sounded sincere" (75). Like Faulkner, Van Vechten implies that the best and most authentic way to perform blackness is through AAVE.

This essentialist, primitivist attitude means that Van Vechten treats AAVE as just another one of the 'Negro artifacts' that Mary collects for the library. It's not a living, breathing language that exists in a bidialectal continuum with SAE, but something to be kept apart and studied. By bidialectal continuum I mean that AAVE and SAE are two segments of the wide spectrum of languages we call English. While there are features that are characteristic of each, it is impossible to draw a clean line between them, especially in a community in which they exist in such close proximity. The fact that Van Vechten attempts separate them to such a strong degree shows that he does not understand the different roles that AAVE and SAE play in this community. Additionally, he includes a glossary defining AAVE slang terms at the end of the novel, which widens the distance between

AAVE and SAE even further by implying that AAVE is strange and distant enough to require translation. The glossary also sets him and his novel up as authorities on the subject- much like Twain and Page's notes on dialect, Van Vechten uses this glossary to paint himself as *the* translator, as somebody with special access to the heart of this community. He is almost an informant for his white audiences, someone who has infiltrated the African American community and can provide white access to this closed space. While the use of AAVE may be a key part of African American life, for many speakers the line between AAVE and SAE is not as strict as he makes it out to be. Van Vechten, like many white authors, does not appreciate the flexibility of language, and the permeability of the lines between languages.

Unlike Van Vechten, the works of Langston Hughes bring AAVE and SAE into conversation, sometimes literally as we shall see. Hughes's use of AAVE and jazz forms in poetry has received much critical attention, but his extensive use of AAVE comes in his *Simple Stories*. These short stories and vignettes focus on a man named Jesse B. Semple, usually called Simple. The nickname alone rings alarm bells- the nickname Simple is not a flattering one, and many of these stories are about hard drinking, womanizing, and Semple's disinterest in self-improvement. Furthermore, in the introduction to *The Best of Simple*, Langston Hughes writes: "I cannot truthfully state, as some novelists do at the beginnings of their books, that these stories are about 'nobody living or dead'" (vii). The characters in these pages— the hard drinking, wise-cracking Jesse B. Semple, his respectable lover-then-wife Joyce, and his former mistress Zarita— are all based

on types, and Hughes claims to have known dozens of each of them during his time in Harlem. This kind of broad-brushed painting, this celebration of the disreputable, is exactly what Du Bois and Johnson wanted to avoid. Yet Hughes here seems to fly in the face of their beliefs, even going so far as to say that Simple's stories are told "mostly in high humor, but sometimes with a pain in his soul as sharp as the occasional hurt of that bunion on his right foot" (viii), which seems to be a direct response to Johnson's lament that dialect has only two notes, humor or pathos. These stories are certainly not meant to promote racial uplift, at least not in the way the Du Bois might have envisioned it.

However, this doesn't mean that they do not make bold racial statements. In fact, Semple is the next heir to a long, American tradition that I have been tracking over 100 years and three chapters—the dialect speaking every-man. He may not speak SAE, but his non-standard speech and homely knowledge cut through the pretensions of modern society to a deeper truth. Like Sut, Huck, and Jim, Semple strives to live life outside of the expectations of society, and his use of dialect allows him to say things that other people cannot. For example, in one story he discusses the difficulties that injured veterans face after returning from war, and in another he tells the story of an African American artist whose work had been ignored by his community until it was praised by a white newspaper. Elsewhere these pieces would be combative, perhaps even the propaganda Du Bois wished for, but through the voice of Semple the blow is softened and readers giggle while they think. This is not to say that brash, direct racial literature isn't effective or valuable, Semple just provides another possible strategy of

challenging readers expectations. He draws on stereotype, but also on another, separate tradition of subversion and resistance that transfigures quaintness to insights and a lack of a formal education into originality and authenticity.

However, unlike Sut's stories, Semple's stories do not entirely dismiss the value of education and literacy. Like Sut and many AAVE speaking characters from the plantation school, Semple's stories come to us through a standard-speaking narrator, a stand-in for the authors who can interpret his dialect for the wider reading public. However, unlike previous iterations of this trope, the frame narrator in these stories is not a white stranger or an outsider, but a member of the African American community. Whenever he encounters Semple he is more than willing to buy drinks and have a conversation- they gossip about mutual acquaintances and play the dozens, teasing various friends and relatives. For example, the narrator describes Semple's cousin Minnie: "...an ugly woman who has pretty points, a homey dame who hypes men, a sad sack who signals back when it comes to the Male Code, not the Morse Code" (232). While his speech does not have markers of AAVE phonology or grammar, he does use slang associated with AAVE and rhyming/rhythmic speech and repetition, which are paralinguistic features associated with black preaching style. This is fascinating because the rest of his dialogue is in what looks like a hyperliterate register of SAE- in these casual conversations he says things like "In fact, your line of thought is based on outmoded economics" (17) and "The convolutions of your hypothesis are sometimes beyond cognizance" (18). I say "looks like" because this extravagant style of speech is itself an African Americanism. Johnson points

out in his introduction to *God's Trombones* that a love for large, showy words is a key part of African American oral culture, and that an enthusiastic use of large words is as much a style of African American speech as black preaching style. Yet when the narrator tries to talk about Minnie he recognizes that the words to describe her do not exist in SAE, so he code switches. As a master of multiple distinct dialects, he knows the appropriate contexts for each form and can fluently switch between them. Compare this to the educated characters in Van Vechten's novel, who do not understand these nuances. The first day that Byron works as an elevator operator he makes the mistake of speaking SAE around his AAVE speaking coworkers, and they immediately judge him for his misstep. Within a few weeks they drive him off the job. In Hughes's work, SAE and AAVE can live in the same world and the same person, they can sit side by side in a bar and chat. Furthermore, because the frame narrator also acts as a stand-in for the audience, Hughes's not treating Semple as an exotic curiosity means that the audience will not see him as such.

By accessing the tradition of the dialect speaking everyman, Hughes can write about AAVE and sometimes-scandalous characters in a way that gets around white prejudices and expectations about AAVE. However, one of his collaborators, Zora Neale Hurston, makes no effort to fight primitivist stereotypes when writing AAVE. On the surface the way that she talks about language seems closer to Van Vechten than Hughes, and the essentialism and primitivism inherent in her discussion of AAVE is enough to make any linguist cringe. First, she draws a line between 'primitive' languages and 'civilized' languages, claiming that

“highly developed languages have words for detached ideas” but that “primitive” languages are hieroglyphic and based on literal pictures of things. This is of course outrageous— all languages are complex in their own ways, and the so-called civilized world is not the sole possessor of abstract thought. Even more shocking is her claim that certain features of AAVE came about because of the shape of African American lips: “By experiment that reader will find that a sharp “T” is very much easier with a thin taut lip than with a full soft lip” (Characteristics 71) Linguistically, this makes no sense. The word “T” sounds different in AAVE because the diphthong [aɪ̯] (as heard in “pie”) has gone through a process of monophthongization and now usually appears as [a:], an elongated version of the vowel found in “father.” The difference between these sounds is one of height and movement, and is connected to the lips only tangentially. Yet despite these alarming linguistic claims, her actual use of different dialects in her novels, short stories, and anthropological work is revolutionary in the ways that it plays with orality and performativity. She breaks down the distinction between dialogue and narration in the text, and turns performativity into its own aesthetic.

Hurston embraced AAVE as a truly literary form, and was unafraid to mix it with SAE in her work. For example, while all of the dialogue in *Their Eyes were Watching God* is in AAVE and most of the narration is in SAE, occasional pieces of AAVE slang or grammatical constructs occasionally slip into the narration. For example, the following description of the everglades features a zero copula (a missing “to be” verb), one of the most common features of AAVE: “Wild cane on

either side of the road hiding the rest of the world. People wild too” (*Eyes* 129). Her use of free indirect discourse has a similar effect, blurring Janie’s private thoughts with the wider text. In general, these techniques make the written text sound more like a spoken one. Consider this moment: “Fact is, she decided to treat him so cold if he ever did foot the place that he’d be sure not to come hanging around there again” (100). While these lines have no phonological markers of AAVE and are not a piece of dialogue, their rhythm and use of slang like “foot the place” give them a distinctly oral feel. This pervasive code-switching challenges the default, hegemonic nature of SAE. Unlike Faulkner, who went out of his way to distinguish African American speech from the rest of the text, Hurston allows AAVE to pervade every part of her text. In other words, pure SAE becomes more marked while AAVE becomes less marked.

Because AAVE is deeply associated with oral culture and dialogue, and SAE with written culture, this blurring of dialects also blurs the line between oral and written forms. This fusion of forms marks Hurston’s works as profoundly performative. This is because like staged performance, her writing also blurs the line between speech and text, between natural language and written language.

Recall that while Britt’s study of black preaching style at the SBU did focus on actual spoken words, the staged nature of these words means that they have as much in common with written texts as with an oral ones. These speakers did engage with their audience in a limited way, which makes the interaction a kind of conversation, but their performance was far more one-sided than most

conversations. Zora's texts are obviously written, but their heavy use of dialogue and AAVE makes more like conversations than many novels.

Not only does the style of *Their Eyes were Watching God* embody performativity, Hurston actually obliquely embraces performativity as an aesthetic in

Characteristics of Negro Expression. One of the central claims of this essay is that mimicry and imitation are key parts of African American art: "The Negro, the world over, is famous as a mimic... Mimicry is an art in itself... He does it as the mockingbird does it, for the love of it, and not because he wishes to be like the one imitated" (Characteristics 63-64). While she acknowledges that the association of mimicry with African Americans is a harmful stereotype, she defends her stance by pointing out that all art, including the works of Shakespeare, borrows from other artists and mimics the world. And African Americans, she claims, are the best, most original mimics around. The concepts of mimicry and performativity have much in common- both of them involve a speaker or artist taking up and discarding personas in order to engage their audience and act a certain reality into being. Within mimicry of this sort is the potential for subtle but profound change as the mimic makes slight alterations to the original "text." Hurston engages with another example of this kind of performativity in her anthropological study of African American folklore in Florida, *Mules and Men*. The first half of this work focuses on "lies", or tall tales told for the amusement of onlookers. "Lying" is also a form of performativity—the speakers know that they are putting on a persona, knows that they are

speaking absurdities, but still swears that they are telling the truth in order to engage with their audience in the proper way.

The embrace of these strange, seemingly contradictory dynamics— original mimicry, true lies, literary dialect— is what makes Hurston’s use of AAVE so innovative in its performativity. As Michael North points out in *The Dialect of Modernism: Race, Language, and 20th Century Literature*, she plays with the dichotomy of *actual* and *acting* throughout her works, a dichotomy that also exists in linguistic performance. Performed speech like the kind we saw in “Can the church say amen” blends the dialogic nature of conversation with declamatory style of literature; it is a genuine production of natural language, but also a pre-determined text. Furthermore, because this style of speech foregrounds the relationship between author and audience, it creates a fascinating opportunity for the speaker to challenge or change that relationship by engaging in code-switching or crossing. The works of Zora Neale Hurston embrace this paradoxical, chasmic middle ground between oral and written, performed and genuine, to create a new aesthetic based on performativity. While she make some essentialist claims similar to those of Van Vechten, her actual use of these liminal, changeable forms mean that her works embrace linguistic reality much more accurately and productively than his do.

Most of the works by African American authors that I have considered in this study have had a chiasmic element in their representations of AAVE- they blur lines, question essentialist assumptions, and test the boundaries of racial and cultural divisions. However, as artists in the Harlem Renaissance became more

aware of the performative nature of literature and of speech, they embraced these reversals with a new enthusiasm. By applying lessons learned from Erica Britt's analysis of performative code-switching at the SBU, I have read the Harlem Renaissance as a literary movement based on the idea of performativity. Some authors took to a pulpit of sort, preaching a new and unique style of African American art that would cross and subvert the expectations of white audience members. Others took the paradoxical step of ignoring their audience all together and emphasizing the use of AAVE in their quest to develop a purely African American aesthetic. Whether or not they succeeded in this endeavor depends on how you view the importance of dialogism in art and linguistic performance. Does the significance of a piece of art and or a linguistic utterance depend only on the intentions of the artist/speaker? Or are we obligated to consider the cultural background of their audience as well?

In the end, I believe that the most successful and compelling works are the ones that turn this dichotomy into a dialogue. For example, Hughe's Simple stories both speak their own artistic truth, and enter into conversation with past conventions of the dialect speaking every man. His depiction of dialect embraces the subtlety and in-betweenness inherent to a bidialectal community. Van Vechten's work, on the other hand, does not understand the performative nature of language and art. He does not take advantage of the complex relationship between speaker and audience, and his inclusion of the glossary clearly represents his desire for clear-cut categories and his unwillingness to leave the relationship between his characters and his audience ambiguous and open to manipulation. An

understanding of performativity, of this linguistic space and the speaker's ability to shift it, is one of the things that made authors like Langston Hughes, Zora Neale Hurston, and James Weldon Johnson, despite their ideological differences.

Conclusion

“On numerous occasions.. I was asked if I "believed in Ebonics"...In fact, one host on a radio talk show confronted my stance on the legitimacy of African American Vernacular English as a linguistic system with the comment, "You have to understand, professor, that I believe in a right and a wrong, a moral and an immoral, a correct and an incorrect, and Ebonics is simply incorrect English." (Wolfram 110).

In the above quote Walt Wolfram, one of the earliest linguistic scholars to study AAVE extensively, reflects on the skepticism that he often encounters when discussing his work. In the chapter “The Real Trouble with Black English,” from her book *English with an Accent: Language, Ideology, and Discrimination in the US*, Rosina Lippi-Green shows the widespread nature of this discomfort by citing example after example of white Americans expressing disgust and alarm at the use of AAVE. She persuasively argues that the trouble with AAVE, the reason that these people respond to AAVE with such vehemence, is that “AAVE is tangible and irrefutable evidence that there is a distinct, healthy, functioning African American culture which is not white, and which does not want to be white. This is a state of affairs which is unacceptable to many” (178). In some ways this project has been about following the development of this linguistic consciousness, and the way that white authors and audiences relate to and understand it.

This conflation linguistic and community/national identity also returns us to my first chapter, which I opened by tracking the efforts of authors to build a new national image based on language. This investigation lead me to consider the

complexities of code-switching in Antebellum era literature. George Washington Harris and Harriet Beecher Stowe used static, oversimplified linguistic figures that failed to do justice to the complexity usually found in bidialectal code-switching; as a result, their works consisted largely of racist caricature. In contrast to these two authors, in her narrative *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* Harriet Jacobs embraces variability and change, even showing some brief examples of code-switching. By demonstrating the variation present among members of a linguistic community and in individual speakers, she paints a more linguistically accurate portrait of a bidialectal community. On the other hand the works of Sojourner Truth attempted to turn AAVE into a more privileged code, but unfortunately this often ended up reinforcing the racist belief that African Americans were primitive and childlike.

Chapter two looked at crossing in the post-bellum/Reconstruction years and identified minstrelsy as the key trope of AAVE use in this era. This minstrelsy encodes both fear and fascination, a desire to embody and to control the racial and linguistic other. In particular, the works of Thomas Nelson Page and Thomas Dixon showed a fascination with black sexuality, as well as reliance on African American voices and labor for cultural material. While the works of Mark Twain mostly show an enthusiasm for African Americans and their language, that enthusiasm often becomes belittling because Twain cannot move away from minstrel images of African Americans that he absorbed in his youth. While he intend to paint sympathetic and engaging portraits of African American characters by crossing into AAVE when writing them, the language and style of these

portraits relies too much on the minstrel tradition. Charles Chesnutt, one of the few African American men to write in the plantation tradition of literature, showed a way for non-white authors and characters to make a 'profit' off of and subvert the minstrel tradition. Unfortunately, readers at this time largely did not pick up on the anti-racist themes of his stories because they could not get past his use of AAVE and their associations of it with humor or sentimentality.

Finally, in chapter three I turned to the works of the Harlem Renaissance and theorized that the linguistic theory of performative speech is fact one of the driving aesthetic influences of this era. Authors at this time became even more aware of the performative nature of their texts and sought to directly manipulate the relationship between them and their audience. They also sought to develop a new black aesthetic independent from the white artistic establishment. In *God's Trombones*, James Weldon Johnson works to achieve both of these goals by crossing into black preaching style. He hoped that this form of black discourse would both serve as a template for the new aesthetic and to place himself in a position of respectability and influence. In this chapter we once again see that a willingness to embrace code-switching and linguistic variability is one of the things that distinguishes an authentically anti-racist text from a work that is merely attempting to be anti-racist and failing, like Carl Van Vechten's *Nigger Heaven*. He, like William Faulkner in the *Sound and the Fury*, attempts to depict African American characters in a sympathetic light but does not capture the way that AAVE actually functions in most African American communities. Finally, the works of Langston Hughes and Zora Neale Hurston use AAVE outside of

their dialogue and embrace performativity as an artistic strategy in their efforts to create a new African American aesthetic.

One theme that ran through all three chapters was the presence of the heroic dialect speaking everyman. Sut Lovingood, Huckleberry Finn, Jim, and Jesse P. Semple are parts of a clear literary tradition in which slightly (or very) irreputable characters use a language other than SAE to speak out against the corruptions of modern society. By using literary dialect, humor, and folksy comments as a cover, they can say things that others cannot. Audiences usually interpret their distance from traditional structures of power and conventional education as a sign of truthfulness and authenticity. This trend makes me wonder if anti-establishment heroes in other literary traditions are also associated with subaltern dialects, or if this is a purely an American tradition.

In general, in this project I have determined that the use of dialect is far more complicated than "good speech=good person, bad speech=bad person." Rather, I believe that the most important question to ask about representations of AAVE in literature is how well the author embraces linguistic principles of change, and how they treat their characters who defy the linguistic expectations that audiences might have. I see an openness to variations in speech as an openness to variations of all kinds- those of race, gender, sexuality, and the ways in which these identities may intersect in complex ways.

While some might object to the application of linguistic theories designed for spoken language to written language, in this study I have demonstrated how this strategy may provide insights to both linguists and literary scholars. This latter

group gains new, more complex ways to critically think about the depictions of various literary dialects. How do authors maintain or challenge linguistic hierarchies? How well do depictions of dialect match patterns of use that linguists have identified in the real world? On the other hand, linguists can gain insights into language ideology by investigating how authors and audiences engage with literary dialect. For example, the power of the dialect-speaking everyman reinforces the fact that code prestige is flexible, and that certain situations privilege some codes more than others. Perhaps this might inspire a perception study on the trustworthiness of different dialects of English in different situation or social contexts.

Not only is literary dialect an important source for linguistic data in the time before audio recording, I believe that the rise of digital culture will soon make these strategies even more important. The internet has converted an increasingly large portion of our conversations to a written form, and has fundamentally changed the ways that we communicate. Understanding these changes requires an understanding of how sociolinguistic theories may be applied to constructed, performed, written texts. As Bell and Gibson state in their review of staged language, "Some strands of sociolinguistics have assumed that performance language plays no significant role in language change... But as media become ever more embedded in day-to-day experience, it seems increasingly likely that there are circulating relationships between performed and everyday language" (559). While most of the texts that I have investigated in this study do not widely circulate today, I hope that the ways in which I have thought about their language

may create a basic template that other investigations may build on. Lastly, I believe that one of the jobs of a linguist is to inform the public about the beauty of linguistic variation, and I hope that, in its own small way, this study will challenge the way that we think about dialects in English and how we respond to them on the page.

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