

‘We People Be Darker than Blue’:

The Search for African American English *Be* in Nineteenth-Century American Literature

Carly Houston Overfelt

Today I present a pilot study that represents the first step towards my second project. My first project, my dissertation, explored the politics of orthography in the construction of race and place in American fiction of the long nineteenth century, especially the way ‘non-native’ and ‘non-standard’ English representations create imagined speech communities through innovative spelling and punctuation. My second project focuses specifically on African American English (AAE) representations in Black-authored texts, and the shifting *domains* of linguistic representation (for example, syntax versus phonology) of AAE over the centuries. Why does the phonology of AAE seem de-emphasized over time, and why? And when do syntactic constructions associated with AAE (like zero copula, or habitual *be*) become more frequent in literary depictions of African American speech? This project will shed light on the changing politics and poetics of African American literary language, but also has implications for how we understand the construction of ‘literary dialects.’ First, a quick review of AAE may be helpful.

African American English (AAE) is a variety of English associated with the African American community, but, while it is spoken by many African Americans, it is not spoken by all. For that matter, there are people are not African American who use these features, or speak the variety. And those who *do* speak AAE also command *other* varieties, styles, and registers of English, in addition to AAE. To call AAE a ‘variety’ is to name it for convenience, but there is, of course, variation between communities and between speakers in any given community. Variation notwithstanding, there are some core features, a few of which I will discuss below. The most important thing to know about AAE is that it is not slang, or some form of broken, or

incorrect, or improper English, despite continued misconceptions and misrepresentations in popular culture. It is a fully developed, complex English variety that linguists argue grew out of contact between West African languages and English spoken in the colonies during the transatlantic slave trade. Overall, AAE is an important marker of African American identity among many African American communities.

As I mentioned before, the work I present today stems from some observations I made while working on my dissertation, which investigates the way African American English and other ‘nonstandard’ varieties of English are represented in fiction of the long nineteenth century. My dissertation focuses on the politics of spelling and other orthographic innovations writers use to create literary dialect in this era. However, in my research, I noticed that there seems to be much more emphasis on the *sound* of AAE in the nineteenth century than in the twentieth. Phonetic spelling, and the insertion of apostrophes to indicate missing sounds, is quite conventional in the ‘dialect literature’ era, but later, especially by the twentieth century, it seems to be de-emphasized. Take, for example, the following quotation from Charles Chesnutt’s *Conjure Woman* (1899). Julius says:

Lawd bless you, suh, I knows all about it. Dey ain’ na’er a man in dis settlement w’at won’ tell you ole Julius McAdoo ‘uz bawn en raise’ on dis yer plantation. Is you de Norv’n gemman w’at’s gwine ter buy de ole vimya’d?

Contrast this with the following excerpt from Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* (1987), which depicts the speech of Baby Suggs:

‘Here,’ she said, ‘in this here place, we flesh; flesh that weeps, laughs; flesh that dances on bare feet in grass. Love it. Love it hard . . .’

While Chesnutt, like his contemporaries, emphasizes the phonology of AAE, (like *d* sounds for *th* sounds), Morrison's work, like many of her contemporaries, leaves pronunciation to the imagination while highlighting distinctive AAE syntax. In the example above, Morrison includes a 'zero copula' construction: *we flesh*. Zero copula is the optional absence ('zero' value) of a linking verb. This optional absence is only possible in some syntactic environments, and is a hallmark feature of AAE, what linguists have called a 'showcase' feature of AAE (Rickford, et al.).

Another distinctive feature of AAE syntax is a construction called 'habitual be,' 'continuous be,' or 'invariant be.' I will call this construction 'habitual be.' This *be* is an aspectual marker that denotes a continuous state, or a recurring, regular action. For example, in AAE, 'I be in my office by 7:30' means, in General American English, 'I'm usually in my office by 7:30' (Green 47-51). This feature is one of the few syntactic features of AAE that the general American public recognizes, but it is often misunderstood by outsiders as a copula—to mean simply *is*. Habitual be is so distinctive of Black language in the U.S., it is often used to emphasize African American identity, as in the following line from Anita Sanchez's 'To Anita': 'we people be darker than blue.'

These 'showcase' features of AAE might be expected to appear in early writings that depict African American speech, but this does not seem to be the case. In my dissertation research, I found that both zero copula and habitual be were rare in the nineteenth-century texts I was working with. I decided to test this impression, since I had no hard evidence that this was the case, and that is where my pilot study began. To test the hypothesis that habitual be is rare in nineteenth-century African American literature, I chose digitized texts from sources like the University of North Carolina's 'Documenting the American South' Project and Project

Gutenberg. I chose African American-authored texts from the mid nineteenth century through the turn of the century. The exact range was from 1853 to 1900. I selected 10 texts by 9 different writers; five are men, four are women. The texts I chose include the following: Charles Chesnutt's *Conjure Tales* (1899) and *The House Behind the Cedars* (1900); Amelia E. Johnson's *The Hazeley Family* (1894); Frances E.W. Harper's *Iola Leroy; Or, Shadows Uplifted* (1893); Pauline E. Hopkins's *Contending Forces: A Romance Illustrative of Negro Life North and South* (1900); Paul Laurence Dunbar's *The Strength of Gideon and Other Stories* (1900); Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861); William Wells Brown's *Clotel; Or, the President's Daughter* (1853); and Martin Delaney's *Blake; Or, the Huts of America* (1860). I chose a range of well-known texts (like Jacobs's *Incidents*) and lesser-known texts (like Delaney's *Blake*). The genres are also mixed, with mostly traditional fiction (novels and short stories), but also a few slave narratives. Most of the authors included are not well-known for their depictions of Black speech, but a few (like Chesnutt and Dunbar) are famous for their dialect representations. Overall, the corpus is meant to represent a general sampling of African American writing in the latter half of the long nineteenth century.

To analyze my miniature corpus, I used a concordance tool, called 'Antconc,' an open source corpus analysis toolkit. I used Antconc to pull up all instances of *be* in each text, which included habitual *be* instances as well as all other types of *be*. I analyzed these results to rule out any examples that did not fit the environment for habitual *be*. That means I looked for *be* + adjective/preposition/gerund constructions. These decisions were based on the description of habitual *be* in Green's grammar of AAE.

My analysis revealed only four clear instances of habitual *be* in the corpus, with two other ambiguous cases. Two of the instances were spoken in same collection, Dunbar's *The*

Strength of Gideon and Other Stories. The first instance is from the titular story, ‘The Strength of Gideon,’ in which Ben, a slave character, is speaking to his wife, Viney:

‘All right. Den dey ain’ no use in me a tryin’ to ‘vince you. I jes’ **be** wastin’ my bref.’

While I analyze *be wastin’* as habitual be, one might argue that the context suggests that the speaker is talking about what they *would* be doing if they continued to argue, and that the ‘d contraction has been left off of *I’d*. However, given Dunbar’s emphasis on sound elisions and reductions (often marked with apostrophes), it seems likely that he would have indicated this omission with an apostrophe, if that were what he meant to represent.

The next case is from Dunbar’s ‘The Case of “Ca’line,”’ in which Caroline, the cook, is speaking in frustration to herself:

‘Well, Mis’ Ma’tin, hit do seem lak you jes’ bent an’ boun’ to **be** a-fin’in’ fault wid me w’en de Lawd knows I’s doin’ de ve’y bes’ I kin.’

Given that Dunbar is well-known for his emphasis on representing African American speech, it makes sense that two of the four instances of habitual be are found in his work. However, Chesnutt is another writer who relied on Black speech representations for his satirical stories as well as his novels. Yet, I found no instances of habitual be in either his famous *Conjure Tales* or his passing novel, *The House Behind the Cedars*. The *Conjure Tales* have been analyzed for AAE features in Lisa Minnick’s *Dialect and Dichotomy: Literary Representations of African American Speech* (2006), in which Minnick concludes that Chesnutt’s representations are authentic, however, Minnick’s analysis does not address the presence or absence of this hallmark AAE feature.

A third instance of habitual be was found in Pauline E. Hopkins’s *Contending Forces*. Sister Robinson is speaking with other Black women in her church:

‘I used ter **be** takin’ fresh eggs an’ ham an’ chickuns out to that house all the time, but resuntly I’ve been reasunin’ with myself, an’ I camed to the conclusion that I won’t do it no mo’.’

The final instance of habitual be is in Frances E. W. Harper’s *Iola Leroy*, spoken by a slave character, Daniel, speaking to other enslaved characters:

‘ . . . I specs dem Yankees **be** all right, but I knows Marse Robert, an’ I don’t know dem, an’ I ain’t a gwine ter throw away dirty water ‘til I gits clean.’

Two cases, below, could be analyzed as habitual be, but I ultimately deemed them ambiguous:

‘Come, unharness yeseff, old boy, an don’t **be** standing dar.’ (*Clotel*)

‘I was not fool enough to **be** stayin’ round there . . .’ (*Incidents*)

Finally, I found that nonstandard use of be (although not habitual be) is used strategically in Delaney’s *Blake*. Take for example, the exchange below:

‘Am yers free?’ enquired the ferryman.

‘Am I free! Are you free?’ rejoined Eli.

‘Yes, I **be**’s a white man!’ replied the boatman.

‘And so am I!’ retorted Eli. ‘And you dare not tell me I’m not.’

‘I’ll swong, stranger, yer mus’ ‘scuse me, as I did n’ take notice on yez! But I like to know if them air black folks ye got wey yer am free, cause if they arn’t, I **be** ‘sponsible for ‘em ‘cording to the new law, called, I ‘bleve the Nebrasky Complimize Fugintive Slave Act, made down at Californy, last year,’ apologized and explained the somewhat confused ferryman.

‘Yes,’ replied Henry, ‘we are free, and if we were not, I do’nt think it any part of your business to know. I thought you were here to carry people across the river.’

‘But frien’,’ rejoined the man, ‘yer don’t understan’ it. This are a law made by the Newnited States of Ameriky, an’ I **be** ‘bliged to fulfill it by ketchin’ every fugintive that goes to cross this way, or I mus’ pay a thousand dollars, and go to jail till the black folks is got, if that **be**’s never. Yer see yez can’t blame me, as I mus’ ‘bey the laws of Congress I’ll swong it **be**’s hardly a fair shake nuther, but I **be** ‘bliged to ‘bey the laws, yer know.’

‘Well sir,’ replied Henry, ‘we want to cross the river.’

In this conversation, the ignorant, white boatman is positioned as the nonstandard English speaker, with nonstandard *be* usage throughout. These instances seem to be functioning as copulas in most cases (habitual is not usually inflected with *-s*), but it is not clear. What is clear is the divide between the speech of the white boatmen and Henry (and his crew), who are fleeing slavery. The density of nonstandard *be* in the speech of the boatmen positions him as ignorant and uncivilized (the type of man who could blindly follow such barbaric orders), especially in contrast with Henry and Eli’s standard speech. The density of nonstandard *be* seems to indicate its significance as a marker of ignorance in Blake’s time, and may help explain why many African American writers eschewed its inclusion in their own Black speech representations.

Overall, this study raises more questions than it answers. Was habitual *be* avoided by African American writers because of its potential to convey ignorance, or was this feature simply below the level of consciousness in the nineteenth century? If the latter, then when (and how) did it become salient as a marker of AAE in cultural representations? What factors predict the inclusion of habitual *be* in these texts? For example, is it more commonly included when African American characters are speaking to each other versus speaking to whites? Are the authors’ backgrounds and experiences in particular communities influencing what syntactic features they include? In what ways does genre affect the presence or absence of habitual *be*?

To take this project further, the most important step is to widen the analysis to include more texts. I may also create a comparable corpus from twentieth-century texts to promote clearer comparison and contrast between the eras. Finally, clearer diagnostics for what counts as habitual *be* will help disambiguate some cases. I plan on consulting a speaker of AAE to refine my process and to assist me in using the context to interpret the cases of habitual *be*. While my

findings are consistent with my initial impression that habitual be is scarce, this small pilot study is only the beginning of my search for habitual be, and other hallmark features of AAE syntax, in African American writings, and I look forward to reporting back on what I find next. Thank you for your attention, and please feel free to share questions, comments, and recommendations.

References:

- Brown, W. and Fabi, M. (2004) *Clotel, Or, The President's Daughter*, n.p.: New York : Penguin Books.
- Chesnutt, C.W. and Andrews, W. (2000) *Conjure Tales and Stories of the Color Line*. New York: Penguin.
- Chesnutt, C.W. (2007) *The House Behind The Cedars*, n.p.: Mineola, N.Y. : Dover Publications.
- Dunbar, P. and Kemble, E. (1900) *The Strength Of Gideon, : And Other Stories*, n.p.: New York : Dodd, Mead & Co.
- Green, L. (2002) *African American English: A Linguistic Introduction*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Harper, F.W. (1969) *Iola Leroy; Or, Shadows Uplifted*, n.p.: College Park, Md.: McGrath Pub. Co.
- Hopkins, P.E. (1988) *Contending Forces : A Romance Illustrative Of Negro Life North And South*, n.p.: New York : Oxford University Press.
- Jacobs, H. (2015) *Incidents In The Life Of A Slave Girl*, n.p.: Oxford : Oxford University Press.
- Johnson, A. E. (1988) *The Hazeley Family*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Minnick, L. C. (2004) *Dialect And Dichotomy*. [Electronic Resource] : *Literary Representations Of African American Speech*, n.p.: Tuscaloosa, Al. ; [Great Britain] : University of Alabama Press.
- Morrison, Toni. (2004) *Beloved : A Novel*. New York : Vintage International.
- Rickford, J., et al. (1991) 'Rappin on the Copula Coffin: Theoretical and Methodological Issues in the Analysis of Copula Variation in African-American Vernacular English,' *Language Variation and Change* 3: 103-132.
- Sanchez, S. (2006) 'To Anita.' *A Sun Lady for All Seasons Reads Her Poetry*. Washington, D.C: Smithsonian Folkways. Sound recording.