Introduction: Literary Representations of Black English

The conventional wisdom among modern fiction writers is that the use of nonstandard dialects in dialogue should be avoided. In her book on writing *Bird by Bird*, Anne Lamott makes it clear that she considers nonstandard dialect use in fiction to be risky:

> One last thing: dialogue that is written in dialect is very tiring to read. If you can do it brilliantly, fine. If other writers read your work and rave about your use of dialect, go for it. But be positive that you do it well, because otherwise it is a lot of work to read short stories or novels that are written in dialect. It makes our necks feel funny. We are, as you know, a tense people, and we have a lot of problems on our own without you adding to them.

Nonstandard pronunciations and grammatical features represented on the page slow a reader down, and some sociological aspects of dialect representation (such as the idea that representation of a character’s dialect may make her seem less intelligent) make the use of literary dialects unattractive to most writers. Further, it is technically difficult for any fiction writer to represent a nonstandard dialect accurately. If the writer is not a native speaker of the dialect represented, her task becomes even more difficult. Since it is of primary importance that fictional dialogue seem authentic, the use of such dialects may make a writer’s job considerably more complicated.

Orthographic representations of nonstandard pronunciations, in particular, complicate the process of reading for a writer’s audience. Consequently, these have disappeared almost entirely from fiction. Now, when a modern writer represents any nonstandard dialect, she does it through implication. For example, she may include a few key words such as “ain’t” (“isn’t”) or “sumpin’” (“something”) to show that her character is speaking a Southern dialect, and change some grammatical features to match the nonstandard grammar of that dialect. She will let her readers impose onto the dialogue their own ideas about the sounds of Southern dialects. This new method both avoids the trap of heavy orthographic representation and partially protects the writer from seeming to represent a dialect inaccurately—for, since readers must insert their own ideas of the

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dialects into their reading, the writer's representations may take on the inflections of the readers' conceptions about the dialect. For example, in his novel *A Gathering of Old Men*, Ernest Gaines uses a few orthographic representations and many nonstandard grammatical forms to show that his narrator speaks a form of New Orleans black English:

> Me and Mat was down there fishing. We goes fishing every Tuesday and Thursday. We got just one little spot now. Ain't like it used to be when you had the whole river to fish on. The white people, they done bought up the river now, and you got nowhere to go but that one little spot.  

Nonstandard forms such as "We goes" and "they done bought up" show that the narrator is speaking a dialect, as does the word "ain’t," which is commonly thought of as being an aspect of both white and black rural Southern dialects. This form of representation, because of its lack of phonological transcriptions, is easier on the reader than its precursors from the nineteenth century (see Southworth, below). However, the use of nonstandard forms (as well as stereotypical content such as the reference to "the white people") still suggests that certain characteristics are associated with the speaker of this dialect. Given that such stereotypes enter into our literature even today, it is doubtful whether speakers or writers of nonstandard dialects may ever escape entirely the trap of stereotype.

The black dialects in America today represent a particularly unusual linguistic situation. These dialects derive from the slave dialects of some 200 years ago, when Africans were enslaved and brought to America as part of the slave trade. Most minor language communities in the presence of another, dominant language undergo a quick progression towards learning the Standard form of the dominant language, in which the children of the first generation emigrants are bilingual, and the children of the bilingual generation have the dominant language as their first language. In the case of the African slaves, however, the version of English which they learned generated a class of dialects of English which conserved features of their African languages, and these became the black dialects in America today. This happened for a number of reasons. First, Standard English was not available to slaves as it was to other emigrants to America. The slaves learned their English from lower-class Americans who were either servants or indentured servants, who spoke imperfect English themselves. There was no opportunity for slaves to associate with Standard-English-speaking whites in such a way as to learn the Standard language rules. Further,

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slaves were punished for learning to read, and so to a certain extent learning Standard English was discouraged. Second, access to a language (or, in this case, a pidgin or creole) which their white masters did not entirely understand would have been eminently useful to the slaves, particularly from the standpoint of later escape movements. Since the African slaves did not have the opportunity to learn Standard English, and since socially a nonstandard dialect was preferable to the Standard dialect, the slave dialects were perpetuated in a way in which other dialects of emigrants were not. This process of selection has continued in some regions until the present day.

Since modern use of nonstandard dialects involves the negotiation of issues of both racism and classism, one might ask why fiction writers still choose to represent them. One reason is that nonstandard dialects may be used by some less cautious authors to suggest the stereotypical traits which our society associates with such dialects. Primary among these assumptions, with regard to most dialects, is the notion that nonstandard dialect speakers lack the intelligence of those who speak standard forms of the language. E.D.E.N Southworth’s character Pitpat from her nineteenth-century novel *The Hidden Hand* is an example of the typical characterization of a slave during that century, and she has the dialect to match the traits she is given:

"'Deed, I’se ‘fraid, Miss," said the poor little darkey.
"Afraid! What of?"
"Ghoses."
"Nonsense..."

Pitpat’s white mistress speaks perfect Standard English, though it might be assumed that she would have some sort of Southern dialect, and she speaks in what might be termed a rational manner; she is not afraid of the ghosts. On the other hand, almost every word Pitpat speaks is orthographically represented as nonstandard, and the emotions she expresses are superstitious ones. It is particularly interesting to note the unnecessary orthographic representations in even this short passage: "I’se ‘fraid” spoken out loud offers a nearly similar sound to those which might be represented by “I’s afraid.” The schwa produced by the contraction between “I’se” and “‘fraid” stands in rhythmically and phonologically for the “a” that is contracted. As well, the contraction of “I” and “is” to “I’se” rather than “I’s” (the “correct” contraction) is a form of eye dialect; that is, a deliberate misspelling of words in a dialect representation which enhances the sense that the

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speaker is using nonstandard English. This suggests that the contraction is not a representation of an actual tendency in black English of the time, but rather an exaggeration of the orthographic representation of the dialect, probably to underscore the Pitpat’s lack of skill with standard language.

Another, more modern reason for the continued use of dialect in fiction is to counteract the stereotypes with which various dialects have been burdened. Because of the highly specific ideological uses to which representations of the black dialects have been put in the past, authors who step outside of the rules of those stereotypes, such as giving an extremely intelligent character a nonstandard dialect, or a non-black character a dialect usually associated with blacks (as any rural Southern dialect was in literature before the 1860s), may use these ideological stereotypes against the movements by which they were originally defined.

One of the earliest instances of the use of dialect in a venture contrary to that of the dominant racist society of the nineteenth century is in the slave narratives which were written to convince liberal Northerners to join the anti-slavery movement. In particular, Harriet Jacobs has been cited as an author who specifically used the stereotypes associated with the rural Southern (then considered to be predominantly black) dialect to bring her audience to the side of the slaves in her narrative. While her family and other slaves speak Standard English in Jacobs’ narrative, characters—both black and white—whom Jacobs fears will betray the slaves speak in dialect. This new distribution of the rural black dialect into the mouths of those whom Jacobs wanted her audience to mistrust did little to counteract the stereotypes about the dialect which Jacobs used, but much (at least within the context of Jacobs’ narrative) to remove the stereotype associated with those who commonly spoke that dialect.

Still, Jacobs used a dialect representation that was very conservative for her day, and her narrative must have been polished by her publisher in order that she would seem as erudite as possible to her readership. Because of this heavy ideological motivation for changes in the language of the slave narratives, they may not serve as linguistic evidence for the shape of the actual slave dialect of their time. To a lesser extent, this is true of all literary representations of dialects, though some information has been gleaned from these.

Linguistic analyses of literary representations of dialects have given linguists information
about early American dialects, and specifically about early features of these dialects which are not now attested. These sources have some serious limitations, however. First, as addressed above, these representations may be exaggerated because of an author's desire to represent a character's dialect more strongly in a piece. Second, phonetic analyses of the dialects represented in some early works (such as the Uncle Remus tales, which were narrated entirely in a rural Southern slave dialect and included heavy orthographic representations of certain pronunciations) cannot be considered to be completely accurate, because an orthographic representation of a sound is not completely consistent. That is, linguists may never be sure what sound an author meant to represent by their nonstandard spellings.

Problems of this nature arise more rarely in syntactic analyses of literary dialect evidence. Syntactic analyses of literary dialects are a fruitful area for new inquiry, because the exaggeration of a nonstandard syntactic feature of a dialect would be much less intuitive to an author than is the exaggeration of nonstandard pronunciations. As well, the inaccuracies that are almost certain to arise with the use of orthographic spellings of certain sounds in phonologic analyses are virtually impossible in syntactic analyses. Syntax may be represented on paper just as it is spoken, unlike phonology. This gives syntactic analyses of the nonstandard grammatical features of certain dialects more weight than some phonetic analyses may carry.

This paper will examine, first, the social situations affecting both use of literary dialects in the modern age and in the nineteenth century. A discussion of various types of linguistic analysis of these literary dialects will follow, and then one of the social pressures of modern and nineteenth-century authors, as well as the various strategies of representation which they employ when giving a character a dialect. It is my hope that this examination may reveal to linguists the limitations of the analyses which they are carrying out, and may give the general public an idea of the value of the dialects represented by these literary forms. In this manner, I hope to open up the possibility for dialect-speaking authors to represent their dialects in their fiction without fearing the associations which such usages have come to bring up, both for critics and for the reading public.
Part II: Early Social Consequences of the Use of Literary Dialects

In an article on Harriet Jacobs' use of dialect in *Events in the Life of a Slave Girl*, Andrew Levy says that, since the time of Chaucer, literary representations of nonstandard dialects have been used to indicate that a character who speaks a nonstandard dialect is of a lower class than the other characters. This use of a dialect to indicate a character type is particularly salient with regard to literary representations of the rural black dialects. The particular emphasis which these dialects hold as an indication of character and/or class is a result both of the history of American society's treatment of blacks and of the way black dialects came to be represented in early fiction.

When rural black dialects were first represented in literature, in the 1700s, that literature had almost always been written by white authors, and the dialects were meant to represent the speech of slaves. Because of this, the dialects were associated immediately not only with that low social standing, but also with all of the stereotypes that were placed upon blacks in America in the years during and immediately after slavery: those of benign, humble slaves, of minstrel players and of a childlike emotional nature rather than an articulate voice and an equal place in society. In an article on Paul Laurence Dunbar's dialect poetry, Ralph Story lists the various mediums through which popular stereotypes of black people were transmitted in the nineteenth century:

> In fiction a variety of black types [flourished] both during and after the Civil War. The stage was dominated by minstrel shows with virulent titles like "Rufus Rastus," "All Coons Look Alike to Me," and "Go Way Back and Sit Down." Newspapers carried ludicrous cartoons such as *Spare Ribs and Gravy*, or had characters with names like "Asbestos" or "Smokey." Even film, in its infancy at the turn of the century, was reflective of the society's condescending attitude towards blacks.

Again and again, blacks were classified as a more emotional, less intelligent, animalistic and generally inferior class of people, and this stereotype has remained with the associations of the black dialects even today. Such a proliferation of negative images about black people in general would of course transfer, at least partially, into the connotations which the black dialects held for white readers. Likewise, negative associations with the black dialects transferred into further

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6 Story, p. 31.
negative associations about speakers of those dialects, especially about their intelligence (or lack thereof). In literature, use of black dialects in specific situations when the character speaking a black dialect is in a compromised position would tend to reflect back upon the dialect itself, in much the same way as the stereotypes of the black dialects feed back into the stereotypes of black people.

Levy points out that black dialects were most often used by white authors when depicting scenes which somehow compromised the black characters in their books. For example, a nineteenth-century slave character might lapse into dialect when expressing fear or sorrow, or betraying a lack of expertise with either the English language or the world around her. Levy quotes James Weldon Johnson’s claim that conventional black dialects could hold “only two main stops, humor and pathos,”7 and underscores the way in which these two characterizations furthered the stereotypes which already plagued free blacks and slaves alike in the United States. Story cites an article by Adam David Miller in order to illustrate the place which the black literary dialects held during this time:

When black writers tried to use dialect to reproduce sounds characteristic of our people, they were told that the only emotions dialect could convey were humor and pathos. We can either laugh at you or be maudlin over you. Our early writers accepted this two-valued orientation, apparently not realizing that this judgment on the possible uses of dialect had nothing to do with dialect, but rather with the only two feelings the arbiters of culture were willing either to show towards us themselves or to allow us to show.8

The use of dialects was hence limited, for white and black authors alike, by the views which the newly-emancipated American society was willing to take of black people. These sorts of connotations made early representations of the rural black dialects continuations of the racism which predominated in America during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, as well as those which remained from the years of slavery.

Other less blatantly negative but nonetheless pejorative stereotypes derived from the overall place which dialects took in nineteenth-century fiction in comparison with Standard English. Levy explains the general use literary dialects were put to in the nineteenth century:

The use of dialect, in any form, was presented as an antidote to the proliferation

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of sentimental Victorian dialogue, and its concomitant lack of expressiveness. Dialect was believed to vividly re-create the particular creolizations of English that had proliferated regionally across the American continent; these creolizations were presented as un-affected, “artless” versions of an overconventionalized Standard English.9

He goes on to explain that, though the use of dialects to counter the hyper-stylization of the Victorian dialogue could have had positive connotations as a respite from the cloying style, the overall stereotype remained negative, for its assumptions rested in the idea that a dialect speaker would possess only “artless” common sense, rather than intelligence. Hence Southworth’s character Pitpat lends comic relief and variation to Southworth’s popular, romantic form, but since most of the contrast she provides is centered around the humor of her own linguistic ineptitude, Pitpat’s frustration of the Victorian dialogue never forces readers to step outside of their own preconceived notions about slavery and the mind of a slave.

The only works which did not further such stereotypes in the slave period were those few written by blacks themselves—predominately, the narratives written by escaped slaves and published by the Northern anti-slavery movement in an effort to recruit others to their cause. Most of these were narrated deliberately in Standard English, in order that their authors might seem to be on a similar social and educational level to that of their readers. When dialects appeared in the dialogue of the narratives they had a different distribution than that of the dialects represented in fiction by white authors. For example, Levy postulates that Jacobs uses dialects, and the negative stereotypes they carry, either to demonize certain of the characters in her narrative, or to lend strength to the words of her protagonists. He points out that most of Jacobs’ dialogue is in Standard English, and stays within the sentimental form common at the time10, and says that when she does use dialects, she uses both the Victorian convention and the stereotypes commonly associated with dialects to her own advantage:

Jacobs verifies the objectivity of her narrative... by manipulating the literary conventions most familiar to her readers in a manner that validates their conception of authenticity. That this conception of authenticity was frequently antagonistic to her own race, however, forced Jacobs into the anomalous authorial position of simultaneously honoring and repudiating a set of social and literary conventions.11

9 Levy, p. 207.
10 Levy, p. 209.
Although, as Levy claims, it was necessary for Jacobs to use dialects in her narrative in order that it would seem authentic, she uses those dialects in a stronger, probably more realistic manner than did the stereotyping white authors of the day. In this manner, she was able to change subtly her readers’ assumptions about a certain character’s use of a dialect, although probably only in the context of her own work. The price of this, however, was that she had to retain and even reinforce some of the stereotyped images of her own dialect in order to place those demonizing stereotypes on the characters who spoke that dialect in her narrative (as when she gives a pair of white lynchers a dialect similar to the rural black dialect of the time). Of course, this use of the black dialects did nothing to change the stereotyped images of black people within the American society, because the stereotypes of the dialects were still associated with those who spoke those dialects in the society—black people.

In a similar manner, in the early 1800s, Paul Laurence Dunbar wrote some of his poetry in a black Southern dialect, though he was from Ohio, because he wanted his poetry to gain a larger white audience. He soon became known as a dialect poet since, in the years following the Civil War, black poets who wrote in dialect were more acceptable to the general population than black poets who wrote in Standard English. The reward for Dunbar’s compromise with the social stereotypes of dialect was that he was able to make his voice be heard at all; but the sacrifice he made turned out to be greater than he anticipated, as it meant the re-shaping of his art. He ended up supporting a stereotype of black Americans (that they all spoke in a certain dialect) which he could have attempted to fight. Conflicts of ideology such as the ones faced by Harriet Jacobs and Paul Laurence Dunbar, and the various results which they gained, will be the subject of section four of this paper.

It is plain to see that the social situation regarding black people in general in America both before and after the Civil War made representations of a black dialects in fiction a dangerous ground to tread for certain authors. The use of a black dialect would undoubtedly call up many of the associations which are discussed above. For this reason, as we have seen, some authors would alter their representations of a dialect, or use the representation of the black dialects thought of as the norm for white authors, rather than attempting to make accurate representations of the black dialects of the time. Because of this, linguistic analyses of most of the texts produced during
the nineteenth century must be discarded; for it might be said that, in general, a literary representation of a Southern black dialect was either inaccurate because it was formed by one who did not speak that dialects (i.e., white authors or black authors from another dialect such as Dunbar), or because the author had a specific ideological reason for representing the dialect, and in the process may have exaggerated or otherwise altered their representation. Though many of the reasons for this quandary are specific to the situation of black people in America in the nineteenth century, it seems that the overall principle might be applied to the linguistic analysis of any literary dialect; for, since the use of any dialect is marked in literature, an author will have a specific purpose for representing it, and this may change the dialect representation (even if it is simply that an author is following the “norm” of the way a dialect is represented). The various ways in which analyses of literary dialects have been carried out, and some thoughts about the limitations of these studies, are the subjects of the third section of this paper.
Part III: A Historical Review of Linguistic Analyses of Literary Dialects

Linguistic studies of literary dialects have taken many different forms and functions. Many of the early linguistic studies of literary dialects focused upon proving the adeptness of a particular author’s representation of a dialect, and most concentrated on phonology. Later studies also included syntax and vocabulary, and some examined a wide variety of authors from one time period in an effort to glean information about the spoken dialects of periods in our history for which there is no spoken record (as the nineteenth century). Linguistic analyses of literary dialects usually have included a component of comparison to their spoken analogs (the dialects they are meant to represent), and in the later comprehensive works (those which included more than one author), more accuracy is assumed because of the broader base of field information with which those authors were able to work. Whether literary dialects may be considered to be true linguistic evidence, and whether it is proper to compare them to the dialects which they profess to represent, are still open questions.

The first major study of a literary dialect, Sumner Ives’ *The Phonology of the Uncle Remus Tales*, used field research on rural black southern dialects to study the accuracy of the dialect represented in Joel Chandler Harris’ *Uncle Remus Tales*. Ives’ work served as a guideline for authors of several other studies on the accuracy of various authors’ dialect representations. While his study was rigorous and included field accounts of the actual dialect which Harris professed to represent, Ives’ study ultimately added very little to the linguists’ body of dialect information, either about authors’ strategies of construction of a literary dialect, or about the specific dialect which Harris was representing. Because Ives was primarily concerned with showing Harris’ dialect to be “authentic,” he presented no new evidence about the dialect, but rather used preexisting information about it to carry out his analysis. While he made an interesting case for Harris’ dialectal competency, ultimately his study was not substantially informative for linguists.

An unusual response to Ives’ study is that of Lee Pederson. While most linguists who respond to his work apply Ives’ method of comparing a written dialect to that which it is meant to

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represent, Pederson discards the notion of authenticity altogether, instead positing that Harris’ nonstandard pronunciations (especially elisions) were determined by his poetic demands.

...Harris realizes prosodic effectiveness through assonance, sonority, and rhythm... these deletions of obstruents occur in three phonological processes:
- elision (by and by — > bimeby, more than — > mo’n, and out of — > out’n),
- simplification of consonant clusters (after — > arter and just — > des), and
- assimilation (him — > 'im and Brother — > Brer). These processes alone remove fifteen obstruents from the sentence...  

Pederson seems to be proposing a kind of poet’s dialect of the English language, whereby an author deletes obstruents from her sentences in order to make the sounds of her prose flow better. He suggests that the elisions Harris used to create Uncle Remus’ dialect functioned primarily to give his prose such a flowing style. The fact that Pederson groups elisions of, for example, all obstruents, together and explains them in such an overarching manner makes his theory seem less linguistic and more poetic, as well as the fact that he completely ignores that there was an actual dialect which served as the blueprint for Harris’ language, but the study is interesting for its concentration on the constraints which a writer faces.

It is intriguing that the first few studies of literary dialects (as those of Ives, Pederson, and Charles R. Fenno) are concerned with the ‘realism’ of the dialect representations of certain authors, given the claim of many literary critics that one major social reason for the literary use of dialects is to lend to a character an earthy, ‘realistic’ quality—to suggest that a character possesses ‘homegrown’ wisdom rather than linguistic expertise. As well, attempts to prove that a specific author’s dialect representation is accurate seems impossible; lack of knowledge of an author’s intentions in using such a dialect, of that author’s linguistic history and familiarity with the dialect which she represents, and of the features of the dialect itself, all worked against the linguists who conducted the early studies of literary dialects.

The early studies of literary dialects were also predominately phonological, possibly because the most obvious written indication of a dialect is the orthographic representation of nonstandard pronunciations of various words. This is especially true of literature written by nineteenth- and early twentieth-century authors, who used orthographic representations of the dialect’s phonology much more frequently than do modern-day authors. This literature is thought

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14 Pederson, p. 295.
to contain information about early nonstandard dialects for which modern linguists have little data. It must be remembered, however, that these dialects were constructed consciously by one author. Native speakers of a nonstandard dialect do not normally think about their own spoken construction of their dialectal speech; it is a reflex to them. This is an important distinction between literary and spoken dialects, because it has to do with consciousness on the part of the author of what she is trying to represent. The social condition of the time period in which an author was writing, as well as of the author herself, must have affected such constructions in some way. Because of these constraints, some studies of literary dialects might be considered to be more valid than others. Studies which survey a wide variety of authors and genres are more likely to pick up overarching tendencies of dialects than studies which concentrate upon a sole author, as are studies which examine the more subtly realized nonstandard grammar of literary dialects, rather than the more obvious phonological aspects of these.

Later studies of literary dialects, such as Michael Ellis' syntactic analysis of nonstandard dialects in middle nineteenth century fiction, concentrated more upon the information which might be gleaned from these dialectal representations than upon whether or not a specific author was accurately representing a nonstandard dialect. Other sources of information regarding the shape of dialects during these years include a close examination of rhyming poetry and of early orthographic representations of the phonology of a dialect by people who were interested in their language. Very little reliable information is available for these time periods, however, and on the level of syntax, at least, the use of fictional representations of dialects seems to hold some important information.

Ellis isolates two different nonstandard sentence types from his survey of violations of subject-verb agreement in various types of fiction, and then places these in a historical context, both of the nonstandard dialects of the English language from which these dialects came (for example, Scotch-Irish dialects which the colonists might have spoken) and the nonstandard dialects which exist today (in the case of one sentence type which is still in use today). This historical approach to the literary dialects seems to be quite resourceful, as it incorporates both information which we already have about dialects and dialect history and information which the literary dialects may offer linguists. It might be said, however, that the phonological level of
representation would be much more difficult to incorporate into a study such as this one, because orthographic representations of nonstandard pronunciations would be much more conscious than nonstandard sentence structures might be to a native speaker of a dialect. Because of this, even the information which may be gleaned from a study such as this one is limited indeed.

While studies of the slave narratives might seem to be a fruitful yield of information regarding the rural black dialects, we have seen that the authors of these may have been actually so conscious of their use of dialect that their dialect representations cannot not be considered to be any more accurate than those of white authors. Levy points out that the dialect representation which Harriet Jacobs uses is actually a very conservative one, reminiscent of the white representations of the time; she uses eye dialect and other conventions in the representation of a rural black dialect, and the liberating aspects of her dialect come not from a new representation of that dialect, but rather from the way in which she uses a very conventional representation of that dialect. In this sense, Ellis' study of what different authors' (from different genres) representations of nineteenth century dialects have in common may be considered to be much more revealing about actual dialects of the time than a study of Jacobs' work ever could be, because of the ideological weightedness of the slave narratives. The next section examines the negotiation of such ideologies which early and modern black authors are obliged to carry out, and the consequences of various ways of addressing the social and literary concerns which accompany dialect representations, particularly of rural black dialects.
Part IV: Strategies Used by Black Authors to Break the Strictures of Traditional Dialect Representation

Modern-day writers, both white and black, represent nonstandard dialects more subtly and less frequently than did their nineteenth-century counterparts. It seems that recent critical approaches which underscore the denigrating nature of many dialect representations have made authors rightfully wary of using such representations in their work. At least some of earlier black writers must have been aware of the ideological problems inherent in using dialects in their work already, however, because of the social position from which they viewed such representations. At the same time, when literature by black authors was first published, it tended to be more widely accepted when it used representations of rural black dialects. In order to gain an audience for their work, many black writers were compelled to use dialect in their work, even if they did not want to, because dialect made their work seem more “authentic” to white audiences. At the same time, these authors had a real need to represent themselves and their race as being separate from the stereotypes that were attached to nonstandard dialect speakers. The negotiation of this double bind by many early black writers was subtle in most cases, but also took the first steps towards the relatively stigma-free representations of the modern day.

One of the most ideologically laden forms of black literature, that which had to negotiate and disprove a variety of stereotypes, was also the first: the slave narratives written before the Civil War by escaped slaves and published by liberal Northerners in an attempt to bring others to the anti-slavery movement. The authors of these narratives were at pains to prove themselves equal to whites, while at the same time retaining a non-threatening, placid stereotype of their race in order that whites would not feel threatened by them. Andrew Levy explains the tight set of boundaries which limited Harriet Jacobs’ narrative:

One might claim that...her ideological interest lay mainly in convincing her Northern readers that blacks were just a deferential and nonthreatening version of Standard English-men. This argument does not take into account the complexities of the racial pressures that were exerted on Jacobs’ authorship, however, or how those pressures limited her narrative choices...[she] needed to produce a text that mediated between deference and self-assertion, with this mediation restricted by the same ideological bounds that restricted her race.15

In her negotiation between stereotype and dignity, Jacobs chooses to retain the inaccurate,

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undignified conventional literary representation of her rural black dialect in order to lend her narrative the proper “realistic” quality that her white audience required. She compensates for this by using the dialect in a different way from her white counterparts. For example, the dialect is spoken by slaves in moments of great emotion or resolve, rather than in deference or as comic relief at the expense of the speaker. This gives the dialect a force which it did not have in the writing of others of the time. Interestingly, that Jacobs has her characters use nonstandard dialects at moments of great emotion is probably more accurate than was the dominant literary distribution of dialects.

Additionally, in Jacobs’ narrative, white and black characters alike speak in nonstandard dialects at different times. This usage is probably also a more accurate representation of the language situation in the rural South than was that of early literature which gave black characters heavy nonstandard dialects while white characters spoke Standard English. Lacy presents this as another of Jacobs’ rhetorical strategies:

What makes Jacobs’ use of dialect particularly effective in this instance is that she invokes class fears, but severs the connection between race and class: her appeal to the fear of a lower caste insurrection is as conservative as her displacement of race from that fear is radical.¹⁶

Jacobs is hence not only redeeming the general use of dialects by removing the racial overtone from dialect use, but also drawing her audience closer to her side, by depicting the whites who oppressed the slaves in her narrative as lower-class (by their speech). Jacobs had a certain liberty in telling her tale that free black authors would not have after the emancipation; for, though she was in a more precarious social position than later authors, she had already found people willing to publish her story; free authors were more constrained by social expectations of the time because they had to entice publishers to their work.

Paul Laurence Dunbar was one of the first of these authors, and ultimately the expectations of his readership defined the direction which his art took. In his article on Dunbar’s poetry, Ralph Story outlines the situation in which Dunbar found himself as one of the first free black authors:

The black writer was obligated to be entertaining, to assure readers that although blacks had changed since the emancipation, they were still basically a “kind,” “helpless,” “lazy” lot with no thoughts of malice or, better still, retribution for

¹⁶ Lacy, p. 214.
Hence Dunbar found himself constrained by some of the same white fears which Jacobs had had to negotiate; but, unlike Jacobs, Dunbar had no assured audience, nor a publisher who was soliciting work from him for a political cause. Because of this, Dunbar had to please his white audience in a different way than Jacobs did: while Jacobs had to convince her audience of her human worth (and that of her race), Dunbar had to entertain whites in order to gain recognition (and hence make a living) as a poet. In order to do this, he found it necessary to begin writing his poetry as that audience would expect him to write. Primary among these expectations was that he should write in a nonstandard dialect; and, though he was born in Ohio, Dunbar adopted a rural Southern dialect in much of his poetry early in his career, in an attempt to gain a wider audience. Story cites what Dunbar himself said about his choice of a dialect that was not, strictly speaking, his own:

> You know of course that I didn’t start as a dialect poet. I simply came to the conclusion that I could write it as well, if not better than anybody I knew of, and that by doing so I should gain a hearing, and now they don’t want me to write anything but dialect.\(^8\)

It is easy to see that Dunbar’s original strategy to use dialect in order to gain a larger audience for the rest of his poetry backfired, for today he is known predominantly as a dialect poet, taught in junior high and high schools as representative of that specific “type.”\(^9\) Dunbar wrote most of his poems in Standard English, and published as well three novels and a number of articles on race relations which expressed a strong and potentially inflammatory ideology. However, by and large, his mainstream audience never thought of him as anything more than a dialect poet. Late in his career, he was extremely frustrated by the genre into which he had been pushed by the narrow market of his time:

> I am so tired, so tired of dialect. I sent out graceful little poems, suited for any of the magazines, but they are returned to me by editors who say, “We would be very glad to have a dialect poem, Mr. Dunbar, but we do not care for the language compositions.”\(^20\)

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17 Story, p. 33
19 Story, p. 55.
Dunbar's fate, of having been given a reputation as a poet of a very limited genre when it was neither his field of expertise nor that about which he was passionate, serves as an illustration of the very real problems which early black writers encountered. Whether or not they wished to conform to the expectations which their white audience held of them, they could quite easily be reduced to fit those expectations, because of the nature of the publishing market and of the society in which they lived. While modern-day writers do not face such strong expectations (or restrictions) either from publishers or from society, they must face the legacy of past works and past stereotypes in their work, and in many ways are still negotiating the same spaces for their dialects and their content as were their predecessors.

Zora Neale Hurston has been cited by modern critics as an early writer who used rural black dialects, not to represent character traits, but to lend credibility to her portrayals of the predominant black culture in the early twentieth century, around the time she was writing. Even at the turn of the century, the literary use of nonstandard dialects was a mainstream device in the depiction of rural blacks, and (much like Jacobs) Hurston employed a dialect representation which resembled those of her white counterparts. However, critics have said that the way in which she used that dialect, much like the way Jacobs used her dialect, actually added more dimension to the character of the dialect she was representing, and salvaged it from the stereotype which weighed it down. Gayl Jones\textsuperscript{21}, in particular, lauds Hurston for giving back to the black rural dialect the depth which it should have had all along. While Hurston wrote many of her books completely in a heavy dialect, Jones suggests that she does this because it was a convention of her time period, and says that Hurston imbues her dialects with more license than they had in other works because she gives them not just the job of representation of a character’s speech (that is, in dialogue), but also of narrative description and portrayal of emotional depth, since she uses dialect in descriptive passages as well as in dialogue.


\textsuperscript{22} Jones, Gayl, pp. 150-1.
Hurston’s use of dialects might be seen as unmarked for her time period because it was common for writers of that time period to use dialect representations, and because she was writing in her own dialect. However, modern writers who seek to represent characters with black dialects do not have the luxury of using dialects in a manner which will be seen as somewhat neutral. They do, however, have the legacy of those who came before them to make their use of a dialect seem less marked to a mainstream audience, and they have the more progressive ideals of our present society to bolster their attempts at realism.

Ernest Gaines is a contemporary author who gives some of his characters dialects despite the modern convention against these. Though his dialect representations are more modern in that they are achieved more through word choice and syntax than nonstandard orthography, he uses dialect in much the same way that Jacobs did. In Gaines’ writing, dialects arise particularly when a character is expressing strong emotion. A particularly salient example of the distance literary representations of both black characters and black dialects comes in Gaines’ novel *A Gathering of Old Men*. Virtually every character in the book speaks a dialect of some kind, including the white Creoles who are the antagonists of the novel. Below, the character quoted in section I of this paper, Chimley, and his friend Mat are trying to decide whether or not to take a stand against the white sheriff for a cause which they believe is just. During their understated agreement to stand up for themselves, and Chimley’s reminiscences about their lives together, his dialect emerges more and more:

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"Bout that bed," he said. "I'm too old to go crawling under that bed. I just don't have the strength for it no more. It's too low, Chimley."
"Mine ain't no higher," I said.
He looked at me now. A fine-featured, brown-skin man. I had knowed him all my life. Had been young men together. Had done our little running around together. Had been in a little trouble now and then, but nothing serious. Had never done what we was thinking about doing now. Maybe we had thought about it. Sure, we had thought about it. But we had never done it. 23
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This new image, of a black man coming to stand up for himself, is a far cry from the image projected by Southworth’s character Pitpat. The concentration on Mat’s face (“a fine-featured, brown-skin man) as both a thing of beauty and a symbol of his dignity gives both characters a humanity which a nineteenth-century author would not have been able to carry off. It is, however,

23 Gaines, p. 31
interesting to note that the dialect features represented here are not necessarily limited to black dialects—for example, the omissions of subjects in the sentences about Mat and Chimley’s past together (“Had been young men together. Had done our little running around...”). These may occur in a number of different dialects, and it might be argued that they are used here to represent a nonstandard dialect based on the race of the speaker. On the basis of aspects such as these, some critics might argue that the use of dialect here may lend to Chimley’s character a certain childlike quality, but the quiet dignity of man standing up for himself and his community seems more prevalent here, and this comes through despite the use of nonstandard English. While the stereotypes associated both with black dialects and with black people in America are still heavily imbued in our culture, the options which black writers have for their characters and their representations of their own dialects, are growing, and this can only help the social and literary problems which black Americans face today. It is not reasonable to expect that the use of a literary dialect could ever become completely free of stereotypes, but the liberties which early authors such as Jacobs took with their use of dialects, as well as the more subtle modern method of representing a dialect, have increased authors’ options of dialect representations considerably.