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**Jim and Uncle Remus: Stereotypicity versus Authenticity in
Representations of Blackness in the Gilded Age**

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Representations of Blackness in the Gilded Age**

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Report

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Dedication

For my family, always.

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Abstract

Jim and Uncle Remus: Stereotypicity versus Authenticity in Representations of Blackness in the Gilded Age

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Accuracy and authenticity in literary representations of blackness in the modern age are of utmost importance in order to dissuade accusations of racism; however in centuries past, this was not the case. Given the cultural and social climate, what we today see as overt racism may have been viewed in the 1800s as the accepted norm. Actual authenticity was less important than portraying black characters in a way that readers would accept.

The purpose of this project is to examine representations of blackness in terms of language and character descriptions in nineteenth century American fiction through the lens of factors that led to the stereotyped versions of black characters that were prevalent at the time. I investigated two works: *Huckleberry Finn* by Mark Twain and *Uncle Remus: His Songs and His Sayings* by Joel Chandler Harris, taking into account not only the physical texts themselves, but also each author's biographic history and personal

knowledge and experience of black culture. By examining the phonological, lexical, and grammatical aspects of the Black English found in each text in conjunction with physical, emotional, and intellectual descriptions of the chosen characters, I found archetypes of the Sambo slave stereotype, also influenced by the culture of minstrelsy prevalent at the time. While Twain and Harris claim to have represented their characters as genuinely as possible, external societal pressures and their own limitations as white men clearly affected their depictions of blackness. In the century since these Gilded Age pieces first made their appearance, hundreds of scholarly works on African American speech have been published, reifying the academic study of Black English into a well-established field. Nevertheless its occasional representation in fiction and in entertainment media—especially now film—is evidence that stereotype can still too often win out over accuracy.

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Introduction

Blackness in the later nineteenth century signified limitation and strife. Although Black Americans were no longer enslaved, they remained marked as different due to their skin color. These differences made their ways into the literature of the time period, in the form of linguistic and stylistic choices made by the authors. Here I begin an investigation into the representations of blackness in nineteenth century American literature, namely in the form of Black English and slave characters. I will examine two texts: *Huckleberry Finn* by Mark Twain and *Uncle Remus: His Songs and His Sayings* by Joel Chandler Harris.

Many scholars over the past century have examined these and similar works in an attempt to determine the accuracy and authenticity of the representations of Black English. I will continue linguistically in this vein, exploring the effects of social attitude, and expound on this investigation by analyzing the depictions of the slave characters used in each of these texts: Jim in *Huckleberry Finn* and Uncle Remus in *Uncle Remus: His Songs and His Sayings*.

Both Twain and Harris claim to portray the language of their Black characters as closely and faithfully to real life as possible.¹ I will address phonological,² grammatical, and lexical aspects of Black English identified in the two texts. I will also speak to

¹ Written in the introduction of each book, the authors make their claim for a genuine representation of dialect:

“With respect to the Folk-Lore series, my purpose has been to preserve the legends in their original simplicity, and to wed them permanently to the quaint dialect – if, indeed, it can be called a dialect – through the medium of which they have become a part of the domestic history of every Southern family” (Harris xiii).

The characters’ dialect has not been represented “in a haphazard fashion, or by guesswork; but painstakingly, and with the trustworthy guidance and support of personal familiarity with those several forms of speech” (Twain xxxii).

² Harris claims that although his rendition of the dialect is “different from the intolerable misrepresentations of the minstrel stage, it is at least phonetically genuine” (reproduced in Green 170).

characteristics of Black English that are shared with white Southern English in order to address the overlap between the two that the authors may present.

Scholarship has yet to reach a consensus about the accuracy and authenticity of the representation of Black English in these two texts. Black academics too have varied opinions: “There is no single ‘black’ position on *Huckleberry Finn* any more than there is a monolithic white one” (Sewell 10). Books such as J. Leonard et al.’s *Satire or Evasion?: Black Perspectives on Huckleberry Finn* are unable to come to a unanimous assessment of the text. *Uncle Remus* is similarly disputed and shows divided opinion in such works as Robert Cochran’s “Black father: the subversive achievement of Joel Chandler Harris.”

In his dissertation, Phillip Leigh discusses the difference between what literary dialects *are* and what literary dialects *do*. He claims it unproductive to attempt to verify the authenticity of the representation of literary dialects, as it is an unanswerable question. Determining concrete authenticity seems almost futile, but I will discuss features of Black English that contribute to more or less authentic linguistic interpretations, addressing the social dimensions and attitudes that may have contributed to how each author represented Black English.

The social dimensions and attitudes also come into play with the way the slave characters are defined and described. John Blassingame identified three major slave character types in antebellum literature: Jack, Nat, and Sambo. Occasionally impudent upon mistreatment, Jack generally worked dependably at his own set pace. Rebellious Nat—named for the infamous Nat Turner³—represented everything the white masters feared about slaves. On the surface, Nat appeared to be obedient and hardworking until

³ For a thorough synopsis of Nat Turner, see Kenneth Greenberg’s “Nat Turner: A Slave Rebellion in History and Memory.”

the façade broke and the violent, bloodthirsty savage arose to get revenge. Sambo was the most commonly written character. Simple and docile, Sambo was loyal and “almost filio-piestic,” entirely devoted to his master to the point of self-sacrifice (Blassingame 225). In addition to Blassingame’s character types, I will also look at stereotypes presented in the minstrel shows popular at the time. Most notable were Banjo/Tambo and Bones, named for the instruments they played. As the brunt of all jokes, the coonish minstrels were depicted as outrageous caricatures of black people, often performing race-related humor sketches and slapstick plantation skits.

I will explore how Jim and Uncle Remus fit into these preconceived molds. I will also delve into the social implications of the pervasion of the obedient and submissive slave in literature, post-Emancipation, through Reconstruction and the Gilded Age. A white author writing a black character lends itself to socially and politically tinged representations of blackness, and here I will discuss the implications of such characters.

Social Background

In *Southern Institutes*, George Sawyer maintained that the inferiority of the slaves was proved by their acceptance of the institution of slavery among blacks (reproduced in Genovese & Genovese 98). Racism, “the belief that all members of each race possess characteristics, abilities, or qualities specific to that race, especially so as to distinguish it as inferior or superior to another race or races” (OED), was an inherent and enduring feature of nineteenth century American society.

Countless slaves gave in to the white superiority mentality and accepted the social oppression forced on them, because unlike the first generation of slaves taken from Africa, they had no other way of life with which to compare their situation. Ironically, slaves thought themselves superior to the incoming Africans who knew nothing of the manners and customs of the Americas. Slaves born in the Americas “held the Africans in the utmost contempt, stiling them, ‘salt-water Negroes,’ and ‘Guinea birds’” (Smallwood 7). Some of the African slaves felt similarly distressed being unable to communicate with anyone around them. Olaudah Equiano, an Ibo tribal elder’s son turned slave, wrote in his memoir of his feelings regarding this: “I was now exceedingly miserable, and thought myself worse off than any of the rest of my companions; for they could talk to each other, but I had no person to speak to that I could understand. In this state I was constantly grieving and pining, and wishing for death, rather than anything else” (Vassa 70-71).

In the northern U.S. states, the idea of black inferiority was promulgated based on the tenets of scientific racism, a manner by which to “justify...inequalities on the basis of biologically determined racial differences” (Oboler & Gonzalez). In the eighteenth century, many white Northerners even considered the black population to be a separate species. Eugene and Elizabeth Genovese wrote that through the mid-nineteenth century, the monogenetic principles of human origins were denied by the northern Democratic

Party in favor of pseudoscientific theories such as polygenesis. A century after it was first written in 1748, themes from *History of Jamaica* by Edward Long, which placed blacks between humans and apes on the evolutionary scale, still abounded (94). Belief in biological determinism led to the development of pseudoscientific “theories of racial superiority,” which, based on racial characteristics and African physiognomy, claimed support to black inferiority (Smitherman 148). Geneva Smitherman continues: “The conception is not simply one of African *differentness* but African-derived *deficiency*” (148).

The idea of an egalitarian society was inconceivable. Even Abraham Lincoln, the president immortalized in American history as the issuer of the Emancipation Proclamation, initially espoused the inferiority ideology, demonstrated during a political debate for senatorial candidacy against Stephen A. Douglas in 1858:

“I am not, nor ever have been, in favor of bringing about in any way the social and political equality of the white and black races, that I am not nor ever have been in favor of making voters or jurors of negroes, nor of qualifying them to hold office, nor to intermarry with white people; and I will say in addition to this that there is a physical difference between the white and black races which I believe will forever forbid the two races living together on terms of social and political equality. And in as much as they cannot so live, while they do remain together there must be the position of superior and inferior, and I as much as any other man am in favor of having the superior position assigned to the white race. I say upon this occasion I do not perceive that because the white man is to have the superior position the negro should be denied everything... I will add to this that I

have never seen, to my knowledge, a man, woman, or child who was in favor of producing a perfect equality, social and political, between negroes and white men” (Lincoln).

The attitudes we today view as racist were seen by many nineteenth century slaveholders as paternalism.⁴ The slaveholders thought that slavery was either in the best interests of the slaves or that slaves could not survive without complete dependence on their masters for survival. Supporters of the latter “blatantly assumed the natural inferiority of slaves” (McGary and Lawson 20-23). In this paternalistic mindset, adult slaves were often seen as akin to incompetent children.

One would hope that slave-owners knew at some level the intrinsic injustice of their actions, but when faced with such cognitive dissonance, they rationalized it, convincing themselves it was all for the good of the slaves. Or at least, the financial benefits of slave owning outweighed the guilt. Perhaps, similar to enslaved Gypsies, the slaves were said to prefer their state of enslavement to hypothetical freedom. From Marcel Emerit’s work on the Romani we see that “despite clubbings which the slave-owners meted out at random, the former did not altogether hate this tyrannical regime, which once in awhile took on a paternal quality...” (reproduced in Hancock 23). According to Genovese, “paternalism defined the involuntary labor of the slaves as legitimate return to their masters for protection and direction” (1974, 5). The superior

⁴ As defined in McGary and Lawson: “Paternalism has generally been defined as protecting the individual from self-inflicted harm or as promoting that individual’s own good by overriding the individual’s autonomy” (xxiii). From the OED: “The policy or practice of restricting the freedoms and responsibilities of subordinates or dependents in what is considered or claimed to be their best interests.”

white masters were doing the poor brutes a favor, teaching them to function as human beings, with forks and knives and spiritual guidance. David Walker sums it up nicely: “Whites have never been able to escape knowledge of black humanity but, given their hegemony, have been able to create a corpus of racist thought which defines blacks as inferior” (reproduced in Jones 174).

Minstrel shows only proved to propagate the idea of black inferiority. Black characters were cast as “foolish, stupid, and compulsively musical” and always made to fall “far short of white standards” (Toll 67).

The contemporary situation has, of course, matured after the abolition of slavery with the Civil Rights movement and through other steps toward equality in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. However, sharecropping, even in modern times, proved to trap workers in a cycle of permanent debt, owing money to the landowners, similarly to how slaves were owned prior to the Civil War. After the First World War, in an exodus now known as the Great Migration, many Black Americans relocated to the northern United States to find work in order to escape the economic hardships and the virulence of anti-black racism and violence⁵ in the South. A second wave rushed north following the tolls of the Second World War, finding jobs in places such as factories, slaughterhouses, and foundries (“Great Migration”). This influx of Black Americans to the north is comparatively recent, which may account for more social segregation in the northern states than in the southern states. However, as closely as black and white southerners

⁵ Between 1882 and 1968, almost 3,500 African-Americans were reported lynched (“Lynchings”). It is likely that the unreported cases numbered even higher.

interact, residual negative attitudes towards Black Americans are still prevalent in the legal systems⁶ and politics⁷ of former slave-owning states. Although laws can be changed, the attitudes of the people are not so easily swayed.

⁶ There is a ratio-adjusted correlation between capital punishment conviction of African Americans and former slave holding states (Marquat et al.).

⁷ White Southerners who currently live in counties that formerly focused on a plantation economy and had a high number of slaves are more likely to “identify as Republican, oppose affirmative action, and express racial resentment and colder feelings towards blacks” (Acharya et al. 1)

Black English

As early as 1721, Black English found its way into the written record: Cotton Mather recorded three words: *grandy-mandy*, *cutty-skin*, and *sicky sick* (Read 247). The phrase “Black English” was first recorded in the 1734 version of the OED, and the first instance of Black English in American fiction is attributed to Hugh Henry Breckenridge and his satirical 1792 novel *Modern Chivalry*. Academically, Black English did not make an appearance until 1884 with the publication of James Harrison’s “Negro English” in the journal *Anglia*. Shadowing the ideological milieu of the period, the article derived itself from the linguistic deviant model, which “view[ed] black speech (and black culture, generally) as deficient and pathological...Harrison is coming from a position of Black language differences based on African genetic inferiority” (Smitherman 149).

Many hypotheses explaining the origin of Black English have been presented since Harrison first introduced the dialect to academia. The earliest attempts to explain the differences between Black and white speech were mired in racism characteristic of the cultural climate, with explanations presenting the dissimilarities as the result of physical differences between blacks and whites.⁸ Those theories were quickly abandoned in favor of a dialectologist/sociolinguistic theory focusing on dialect retention,⁹ which looked at different regional dialects of Britain as a source. Creolist and substratist positions later espoused the idea of decreolization and finally a componential, multiple-

⁸ See Lorenzo Turner’s “Africanisms in the Gullah Dialect” for more.

⁹ See Edgar Schneider’s “On the History of Black English in the USA” for more.

influence hypothesis came to light.¹⁰ The general consensus seems to be that Black English is a variety of American English with some inherited creole features. Currently it has been found that Black English--otherwise known as African American English (AAE), African American Vernacular English (AAVE), Black Vernacular English (BVE), etc.--is diverging from¹¹ instead of converging towards mainstream American English, the so-called Standard American English based on British Received Pronunciation ("Standard American English"). Black English has even been the subject of Supreme Court cases, most notably the 1979 *Martin Luther King Junior Elementary School Children et al. v. Ann Arbor School District*,¹² the verdict of which is more commonly referred to as the Ann Arbor Decision.

The Ann Arbor Decision initiated the publication of a series of guidebooks for white teachers on Black English. One issue many proponents of Black English face is the stigmatization that Black English is slang instead of an actual dialect. However, slang words change over time, but Black English has remained largely unchanged over the past three hundred years. It is not the prestige variety in the United States and is subsequently the subject of countless attempts at parody, satire, and caricature. With a fixed grammar that has been consistent for centuries, there is a way to speak Black English correctly and incorrectly.¹³

¹⁰ See Marcyliena Morgan's "Theories and Politics in African American English" for more.

¹¹ See William Labov's "Unendangered Dialects, Endangered People" for more.

¹² See Labov's "Objectivity and commitment in linguistic science: The case of the Black English trial in Ann Arbor" for more.

¹³ See Rickford & Rickford 2000, Rickford 1999, and Green 2002 for more on the correct way to speak Black English.

Black English is largely homogenous across the United States due to the influx of African Americans from the South to the North in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in the Great Migration. This contrasts vividly with white vernaculars, which “vary from one region to another and between the urban and rural environments” (Mufwene 65).

From the beginning, there has been no standardization of written Black English. In the words of Addison Hibbard, “When Poe wrote his ‘Gold-Bug,’ it was possible to write almost anything in distorted English and call it Negro dialect” (475). Many authors relied on impressionistic orthography to mark their Black English speakers. James Weldon Johnson complained of this phenomenon saying, “The Negro dialect is for many people made unintelligible on the printed page by the absurd practice of devising a clumsy, outlandish, so-called phonetic spelling for words in a dialect story or poem when the regular English spelling represents the very same sound” (reproduced in Hibbard 476). For example, *wuz* replaced *was*, *iz* for *is*, *duz* for *does*, etc.

The Authors

The authors, Joel Chandler Harris and Mark Twain, were examined based on their popularity and pervasiveness in popular culture (commonly known to the general public) and geographic locations (Southern and Northern United States).

Joel Chandler Harris was born in Putnam County in Georgia in 1848, where at age 12 he left school and moved to the nearby Turnwold Plantation to work on a small newspaper called *The Countryman*. At Turnwold, Harris met a slave named Mink, through whom Harris first became acquainted with the folk stories and myths he later published as the Uncle Remus stories.¹⁴ As a poor Southern boy, Harris likely used a number of features of Southern speech common to black and white speakers in his own speech.

Samuel Langhorne Clemens, known more famously by his pen name, Mark Twain, was born in Missouri in 1835, and similarly to Harris, left school at around age 12 to work on a local newspaper as a printer's apprentice. He spent much of his young adult life in New York and Philadelphia with a brief stint out west before finally settling in Hartford, Connecticut ("A Life Lived in a Rapidly Changing World"). In his youth, Twain's opinion of the black population was far from positive but with age came maturity and an abhorrence of slavery (Subryan 91). Twain himself was a regular frequenter of minstrel shows throughout his life, which likely influenced the characters he wrote.

¹⁴ For more on Harris's background, including glowing praise, see Brookes (1950).

Although no recordings of Twain's voice have survived, there is a recording of his former neighbor, William Gillette, performing his impression of Twain (*Mark Twain's Voice*). As the only reliable example in existence, it shows that Twain's speech had few, if any, southern characteristics. For example, Twain's Midland speech was rhotic, but it can be safely maintained that Harris's speech was not.

Language

Black English and Southern American English traditionally overlap with each other due to the close proximity and regular interaction between black and white people living in the South. The two dialects might have retained even more similar features if it were not for the “widespread institutionalization of segregation” that came about in the late 1800s¹⁵ (Mufwene 64). We must look at the features not apparent in the authors’ own native vernaculars in order to determine the accuracy of their attempts at dialect writing. A southern writer will recognize southern features and handle them correctly, but a northern writer might incorrectly believe that some southern features are uniquely black.

In dialect writing, authors typically include only dialectal features that deviate from their own natural speech.¹⁶ Based on that phenomenon, Twain’s *Huckleberry Finn* should contain more examples of strictly southern speech (in addition to Black English) than Harris’s *Uncle Remus: His Songs and His Sayings*. Although there is some overlap between Black English features and the features of Southern English, as Green says, “it is important to move beyond listing superficial similarities between [Black English] and other varieties to testing whether elements...exhibit the same patterns in [Black English] and these other varieties” (35).

¹⁵ The effect of the Jim Crow laws can be seen throughout the United States, and can still be observed in the variation and difference between African- and European-American speech in the Northern states as well as in the South (Mufwene 80).

¹⁶ From Ives: “An author will fail to represent many features of his character’s speech which may be regionally characteristic but which carry no implication of inferiority or ‘difference’ within those regions where they are found.... As a matter of fact, the speech of educated persons is not ordinarily represented in ‘dialectal’ spellings by authors who are portraying their own region” (reproduced in Minnick 109).

I will first examine features common to both Black English and Southern American English.¹⁷ Each feature will be illustrated by an example from the texts, prefixed with UR for Uncle Remus and J for Jim.

Grammatical Features

- Use of the prefix *a-* in progressive tenses
 - o *J: “Dey wuz people a-stirrin’ yit” (55).¹⁸
 - o UR: “Den de day time’s comin’, a creepin’ en a crawlin’” (185).
- Use of *done* as an auxiliary verb between the subject and verb in sentences conveying the past tense
 - o J: Did not occur.
 - o UR: “Christ done made dat dead man alive” (193).
- Use of *done* as the past simple form of *do*, and similar uses of the past participle in place of the past simple
 - o J: “She done broke loose en gone” (65).
 - o *UR: “En ’way up de big road I see Mars Jeems a comin’” (211).
- Use of non-standard preterites
 - o Regularly used in Huck Finn’s speech.
 - o J: “I knowed dey was arter you” (42).
 - o UR: “I knowed you bin tellin’ on ’im” (93).

¹⁷ From Kortmann et al. (2004), Nagle & Sanders (2003), and Labov et al. (2006). Though these texts list current features of Black and Southern English, both types of English have remained largely unchanged over the past few centuries.

¹⁸ Lines prefixed with an asterisk indicate that the feature is seen in the representative passages in the analysis section.

- Use of *was* in place of *were*, or other words regularizing the past tense of *be* to *was*
 - Regularly used in Huck Finn’s speech.
 - *J: “Den I was gwyne to swim to de raf’ again when dey was gone” (85).
 - UR: “W’en de day come dey wuz on han” (21).
- Use of *been* instead of *have been* in perfect constructions
 - J: “Jack’s been heah” (106).
 - UR: “You been runnin’ roun’ here sassin’ atter me” (17).

Phonological Features

- /ŋ/ corresponds to /n/ ending (also widespread in colloquial English)
 - *J: “...wuz talkin’ ’bout...” (55).
 - *UR: “Dog talkin’ ter hisse’f way off in de woods” (12).
- Non-rhotic
 - *J: “Jack’s been heah” (106).
 - *UR: “Now you talkin’ sho (115).
- Interchange of [ɛ] and [ɪ]
 - *J: “Dey wuz people a-stirrin’ yit” (55).
 - UR: “Git up en move aroun’” (109).

Lexical Features

- Use of *yonder* as a locative in addition to its more widely attested use as an adjective

- Regularly used in Huck Finn’s speech.
- J: Did not occur
- UR: Did not occur
- *Evening* used where *afternoon* would be used up north
 - J: Did not occur
 - “Dey wouldn’ miss me tell arter dark in de evenin’” (41)
 - Here *evening* is used to refer to after dark, as in the north.
 - UR: “Come ter her house de nex’ Sat’day evenin’” (147).
- *Carry* for *accompany*
 - J: Did not occur
 - UR: Did not occur
- *Tote* for *carry*
 - J: “Didn’t you tote out de line in de canoe” (78).
 - UR: Did not occur
- *Y’all*
 - J: Did not occur
 - UR: Did not occur

Next I will examine features unique to Black English in the same format as above.¹⁹

Grammatical Features

- Habitual BE

¹⁹ From Green 2002, Labov 1972, and Rickford 1999.

- J: Did not occur.
- UR: Did not occur.
- Durative stressed (emphatic) BIN
 - J: Did not occur.
 - UR: Did not occur.
- Present tense verbs inflected for person
 - J: “Now dat’s what I wants to know” (78).
 - UR: “’Fo’ you begins fer ter wipe yo eyes...” (16).
- Genitive ‘s may or may not be used & may be extended (that one’s mines)
 - J: Was not found.
 - *UR: “Brer B’ar wuz swingin’ up dar in Brer Rabbit place” (66).

Phonological Features

- Word final devoicing of /b/, /d/, /g/
 - *J: “I hid in de ole tumble-down cooper shop” (55).
 - *UR: “Ole Brer B’ar, he chomp his toofies en foam at de mouf” (118).
- Th-fronting, /θ/ and /ð/ to /d/
 - *J: “Dat’s de yuther one” (72).
 - *UR: “But dat’s needer yer ner der” (16).
- Labialization of interdental fricatives
 - J: “Bofe un you claims it” (72).
 - UR: “Bofe un um wuz allers atter wunner nudder” (75).

- Consonant final cluster reduction
 - *J: “De bes’ way is to res’ easy...” (17).
 - *UR: “Stan’ fas’ by de fokes...” (232).
- Metathesis s: ask -> aks, grasp -> graps
 - J: “What's de use to ax dat question?” (43).
 - *UR: “He ax de Bad Man fer ter set down a minnit” (159).

Lexical Features

- *Fitna* (often *fixin’ to* is used by white authors unfamiliar with *fitna*)
 - J: Neither *fitna* nor *fixin to* occurred
 - UR: Neither *fitna* nor *fixin to* occurred
- *Ain’t* for *didn’t*: ‘ain’t’ occurs in Southern English regularly as an alternative for ‘isn’t’, but it is uniquely Black for *ain’t* to be used instead of ‘didn’t’
 - J: Did not occur
 - UR: ““Ain’t you year ’bout Jim?” asked Uncle Remus” (215).

Language Commentary

It is important to keep in mind the unlikelihood of a character using all of the above features in his speech. A concentrated essence of extreme features might seem improbable even to writers such as Twain and Harris. Similarly, the absence of evidence of a feature in the written text is not indicative of its usage in general Black English. Not only is it possible for the author to not be aware of a feature, but also speech varies between individual speakers so some features may simply never show up. The authors claimed to be genuinely portraying Black English as accurately as they possibly could, but neither Harris nor Twain was an academic studying Black English and as such did not consider features of Black English the way modern academics do. Non-academics are likely to exaggerate the differences between Black English and so-called Standard American English. Some writers have even parodied features to the point of complete degradation of the dialect.²⁰

To examine the authenticity of Jim's speech, I have chosen a representative passage from *Huckleberry Finn*:

“I tuck out en shin down de hill en 'spec a steal a skift 'long de sho' som'ers 'bove de town, but dey wuz people a-stirrin' yit, so I hid in de ole tumble-down cooper shop on de bank to wait for everybody to go 'way. Well, I wuz dah all night. Dey wuz somebody roun' all de time. 'Long 'bout six in de mawnin', skifts begin to go by, en 'bout eight er nine every skift dat went 'long wuz talkin' 'bout how yo' pap come over to de town en say you's killed. Dese

²⁰ See Washington White's language in Roy Rockwood's *By Air Express to Venus* (1929).

las' skifts wuz full o' ladies en genlmen agoin' over for to see de place. Sometimes dey'd pull up at de sho' en take a res' b'fo' dey started acrost, so by de talk I got to know all 'bout de killin'. I 'uz powerful sorry you's killed, Huck, but I ain't no mo', now" (55).

Twain's usage of eye-dialect²¹ was so pervasive that it was considered to be in "extreme forms" according to Leonard et al. (4). In this passage from the text, *was* is written each time as *wuz*. Both *was* and *wuz* are pronounced the same way, so the replacement with the unstandardized form reflects the exoticization of Jim's speech. Jim's language is non-rhotic and devoices many final consonants. The words *skift* (skiff) and *acrost* (across) show Jim overcorrecting his speech. The treatment of verbs is often nonstandard ("pap come over" instead of "pap came over," "you's killed" instead of "you were killed," and "skifts begin to go by" instead of "skifts began to go by"). In addition, almost all of the interdental fricatives were replaced with voiced alveolar stops, and velar nasals were interchanged with alveolar nasals.

The following is a representative passage from *Uncle Remus: His Songs and His Sayings*:

"Den Brer B'ar, he ax Brer Rabbit w'at he doin' up dar in de elements, en Brer Rabbit, he up'n say he makin' dollar minnit. Brer B'ar, he say how. Brer

²¹ Two definitions:

Eye-dialect: pretends to represent nonstandardness by variant (in some cases, merely phonetic) spellings, though the pronunciations represented may actually be regionally acceptable (Leonard et al. 5).

Eye-dialect: respellings used to mark nonstandardness without attention to actual features and to mark speakers as lower class or uneducated or both (Green 101)

Rabbit say he keepin' crows out'n Brer Fox's groun'-pea patch, en den he ax Brer B'ar ef he don't wanter make dollar minnit, kaze he got big fambly er chilluns fer ter take keer un, en den he make sech nice skeer-crow. Brer B'ar 'low dat he take de job, en den Brer Rabbit show 'im how er ben' down de saplin', en 'twan't long 'fo' Brer B'ar wuz swingin' up dar in Brer Rabbit place" (66).

Uncle Remus's speech also contains eye-dialect (*minnit* for *minute*, *wuz* for *was*) and a number of features from both lists. His speech includes metathesis (*ax* for *ask*) and present tense used for past tense verbs (*say* for *said*), as well as devoicing of final consonants. Uncle Remus's speech shows an additional /r/ in *wanter* and *fer ter*. This is seen as an orthographic choice on Harris's part as Uncle Remus's speech would have been non-rhotic. Similar to Jim's speech, Uncle Remus replaces almost all of his interdental fricatives with voiced alveolar stops, and interchanges velar nasals with alveolar nasals. Additionally, the genitive 's is missing from in the phrase "Brer Rabbit place."

Characters

Both Jim and Uncle Remus play only secondary roles in the texts they inhabit. In the case of Jim, his comrade Huckleberry Finn is most prominent, and in the case of Uncle Remus, his stories play a larger role. From the beginning both black characters inhabit a position of inferiority.

Physically, darkness of skin is emphasized in each character, as well as their builds and the texture of their hair. Twain reduces Jim to a “tangle-headed old fool” (119), but Harris more respectfully refers to Uncle Remus’s “venerable head” (120). While Jim is only described as “big” (22), Harris writes more thoroughly of Uncle Remus’s figure, calling him authoritative and “picturesque” (202).

Jim’s personality is hardly illuminated, unlike that of Uncle Remus who was “dictatorial, overbearing, and quarrelsome.” However, Harris did say that despite these characteristics, “...he was not even grim. Beneath everything he said there was a current of respect and affection that was thoroughly understood and appreciated” (Harris 152-153). Uncle Remus’s sensitivity can also be seen when he “melted” at the sight of a child’s tears and quivering lips (99).

Superstition played a large part of the visible personality of each of the two characters. Both Jim and Uncle Remus believed in witches and spoke about them at length. Jim was incredibly superstitious and refused to partake in a variety of activities that might bring bad luck such as “count[ing] the things you are going to cook for dinner...” or “[shaking] the table-cloth after sundown” (71). He went as far as to consult a magic hairball about the future.

The self-sacrificial actions of both Jim and Uncle Remus also lend a subservient turn to the narratives. Jim sacrificed his potential freedom to stay with Tom Sawyer after Tom got shot in the leg. He refused to leave his former master's side, although it meant risking not only his liberty, but also his life. Uncle Remus shot and killed a Union soldier in order to protect his Confederate master. Miss Theodosia reacted most fittingly, "Do you mean to say ... that you shot the Union soldier, when you knew he was fighting for your freedom?" (212).

Character Commentary

Twain's minstrelsy fascination leads to a character who is reduced to little more than a stereotype. Although perhaps lacking the overt comic manifestation of Brudder Tambo and Brudder Bones, Jim appears as a caricature of nineteenth century blackness. Little of his personality is described, so Jim is seen as a superstitious simpleton with a magical ball of fortune-telling hair. Jim was what Blassingame calls a fugitive Sambo, "the epitome of loyalty and docility, and completely trusted by his master...[and] in spite of his 'loyalty,' he ran away" (204). Unlike the Nat stereotype who would fight if apprehended, Jim instead laid down his life and freedom when he felt his master needed him.

Uncle Remus is the ultimate Sambo character. In fact, Blassingame describes Sambo as a combination of Uncle Remus, Jim Crow, and Uncle Tom. Sambo is, in Blassingame's words, "the epitome of devotion [who] often fought and died heroically while trying to save his master's life" (225). Uncle Remus did exactly that, sacrificing when he "disremembered all 'bout freedom" (Harris 212) and shot the Union soldier. Uncle Remus's physical embodiment and mannerisms, including superstitions, further align him with the Sambo stereotype. Uncle Remus is more venerably described than Jim, but the literature typecast remains the same.

Conclusion

Perspective is most important when viewing the writings of Harris and Twain. It is ineffective to judge 19th century literature entirely from a 21st century perspective, given the change society has undergone over the past two hundred years. Surprisingly, a number of salient features in contemporary descriptions of African American Vernacular English do not occur in the writing of either author. There are two likely causes for this. First, it is possible that the features did not yet make their way into Black English. For example, the use of habitual BE was not found in the slave narratives recorded in the early twentieth century. The same is true for stressed BIN and BE DONE. However, features such as *y'all*, *tote* for *carry*, and *carry* for *accompany* were found in general Southern speech and in the slave narratives, including in Gullah.

The second possible reason is that Twain may not have been as aware of the features in Black English because of his own Northern background. He may have been approximating Black English based on his own speech. Before the advent radio and television, the only way to hear Black English would be to spend social time with black folks. Twain's limited exposure was likely impersonal, either with servants and tradespeople trying to speak 'white' to be understood or on the other side of the spectrum with the exaggeration and stereotype of minstrelsy. In the case of Harris, his lack of inclusion of some of these prominent Black English features is puzzling because he certainly does not have the excuse of ignorance that can be claimed for Twain. Harris used many of the 'missing features' in his writings in Gullah (such as in *Daddy Jack*), so the question remains: why did he leave the features out in non-Gullah Black English

writing? Was Harris exaggerating the distinction between Gullah and general Black English?

The inclusion of features of white Southern English may also be seen as a push to alienate the slave characters from the more educated readers. In effort to ‘make different,’ both authors included features in their black characters that the average white Southerner would use, but did not include them in the white characters’ speech. Additionally, the differences between the formal indirect prose and the direct speech of the black characters may have been exaggerated to intensify the linguistic disparity between character and reader.

Consider too the different genres of the two books. To begin, *Huckleberry Finn* is a novel. Most of the story is written in standard American English, with occasional Black English utterances by Jim. Based on Twain’s lack of intimate familiarity with black Americans, it seems like he is playing with the language to create different perspectives of the characters. Twain distinguished Jim’s role through his speech and how it differed from other characters and the narration. Unlike Harris’s Uncle Remus, Jim was an entirely fictional character whose language gave him dimensionality and possibly provided entertainment value to the readers. Was Twain getting “bogged down in stylistic trivia” (Bakhtain 259)? Twain may have simply been trying to portray an expressive and engaging dialect using the tools he had as a novelist to evoke a passionate response in his reader.

In the case of Uncle Remus, Harris relayed folk tales and short stories with the oral tradition of folklore. With the exception of a few lines narrating the goings-on in

Uncle Remus's room and the speech of other minor characters, the book is almost entirely in Black English. Harris based Uncle Remus on an amalgamation of several slave storytellers whom Harris knew, as if he were reporting the collective-Uncle-Remus' speech. According to Valentin Volosinov, an author's writing adapts the original utterance to the author's own syntactic, compositional, and stylistic designs (116). Harris reported the speech of Uncle Remus through his own lens.

Both Jim and Uncle Remus fit the mold of the Sambo stereotype. Twain and Harris must both have been aware of the possible social ramifications of creating rebellious characters and instead chose docile creatures. The pervasiveness of Sambo was a measure to ease the fear of the white slave-owners about slave rebellion. Had Nat come to the forefront, the threat of slave retribution would overwhelm the white population. It was easier to imagine the minstrel idea of "...nonthreatening images of Negroes as harmless curiosities" (Toll 42). Not only did Simple Sambo rely completely on his master, but also the owners could rest easy that no rebellion would arise from such an obedient slave. Sambo can be seen as "almost mandatory for the Southerner's emotional security." The ubiquitous nature of the Sambo character also served to illustrate slavery as a benevolent institution. With Sambo, it was possible "to prove the essential goodness of Southern society" (Blassingame 230) that created loyal and devoted slaves.

I have found here that the 'accuracy' and 'authenticity' of the writings, while indeed incredibly racist by modern standards, are simply a reflection of the times. As white authors, Twain and Harris, however intimately acquainted with black people they may have been, were not experts in representations of black speech or realistic black

characters. Their writings were not necessarily inaccurate, but instead, they played to the audience of the period in which they were written. Minstrel influence and white fear of retribution played an enormous role in the fleshing out of Jim and Uncle Remus.

Joel Chandler Harris and Mark Twain in *Uncle Remus: His Songs and His Sayings* and *Huckleberry Finn*, respectively, both play with language in an effort to create different perspectives for the readers. Although the texts “may actually help reinforce and strengthen whiteness’ privileged status precisely because they limit blackness to particular domains” (in this case to slaves) (Alim et al. 128), they also provide an artistic portrayal of blackness during the nineteenth century. As authors, Harris and Twain are allowed artistic license in the physical and emotional manifestations and the “stylistically individualized speech of characters,” (Bakhtin 262) of which they partook liberally.

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