50–55.

—Sandra Y. Govan

SPEECH AND DIALECT. How black people adapted and adopted American English after their forced arrival in the New World was marked by several nonlinguistic factors, beginning in the seventeenth century. Whether or not Africans could learn to speak English was directly tied to perceptions of their intelligence. Issues revolving around the shape of the African lips or otherwise centering upon the ability to form words in English were also central to the acquisition of language. When Africans acquired rudimentary English skills, questions then arose about their imitative abilities as opposed to true creative abilities with the language. And when enough Africans in America actually learned sufficient English to publish works in that language, questions were frequently raised about authenticity of composition. Language issues for African Americans, therefore, are clearly tied to questions of intelligence, creativity, literacy, culture, politics, race, and representation.

Throughout their history of representation in European American literary works, African Americans have been portrayed as questionable masters of the English language. European American writers such as John Pendleton Kennedy solidified the manner of representation in works such as *Swallow Barn* (1832), where black characters invariably sound like buffoons. The same trend is operative in works specifically identified with the *plantation tradition and with writers such as Thomas Nelson Page and Thomas Dixon. Page's *In Ole Virginia* (1887) portrays black people as loyal servants longing for the plantation days when they were protected and loved by their masters and where the illiterate sounds issuing from their mouths were considered an appropriate part of the plantation image. Dixon's more negative portrayal of African American speech coincided with his purpose of presenting newly freed blacks as dangerous intruders upon culture and particularly upon white women. Dixon's *The Clansman: An Historical Romance of the Ku Klux Klan* (1905), which was transformed into the movie *The Birth of a Nation,* depicts black males who are absurd in their efforts to make speeches in the legislative bodies in which insensitive northern overseers assured their presence. Their inadequate verbal abilities were barely covering for their menacing bodies, with which they animalistically pursued white women. Not even a veneer of culture, so Dixon posited, could change the basic need for such people to be caged in the benign plantation system.

While black people were being attacked through fiction by the likes of Dixon, black legislators duly elected to various congressional bodies were exemplars of the art of rhetoric. Robert Brown Elliott of South Carolina became well known in the 1870s for the speeches he delivered in the House of Representatives in his home state as well as in Washington, D.C. That was no less the case with Blanche K. Bruce, a Mississippi legislator who might have been one of the ancestors of *Harlem Renaissance writer Richard Bruce *Nugent. Elliott and Bruce were masters of *oratory, as were several other African Americans elected to state and national offices during Reconstruction.

Popular perceptions of black people's use of the English language, therefore, were at times dramatically at odds with historical truth, but the myth prevailed more often than not. Segments of minstrel shows in the nineteenth century frequently depended upon the inability of black characters to master English or the deliberate distortion and exaggerated concoction of words by characters who assumed that such creation made them masters of the language. These patterns are clearly portrayed in *Ethnic Notions,* a videotape that traces stereotypical portrayals of black people in American entertainment and advertising from the 1820s to the 1970s. One minstrel character, Zip Coon, was based on the created gibberish of a black man who thought he was being stylish and masterful in his speech.

African American writers were thus early confronted with a dilemma: how truthfully to represent black voices without intersecting overly much with the stereotypical perceptions of black literacy and intelligence. It was not an easy dilemma to resolve. William Wells *Brown, for example, in the novel **Clotel* (1853), could not reasonably present illiterate

enslaved persons speaking in standard English, but that is precisely what he consciously or inadvertently does on occasion. At times Currer, Clotel's mother, speaks in the same dialect as other enslaved persons; on other occasions, Brown represents her as commanding the same skills in language as white plantation owners. When Currer is being sold along with her daughter Althesa, she says to the prospective buyer: "If you buy me, I hope you will buy my daughter too," yet when she is in the kitchen with the other enslaved house workers, she remarks: "Dat reminds me. . . dat Dorcas is gwine to git married." Of course it might be argued, and it seems highly probable, that Currer is aware of code-switching, for in a few sentences she is back to speaking in standard English. Perhaps, too, Brown is waging war with himself about representation, or trying to command so many things in the novel that he simply forgot to maintain consistency in Currer's speech. The problem nonetheless makes the issue of representation clear. If Currer is represented as the most highly educated of the enslaved persons, then she should probably speak differently from them, but she is nonetheless just as enslaved as they are, so Brown must run the risk of seeming to compromise her intelligence even as he tries to represent realistically what might have gone on in a conversation exclusively among enslaved persons.

Under these circumstances, speech in American culture is clearly perceived to be one of the definitive markers of race, culture, education, and civilization. It also serves to mark character, place, class, substance, and value. Standard English was looked upon as the purview of white American speakers, and blacks who attempted to master English were viewed as interlopers, usually humorous interlopers. The breeding, education, and culture that were to separate white Americans from those whom they enslaved were among the sites, therefore, on which language served as warrior. Standard English meant good breeding and class, which in turn meant whiteness; dialect meant second-class citizenship and the place of subservience designated for black people. It meant that they were of less substance and value, or, indeed, that their value and substance could be bartered.

One of the tasks for African American writers was to present speakers of African American origins in command of standard English, but not desiring to be white or to separate themselves from the black masses. Frances Ellen Watkins *Harper attempts such a project in **Iola Leroy* (1892). However, she, like Brown, nonetheless lapses into establishing educational and thus class levels among black characters by allowing some of them mastery and others not. Iola can certainly speak like a dictionary, but Aunt Linda and her husband are dialect speakers. Given the considerations of realistic representation and the emphasis upon local color during this period, however, sensitive readers might consider Harper's dialect more on the cutting edge of literary depictions, an effort to showcase both aesthetic and artistic skills, to portray character accurately. While wit and wisdom are centered in Aunt Linda, it is nonetheless the case that representation of her speech serves as a marker indicating lesser social status and value. Notwithstanding this seeming inconsistency, Harper allows Iola's nationalistic perspective to overshadow to some extent the issues surrounding the representation of speech by blacks in the text. And indeed Harper herself could personally attest to these issues. She reports that people thought she was white or a man because she "spoke Standard English and spoke it well."

Some contemporaries of Harper directly confronted the proponents of the plantation tradition in their representation of black folk speech. Charles Waddell *Chesnutt and Paul Laurence *Dunbar tried to salvage the best possibilities inherent in dialect and to give agency and power to vernacular speakers. Chesnutt's *Uncle Julius McAdoo, the central reconteur in *The *Conjure Woman* (1899), uses his dialect to highlight values of harmonic interaction with nature, a preference for human beings over property, a sensitivity to the physical and mental conditions of others, and a general appreciation for African American folk culture and folk speakers. In "The Goophered Grapevine," for example, his description of *Aun' Peggy is designed to draw readers to the power of the conjure woman as well as to the power of African American folk culture, of which folk speech is an integral part. When Julius comments that Aun' Peggy "could wuk de mos' powerfulles' kin' er goopher,—could make people hab fits, er rheumatiz, er make 'em des dwinel away en die; en dey say she went out ridin' de niggers at night, fer she wuz a witch 'sides bein' a cunjuh 'oman," his respect for her reputation is contrasted with John's denigration of the culture of which Julius is a part. Chesnutt thus borrows from dialect and storytelling traditions that had been established by Joel Chandler Harris with his Uncle Remus tales to solicit reader engagement with Julius and his tales and thereby with African American culture. He essentially pours new wine into the old bottle of dialect by making Julius a cunning trickster figure who is intelligent enough not only to outsmart John, but to transform reader evaluation of black people.

While it is clear that Chesnutt uses dialect to the larger purpose of trying to "work roots" on his audience and win social acceptance for African Americans, Dunbar's motives are often less clear. He has been accused of buying into the plantation representation of black dialect simply because that was what sold. Readers more sensitive to Dunbar's positioning as a black writer trying to win readers from a primarily white audience are more forgiving of his dialect and indeed argue that, of all the writers who popularized dialect at the turn of the twentieth century, Dunbar was the master. These include the white Hoosier poet James Whitcomb Riley as well as fellow black poets James D. *Corrothers and James Edwin *Campbell.

One of the most famous Dunbar poems, "The Party" (1896), illustrates well the problem as well as the mastery: "Dey had a gread big pahty down to Tom's de othah; / Was I dah? You bet! I nevah in my lice see sich a sight." The light tone, together with the

rhyme and meter, zip the poem through nearly a hundred lines, and characterization of black people during *slavery is just as problematic as the representation of their speech. They cut antics as if they were in a black folktale; they laugh, drink, eat, and have access to more food than any enslaved person perhaps saw in months; and they are stereotypically happy, singing, and good-timing. Even the visual representation of the dialect seems to highlight the good times. Thus Dunbar, struggling to become a writer at a time when that was difficult under any circumstances, was plagued by language issues that he could not resolve during his lifetime. He was aware that editors and publishers stereotyped him as a master of dialect poetry—even though he preferred his poems in standard English—but he could not escape their influence if he wanted to achieve recognition for his works.

A couple of decades later, James Weldon *Johnson would revisit the problematic issue of dialect in his preface to *The Book of American Negro Poetry* (1922, 1931). Having begun his own poetic career in the dialect tradition of Dunbar, and being aware of its limitations, he consciously encouraged younger poets to attempt what he considered greater achievement. Dialect itself was not the problem, Johnson maintained, but the mold of convention into which it had been set in the United States. Its identification with minstrelsy, as well as with happy-go-lucky black people, and its limitations to pathos and humor made it resistant to transformation. The black American poet, Johnson asserted, "needs to find a form that will express the racial spirit by symbols from within rather than by symbols from without—such as the mere mutilation of English spelling and pronunciation. He needs a form that is freer and larger than dialect, but which will still hold the racial flavor; a form expressing the imagery, the idioms, the peculiar turns of thought, and the distinctive humor and pathos, too, of the Negro, but which will also be capable of voicing the deepest and highest emotions and aspirations and allow the widest range of subjects and the widest scope of treatment." In explaining why he did not resort to dialect in representing his sermons in the folk manner in **God's Trombones* (1927), Johnson simply reiterated the position he had taken in the earlier volume.

By 1932, however, when Sterling A. *Brown published *Southern Road* (1932) and exhibited all the skills in dialect that Johnson had assumed could only be exhibited elsewhere, Johnson recognized Brown's achievement by writing a brief introduction to that volume. Brown masterfully portrayed a variety of characters and situations based on working-class black people, and he showed the attendant range of emotions, philosophies, and beliefs—all in dialect. The 1930s also saw Richard *Wright and Zora Neale *Hurston taking on the challenges of the representation of black folk speech; critics generally assume that Hurston was more adept in doing so. In **Jonah's Gourd Vine* (1934), **Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937), and a host of other fictional, folkloristic, dramatic, and essayistic works, Hurston captured the sounds and idioms of black folk simply being themselves. She is credited with some of the earliest realistic portrayals of African American women, from their speech to their beliefs and sentiments.

Wright, on the hand, was less concerned with accurate typographical representation of black folk speech than with attempting to imagine the nuances of the sound of that speech. The consequence is that his dialect on the page looks as if it is a mistake, and readers have difficulty "sounding it out" (that is not as consistently the case with Dunbar or with Hurston). Wright's dialect, in fact, looks on the page a lot like Jean *Toomer's in **Cane* (1923). Both writers seemed to be more interested in other issues than accuracy of visual representation. In "Big Boy Leaves Home" (1938), for example, Wright could represent black folk speech in this manner: "Chile, will yuh c mere like Ah ast yuh?" It might also be noted that he was not appreciably different in his representation of white folk speech. Similarly, an example of black folk speech from Toomer's "Kabnis" is the following: "I'm only tryin t fool y. I used t love that girl. Yassur. An sometimes when th moon is thick an I hear dogs up th valley barkin an some old woman fetches out her song, an the winds seem like th Lord made them fer to fetch an carry th smell o pine an cane, an there aint no big job on foot, I sometimes get t thinkin that I still do." Wright uses dialect to capture the illiteracy of his southern sharecroppers whereas it is uncertain if Toomer is merely inept in trying to portray southern black rural folk speech. Certainly Toomer wants to indicate class distinctions at various points in his text, but numerous inconsistencies throughout the book would indicate as well that his skills in this area were somewhat limited.

The same could be said of the drama of this period. There was a group of women dramatists in the first three decades of the twentieth century who drew sharp lines of class and educational demarcation in their depictions of African Americans. One of the most striking examples is Angelina Weld *Grimké's *Rachel* (1916), in which Rachel is the counterpart to Iola Leroy without the strength of racial conviction that that comparison entails. Rachel speaks in the lofty standard English tones of a young girl lifted from the pages of poetry; her speech and education distance her from the lower-class black children with whom she interacts. Georgia Douglas *Johnson's *A Sunday Morning in the South* (1925) uses exaggerated dialect to represent illiterate southern blacks, as does Mary P. Burrill's *Aftermath* (1928). It is perhaps instructive to compare the use of dialect in these plays to Hurston's in *Color Struck* (1925), which is contemporary with these dramas.

Simultaneous with these representations, Langston *Hughes was experimenting in a different direction—trying to reflect the variety and range of African American lifestyles and speech. Whether in blues poems, the *Madam Alberta K. Johnson poems, the *Simple stories, or his poems in imitation of urban street speech, such as "Mother to Son" (1920), Hughes tried to look from the inside of black experience outward instead of imposing alien forms and patterns on the culture. He was able to achieve, in a more respectful way, what Dunbar attempted earlier

—accuracy without stereotyping or distortion. When the speaker in "Mother to Son" begins by telling her son that her life "ain't been no crystal stair," few readers are inclined to laugh at her or feel sorry for her. Hughes has managed effectively to match medium, voice, and sentiment. In this attempt, there is respect for the character as well as for her creator.

Speech and dialect were but two of the issues relevant to literary portrayal of black people in the 1920s. Indeed, the **Crisis* had featured in 1926 the results of a forum in which black and white writers and critics, among others, responded to the question "The Negro in Art: How Shall He Be Portrayed?" Respondents included W. E. B. *Du Bois, Georgia Douglas *Johnson, Alfred A. Knopf, Vachel Lindsay, Langston Hughes, H. L. Mencken, Walter *White, and several others. Writers who believed in the "best foot forward," that is, portraying middle-class, well-educated blacks, would perhaps prefer Iola Leroy without her racial loyalty, and they would certainly prefer in all instances that characters like Chesnutt's Josh Green in *The *Marrow of Tradition* (1901) be obliterated from the African American literary imagination. On the other hand, for those writers who allowed for the working classes and how they spoke, Brown, Hughes, and Hurston were certainly to be applauded for their efforts.

In the mid-twentieth century, issues of speech were resolved with writers taking readers, without apology, where they wanted them to go. For Ralph *Ellison, this meant presenting a range of black voices in **Invisible Man* (1952), from the naive but linguistically sophisticated narrator, to a lettered preacher, to a storytelling sharecropper, to a blues-singing folk rhymer, to a motherly savior, to two drunks appreciating the antics of a riot. Ellison wanted, he said, to capture the ranges of American speech, with the recognition that blacks were just as American as anyone else on U.S. soil. Margaret *Walker, it might be argued, makes a similar claim in **Jubilee* (1966), which, while ostensibly called a folk novel, incorporates a range of narrative and verbal patterns.

A renewed interest in black folk speech was one of the features of the *Black Arts movement of the 1960s and thereafter, when some writers asserted that traditional music and the dialect of the people were the truest reflections of the culture. Poets especially went out of their way to represent a distinctively black typography and to coin letterings (black poet=blkpt; you=u) that would reclaim the troublesome English language for their own unique use. Sherley Anne *Williams's *Peacock Poems* (1975), which was nominated for a National Book Award, is in part defined by her experimentation with representing accurately the speech of black people in the 1970s. Prose writers like Toni Cade *Bambara were studied in their experimentation with narrative exclusively in black dialect or folk speech. In the stories in *Gorilla, My Love* (1972), Bambara allows the language of the folk all its flavor and range. During this period, therefore, resorting to the speech of the folk was a political act, one designed to show solidarity with the masses and to indicate that black writers were not the chosen few. They were instead merely reflectors of sentiments for all black people.

This progression was also a statement that black writers had come of age. With many of their own publishing outlets, along with a seriously increased black readership, they did not have to depend exclusively upon the acceptance of white readers. They could therefore assert a renewed independence, declare a contemporary manifesto, in the very language they used. In the spirit of the revolutionary moment, language had a role to play in the same way that dashikis, Afros, and Swahili made statements. These writers embraced the full implications of language usage instead of writing against the grain; their characters were who they were—without apology.

The path to freer expression perhaps culminated in 1982 with Alice *Walker's publication of *The *Color Purple*. Written almost entirely in black folk speech and narrated by a character who could not be readily viewed as a "best foot forward" type, the novel captured in prose what Brown had achieved in poetry in *Southern Road* and other poems. Its language recognized the intrinsic value, intelligence, and life world of a character who was not of a privileged class, color, or social situation. When the novel was made into a movie in 1985, that transformation further signaled to viewers the value of seeing *Celie as she was, where she was, and respecting the life that she created under those circumstances.

In drama, the culmination perhaps began with Ntozake *Shange's **for colored girls* (1977) and peaked with August *Wilson's plays. Shange's female characters celebrate their blackness, which includes their speech. They recount their adventures seducing and being seduced by men in language that garnered huge audiences for the play from California to Boston. In Wilson's plays, black male characters especially are given the opportunity to be themselves—in speech, action, and interactions. Boy Willie, in Wilson's Pulitzer Prize–winning *The *Piano Lesson* (1990), for example, comes north with all the rawness of his southern and prison backgrounds. While he may prove an embarrassment to his sister Berniece, he retains the unapologetic essence of himself. Wilson duplicates that feat many times over in the characters he has created in several plays, including the Pulitzer Prize–winning **Fences* (1987).

A comparison of Shange's and Wilson's plays makes clear that gender is a factor in the representation of speech and dialect as well. The images that Shange's characters use to describe their experiences are peculiarly domestic and feminine, as are those that Celie and *Shug Avery use in *The Color Purple*; a quilting metaphor, for example, is especially relevant to Walker's novel. Women frequently must express themselves against the demands of the men in their lives, as Wilson's Rose does in *Fences*; the differences in what she hoped for in life and what Todd wanted finally estrange them beyond sexual reconciliation, although they continue to share the same physical space. How they speak of their desires (baseball versus domestic space; filling up versus emptying) emphasizes their gendered linguistic frames of reference.

Implicit in the works of most of these writers is also the issue of region and its influence upon the representation of black folk speech. The clearest regional division is North/South, with the North carrying healthy class overtones comparable to the black/white split in connotations of speech. Southern and rural usually carry negative values, and it is a tribute to writers like Sterling A. Brown, Zora Neale Hurston, and Richard Wright that southern black voices were embraced as readily as they were. In more contemporary times, the South still carries negative implications for speakers, but the use of that territory by writers as prominent as Toni *Morrison, Toni Cade Bambara, and Gloria *Naylor has gone a long way in transforming attitudes toward the South and its black speakers. Walter *Mosley has given us glimpses of western speech, though many of the characters in his novels are drawn from Texas, the near Southwest.

As Bambara, Walker, Shange, Wilson, and others suggested that black folk speech had intrinsic worth, however, there were trends in the literature away from such representation. This can be seen in works like Andrea *Lee's *Sarah Phillips* (1984) and Brent Wade's *Company Man* (1992), where middle-class African American characters consciously avoid the markers, such as dialect, that would identify them with the masses of un- or ill-educated blacks. This resorting to standard English as the primary medium of black speech has undertones of class and color that marked Harper's *Iola Leroy,* but the issues are not resolved as nationalistically as Harper resolved them. Highly educated young black writers are thus finding that issues surrounding the representation of language in their works are no less resolved in the 1990s than they were in the 1890s, for monitors of one kind or another are always looking over the writers' shoulders to their computer screens, trying to determine if what they are writing places them within or without the culture. Chances are that such issues will continue to inform the literature well into the twenty-first century.

[*See also* Black Aesthetic; Black Nationalism; Blue Vein Societies; Dialect Poetry; Federal Writers' Project; New Cultural Mulatto; New Negro; Novel of Passing; Passing.]

• James Weldon Johnson, preface to *The Book of American Negro Poetry,* 1922; rpts. 1931, 1969. Sterling A. Brown, "A Century of Negro Portraiture in American Literature," in *Black Insights: Significant Literature by Black Americans—1760 to the Present,* ed. Nick Aaron Ford, 1971, pp. 66–78. Joseph Boskin, *Sambo: The Rise and Demise of an American Jester,* 1986. *Ethnic Notions,* KQED Television, California Newsreel, San Francisco, 1986.

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