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“It’s a Cu’ous Thing ter Me, Suh’: The Distinctive Narrative Innovation of
Literary Dialect in Late-Nineteenth Century American Literature”

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of
Arts at Virginia Commonwealth University.

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Abstract

“IT’S A CU’OUS THING TER ME, SUH’: THE DISTINCTIVE NARRATIVE INNOVATION OF LITERARY DIALECT IN LATE-NINETEENTH CENTURY AMERICAN LITERATURE”

By Kym McClary Goering, M.A.

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts at Virginia Commonwealth University.

Virginia Commonwealth University, 2016.

Major Director: Terry Oggel, Professor, English Department

American literature and verse advanced in dialectal writing during the late-nineteenth century. Charles Chesnutt’s “The Goophered Grapevine” (1887), “Po’ Sandy” (1888), and “Hot-Foot Hannibal” (1899); Joel Chandler Harris’ *Uncle Remus: His Songs and His Sayings* (1881); Thomas Nelson Page’s “Marse Chan” (1884); and Mark Twain’s “Sociable Jimmy” (1874) and “A True Story, Repeated Word for Word as I Heard It” (1874) provided diverse dialect representations. Dialect expanded into poetry with

James Whitcomb Riley's "She 'Displains' It" (1888), "When the Frost is on the Punkin" (1882), and "My Philosophy" (1882) and Paul Laurence Dunbar's "The Spellin' Bee" (1895), "An Ante-Bellum Sermon" (1895), and "To the Eastern Shore" (1903). Dialect styles and how they conveyed political or social perspectives are assessed.

Correspondence between late-nineteenth century literary figures as well as periodical reviews reveal attitudes toward the use of dialect. Reader responses to dialect based on their political or social interpretations are explored.

Introduction

In the first half of the nineteenth century, some American writers experimented with vernacular texts, and dialect was often found in the humor writings in newspapers such as New York's *Spirit of the Times* and Georgia's *The Atlanta Constitution*. In the last quarter of the century, however, dialectical texts appeared outside the humor context. Short stories and poetry containing dialectal characters and narrators were published in prominent national literary periodicals such as *The Atlantic Monthly* and *The Century*. Frame-narrative texts also became popular during this time and fiction writers saw success with its many variants.

Examination of several texts by poets James Whitcomb Riley and Paul Laurence Dunbar and fictionalists Joel Chandler Harris, Thomas Nelson Page, Charles W. Chesnutt and Mark Twain, reveals the variety of approaches to written dialect at the turn of the twentieth century. Not only do the dialects differ from one another by region and race, but the context and character development of the dialectal characters differ as well. The political and cultural beliefs of each writer is evident in his works.

During this historical postbellum period, diverse opinions surrounding the use of dialect spread throughout the literary community as well as society at-large. Nineteenth century criticism of dialectal texts was often based on the critic's political and cultural beliefs – instead of the merits of the text itself. Examining contemporaneous literary

correspondence and critical commentary that addresses dialectal texts unveils the ways these writers steered late-nineteenth century societal attitudes regarding the meaning of dialect. Assessment of criticism is limited to criticism written when the texts were initially published in order that primary critical opinion be clearly presented. These dialectal poets and authors achieved results that were sometimes notable and sometimes notorious.

Poet James Whitcomb Riley wrote dialectal poetry that often centered on child characters; however, he is most remembered for his nostalgic presentation of simple pastoral life. Poet Paul Laurence Dunbar and fiction-writer Charles W. Chesnutt were the inspirational forefathers of African American literature who wrote texts with masked dialect which implicitly described the harsh realities that the black race endured throughout the 1800s. Joel Chandler Harris' dialectal folktales preserved African American folklore and culture. Thomas Nelson Page and Mark Twain's dialectical short stories demonstrated how vernacular use could be intricate, complex, and controversial.

Dialectal texts in the nineteenth century were not limited to fiction. Verse also embraced dialect as a medium of distinctive expression. Two Midwestern poets, Indianan James Whitcomb Riley (1849 – 1916) and Ohioan Paul Laurence Dunbar (1872 – 1906), included dialectal variances within their poetry canon and remained popular with readers well after the poets' deaths. Riley's well-received poetry highlighted the rural lifestyle of the Midwest with wistful dialect poems. Innovatively, Riley also wrote poems with dialectal child characters and published poetry books for children. Riley's poems under consideration include the children's poem "She 'Displains'

It," which was published in the children's magazine *St. Nicholas* (1888) and Hoosier poems "My Philosophy" and "When the Frost is on the Punkin" (1895).

Dunbar concentrated on the dialect of African American people living in the Southeastern United States. His poetry cautiously masked the true experiences and beliefs of the black race with an innocuous face that seemed to affirm, but actually mocked, white misconceptions. Readers often mistook this mask for a brand of minstrelsy which gained Dunbar white readership and diminished black readership. Varying examples of Dunbar's mask are seen in his poems "The Spellin'-Bee" and "An Ante-Bellum Sermon" which were published in *Majors and Minors* (1895) and "To the Eastern Shore" found in *Lyrics of Love and Laughter* (1903). With the exception of "She 'Displains' It" which is reprinted intratextually, the Appendix contains all poems in order of their appearance in this project.

Dialect peaked in popularity in the last quarter of the nineteenth century with the publishing of authentic folktales and Plantation fiction. Georgia native Joel Chandler Harris (1848 – 1908) received marked attention with texts grounded in the oral African American folktales told during the antebellum era. Harris published his first book containing folktales in 1881, a collection of works titled *Uncle Remus: His Songs and His Sayings: The Folk-Lore of the Old Plantation*. In the section of the book titled "Legends of the Old Plantation," Harris intermixed dialect with Standard American English, and his stories "Mr. Rabbit Nibbles Up the Butter," "A Story About the Little Rabbits," "The Fate of Mr. Jack Sparrow," and "Why Mr. Possum Has No Hair on His Tail" follow the misadventures of animal characters Br'er Rabbit and Br'er Fox (and others), with the character Uncle Remus serving as a dialectal narrator (the first of three

in this project) of the framed tales. Harris achieved sectional and racial neutrality in his development of Uncle Remus. This was important in order that readers not become distracted away from Harris' primary purpose of conveying African American folklore. The folktales are noteworthy for what scholars have determined is authentic dialect usage reproduced from primary sources.

Virginian Thomas Nelson Page (1853 – 1922) began dialectal writings in 1884 with his short story "Marse Chan." In "Marse Chan" Page's protagonist and the second former slave dialectal narrator, a sympathetic man named Sam, tells a nostalgic tale which lauds his former master and affirms Southern white supremacist ideals. Page's narrative technique with Plantation-fiction and its former slave narrator significantly contrast the techniques used by Harris and Chesnutt. Despite Page's misrepresentation of the Civil War-era Southern existence, black and white, his fiction was well-received by readers who were deceived into believing his fiction to be realistic in large part because of its dialect.

The late 1800s also brought recognition to Charles W. Chesnutt's (1858 – 1932) short stories. The first African American author to be published in *The Atlantic*, the Ohio-born author is well-known for his writings that feature the third dialectal protagonist, Uncle Julius, who stars in a series of 14 tales. Julius differs from a typical Plantation-fiction narrator in that he is not sympathetic toward white characters. Julius does not kowtow to the white race but thinks independently and manipulates the white characters to achieve his pursuits. Additionally, Chesnutt's Uncle Julius implicitly conveys slavery's disgusts through masked dialect which the white Standard American English-speaking outside narrator in the stories fails to notice. In his short stories "Hot-Foot Hannibal,"

“Po’ Sandy,” “The Goophered Grapevine,” and “Mars Jeems’s Nightmare,” Chesnutt’s complex dialect-character development and scope of writing are revealed and herald the beginnings of racial uplift for American blacks.

During the 1870s Samuel Clemens (1835 – 1910), Mark Twain as he became known, gained attention through his short stories. His framed story “The Celebrated Jumping Frog of Calaveras County” (1865) included Old Southwestern dialect and was his first significant success as an author. His first use of Southern negro dialect occurred in his 1874 short stories “Sociable Jimmy” (*The New York Times*, November) and “A True Story, Repeated Word for Word as I Heard It” (*The Atlantic Monthly*, November). Both sketches are reproductions of actual conversations Twain held with the people (characters) in the texts. The African American dialectal characters are unlike dialectal characters typically seen in late-nineteenth century literature like Harris, Page, and Chesnutt. They were autonomous in their speaking and thinking, completely independent from the supremacy of the white race. These sketches were Twain’s breakthrough dialectal texts and familiarized readers with his precise dialect writing.

Within the late-nineteenth century literary conversation, dialect proved a recurrent topic. Literary critic William Dean Howells openly championed literary dialect, and his fingerprint on the success of the authors in this project is not to be underestimated. Examination of correspondence amongst late-nineteenth century writers and literary critics, like Howells, reveals varying attitudes toward the subject of literary dialect with people supporting, but also harboring mixed feelings toward dialectical writing. Understandably, the authors’ attitudes toward dialectal writing varied depending on each writer’s experiences, and those attitudes influenced, deliberately or

not, the readers of dialectal texts. In order to engage in a discussion of the impact of the dialect upon those readers, partnering contemporaneous commentary with the dialectal texts themselves provides deep insight into the effects of dialect on American readers. It is evident that reader and critic impressions of the dialect itself often depends on the political context of the text's content; for example, if readers held the same beliefs that the text exemplified, they supported the dialect, but if readers disagreed with the beliefs found within the text, lack of support for the dialect followed. Therefore, the effect that dialect had on nineteenth century readers was primarily based on emotional responses to the text's content.

Chapter One

“My Doctern is to Lay Aside Contensions and be Satisfied”: The Cherished Wholesomeness of Riley’s Dialect Characters

James Whitcomb Riley, born in Greenfield, Indiana, in 1849, was affectionately known as the “People’s Poet” and also the “Hoosier Poet.” His popularity reached elevated levels in the late-nineteenth century. Critic and author William Dean Howells, in 1899, emphasized Riley’s popularity when he stated, “Probably the most widely read American poems in their time were Longfellow’s ‘Hiawatha’ and Whittier’s ‘Snow-Bound,’ but Mr. Riley’s poetry is much more widely read than either” (*The New Poetry* 588). With his popularity rivaling Longfellow’s during the height of Riley’s career, Riley remained a relative unknown to readers outside the Midwestern region of the U.S. Although Riley also wrote verse in Standard American English, he was best known for his dialect poetry. He defined dialect in his 1892 essay, “Dialect in Literature,” as “any speech or vernacular outside of the prescribed form of good English in its present state” (465). Riley considered dialect as “something more than mere rude form of speech and action--that it must, in some righteous and substantial way, convey to us a positive force of soul, truth, dignity, beauty, grace, purity and sweetness that may even touch us to the tenderness of tears” (“Dialect” 466). As Riley’s friend, writer and critic Hamlin Garland believed, readers – particularly those in Indiana and its surrounding areas – were drawn

to Riley's poetry for accurately portraying "the homely, the quaint, the pathetic, and his best expression was the vernacular" (7). Readers found his writing captured the character of native Midwesterners in language as well as action. His everyday fans did not question whether his written dialect was philologically authentic. Riley biographer Richard Crowder surmises that "if today there are doubts as to the authenticity of his rural language, at least in his own time his readers were confident that he was recording the speech of their Hoosier forebears" (144).

Crowder's sentiment supports the argument that those who enjoyed Riley's poems for their content also enjoyed the dialect in which they were written. Content, in this instance, consists of subject matter (Midwestern agrarian lifestyles) and characters (native Indianans). The converse to the argument stands as well; if readers did not identify and enjoy Riley's content, they correspondingly found Riley's dialect unsavory as well. Content and dialect are never separated in one's criticism of dialectal work. Further examination of Riley's dialect poetry and its positive and negative criticism provides evidence in support of the argument that using content as a measurement for dialectal authenticity runs throughout criticism of dialect texts. Riley authored two variants of dialect poetry: child dialect and Hoosier dialect. Criticism of Riley's work considered his dialect generally and did not distinguish between the two variations.

Many readers enjoyed both types of dialect poetry written by Riley. Discussed below, they enjoyed the innocence of the characters in his child dialect poetry as well as his Hoosier dialect poetry. Riley was gifted in writing child dialect poetry. This subgenre of dialect poetry involved a child character who misspelled and mispronounced words because that character was in the process of learning how to read and write, but the

character also pronounced words in Standard American English just as a learning child would. These child characters exemplified the natural development of language usage seen in a child. Riley mastered this eye dialect found in children's poetry, and by career's end Riley had published *Rhymes of Childhood* (1891), *A Child-World* (1897) and *Book of Joyous Children* (1902), and "schools were apparently eager to include [these books]...in their curricula" (Nurhusein 77).

Poet Edgar Lee Masters proclaimed Riley's superiority in this subgenre by stating, "His work of incomparable merit, of unmatched excellence was in the field of childhood delineation. Here he has no equal, and no one to be mentioned in the same breath with him. Here he was pure genius" (714). Riley's poem "She 'Displains' It" was originally published in the children's magazine *St. Nicholas* in February 1888. Reprinted here in full, childhood innocence can be seen through Riley's use of eye dialect.

"Had, too!"
"Hadn't, neither!"
So contended Bess and May,—
Neighbor children who were boasting
Of their grandmamas, one day.

"Had, too!"
"Hadn't, neither!"
All the difference begun
By May's saying she'd two grandmas,
While poor Bess had only one.

"Had, too!"
"Hadn't, neither!"
Tossing curls, and kinks of friz,
"How could you have two grandmothers
When just one is all they is?"

"Had, too!"
"Hadn't, neither!"
'Cause ef you had two," said Bess,

“You’d displain it!” Then May answered:
“My grandmas were twins, I guess!” (“She ‘Displains’” 276)

The narrator of the poem is fluent in English as demonstrated by the use of Standard English throughout the poem; however, the young girls, Bess and May, speak in a dialect depicting them as in the process of learning English. The girls’ debate within the poem stems from the fact that Bess had one grandmother while May had two. Riley’s construction of Bess’ speech demonstrates her developing English as she declares to May, “‘How could you have two grandmothers when just one is all they is?’” (276). Bess further argues with May, “‘Cause ef you had two...you’d displain it!’” (276). Riley uses this statement with eye dialect to show readers a child’s endearing misuse of English which innocently and naturally occurs during language development. Additionally, Riley’s use of “‘cause ef” indicates that the child speaks with a regional dialect as seen by Riley’s use of “‘cause” instead of “because” and “ef” instead of “if.” Riley begins each stanza with May proclaiming she has two grandmothers with, “‘Had, too!’” Also, this opening line of the poem fools readers into believing the “too” is not referring to the number two; however, as the poem progresses, readers understand that “too” refers to “two grandmothers.” This eye dialect builds up the humor in this short poem and eventually leads readers to the punchline and the heart of the girls’ argument.

Riley also wrote dialect poetry with non-standard orthography to indicate that the character was speaking a kind of vernacular (or regional dialect) commonly referred to as Hoosier dialect. Rarely did readers separate Riley’s two types of dialect poetry, preferring to label them collectively as dialect. Dialect scholar, Nadia Nurhussein astutely observed that Riley’s poetry enabled readers to consider dialect poetry “as a new and experimental generic experience combining the resources of orality and

literacy" (32). A wide variety of readers embraced this experimental generic experience, but precisely who was Riley's readership?

Within the general population, Riley's readers were from the high, middle and low social classes. Although Riley's poetry was appreciated by audiences both highly literate and less than so, it should not be considered low brow poetry. On the contrary, Riley's poetry "targets a highly literate reader" despite containing approachable themes that people, regardless of educational level, could relate to (Nurhussein 33). As Nurhussein noted, "Because Riley's themes revolve mainly around lower and lower middle-class life, many mistakenly assume that his reading audience consisted mainly of members of these classes" (33). However, W.D. Howells observed the contrary: "Mr. Riley's poetry reaches the lettered as well as the unlettered; it has had the courage of the familiar, the homely, qualities which are the most widely felt, and it is not because it is American (although we like it so), but because it is human that it finds its way over the fruitful levels where men are all equal" (*The New Poetry* 588). As Hamlin Garland commented, Riley's "immense success with the common, non-literary public is to be counted for him and not against him" (8). The largest constituency of readers hailed from Riley's home state of Indiana.

Native Hoosiers were Riley's biggest supporters because, as explained by poet Edgar Lee Masters in *The Century Magazine*, Riley gave "pure joy and compassion and tenderness, and very often great beauty to the [...] life of Indiana of the pioneer days down to the dawn of the twentieth century" (705). Riley "built an enormous middlebrow following between 1877 and 1915 despite the shifting and shrinking 'genial middle ground' that had supported midcentury poets like Henry Wadsworth Longfellow and

John Greenleaf Whittier” (Sorby 198). Jeannette Covert Nolan, native Indianan and scholar, described Riley’s poetic character(s) as “a mellow, humorous rustic, a quaint, bucolic philosopher, unlettered but gifted with an earthy shrewdness, a peasant wisdom, a heart of gold, speaking a drawling, hybrid tongue, a dubious dialect as yet unidentified by any philologist – but a figure so convincing that even the Hoosier himself was persuaded to proclaim it his true likeness and to try to emulate it” (18). In Horace Gregory’s essay, “James Whitcomb Riley: A Victorian American,” he considered Riley’s dialect to be “an unliteral dialect that has behind it a span of literary precedent, and as Riley wrote it, it extended the span of a nineteenth century convention” (Nolan, Gregory, and Farrell 43). To the general reading population of Indiana natives, it did not matter whether or not Riley’s dialect was authentic; they claimed him as theirs regardless. Riley’s dialect lacks philological evidence of “being an absolutely accurate representation of the Hoosier dialect in all its phonetic and grammatical features; but this is in the final analysis immaterial. What matters is that Hoosiers themselves felt that Riley was celebrating their ways of speech and their own regional character and culture, and was establishing the Hoosier as a distinct regional type in American life and literature” (Robertson 15). Below is a brief examination of one of Riley’s Hoosier dialect poems. “When the Frost is on the Punkin” (1882, See Appendix) is well-known by Riley fans and captured the lifestyle and personalities most endearing to Riley. Although the dialect is not impervious to imperfection, it did not detract from the poem’s popularity.

In Riley’s “When the Frost is on the Punkin,” one can see his consideration of those reading dialect in his use of the word “their” throughout the poem. It is used in the third stanza: “The hosses in **theyr** stalls below” as well as in the fourth stanza: “With

their mince and apple-butter, and **theyr** souse and sausage, too” (*Complete Works* 828). Riley’s use of standard orthography intermixed with dialectal orthography playfully demonstrates how dialectal English blends with Standard American English both in writing and in speech patterns. By scaffolding standard orthography with dialectal orthography, dialectal writers help readers acclimate to dialectal spelling within dialectal poetry. Riley successfully employs the strategy of using both spellings of “their,” and reader fatigue is thus diminished.

It is interesting to note that although Riley uses the dialectal spelling “fer” to represent “for” and “fergot” to represent “forgot” throughout his poetry, he does not use the dialectal spelling “yer” to represent “your.” The “er” morpheme, being prevalent in both Standard American English and English vernacular, gives pause as to whether or not the nonstandard orthography would more accurately represent the word “your.” However, Riley’s use of dialectal orthography in these instances is consistent. Again, Riley’s balanced application of dialect intermixed with Standard American English does not tax readers as they experience the poetry. The subject of “When the Frost is on the Punkin” centers on the Indiana farming culture. Riley’s imagery of “the rooster’s hallylooyer as he tiptoes on the fence” and “a crisp and sunny morning of the airy autumn days” coupled with his gentle Hoosier dialect was identifiable to the Midwestern agrarian population (*Complete Works* 826 – 827). Although Riley’s Hoosier dialect resounded with Indiana readers, opinions on Riley’s dialect poetry varied among his peers.

Among literary colleagues and high-brow society members, discrepancies in opinions of Riley’s dialect poetry were evident. Riley had significant support of his

literary peers; indeed, “many of the great [writers] of that day became his devoted admirers and correspondents” (Masters 712). Poet Bliss Carman - Riley’s friend for over 20 years - expressed his admiration for Riley’s work in his 1925 essay, stating, “[His poems] are so masterfully done, that they sound like the unstudied utterances of every-day, bubbling with humor and warm with sentiment, and you never notice the vigorous and skilled craftsmanship which has been expended upon them” (13). Carman’s remark that Riley’s dialect was “unstudied” provides an indication that in the year 1925, formal philological study of written dialect, in order to determine dialectal authenticity, was in its early stages. Riley’s friend and editor of his letters, writer William Lyon Phelps, stated in 1930, “In his use of dialect, [Riley] was a master, and his remarks on dialect will interest all who believe in the accurate reproduction of speech. The three supreme specialists in dialect at the turn of the century were Riley, Joel Chandler Harris and Mark Twain” (qtd. in Riley, *Letters* 6). Edgar Lee Masters, in 1927, further supported Riley’s reproduction of Indiana Hoosier dialect as authentic by stating, “If a vernacular is to be reproduced, grammatical errors, and elisions must be reproduced; but more important still the ways of thinking and feeling of the particular people must be divined and portrayed. Riley did all of this” (708). Whether or not the dialect was formally authenticated was irrelevant not only to Indianans but also to literary figures. Riley’s British friend, Rudyard Kipling wrote to Riley in 1893 stating, “Fessler’s Bees’ was tee-totally new and I shook helplessly over it. I can hear that tale being slowly drawled by the teller” (qtd. in Riley, *Letters* 333). When writer Arthur Brisbane questioned Joel Chandler Harris about dialect poets, Harris responded, in an undated telegraph, with: “Under what flapping flag of freedom ever put it into your busy

head to ask me about dialect poets? I know of only three that will be popular next year – Burns, Riley, and Stanton. Now, I'll give you a pointer: why not offer a prize for the man who can graft asparagus on the artichoke so as to make it eatable at both ends?" (Harris, Julia 421-422n1). The number of positive responses to Riley's dialect poetry, such as Kipling's and Harris' light-hearted comments, boosted Riley's popularity; however, negative criticism of his poetry existed as well.

Some critics and peers regarded Riley's dialect poetry with mixed opinions. Indiana author James Farrell, who wrote favorably of Riley's poetry, claiming it contained "elements of a new expression, and of native humor," also criticized it when he wrote that Riley's work shared "something of the life and interests of the farmers and of small town life [...] but these are also usually stereotyped. They contain lines which are also fresh or perceptive, but as a whole, this dialect poetry is contrived and artificial" (Nolan, Gregory, and Farrell 93, 90). Critics tired of Riley's sentimentalism and his lack "of exploring localized places and persons as complex figures" within his poetry (Wolosky 131). Thomas Bailey Aldrich, in his June 4, 1900, letter to poet R.E. Lee Gibson, expressed his preference for Riley's Standard American English verse poem "The Flying Islands of the Night," as "an imaginative poem of singular beauty, and worth a thousand volumes of his dialect verse." (qtd. in Greenslet 210 – 211). As his letter continued, his disdain for the dialect movement in general becomes evident: "The English language is too rich and sacred a thing to be mutilated and vulgarized" (qtd. in Greenslet 211). Riley's "The Flying Islands of the Night," his play transformed into poetry, was generally panned by critics upon its release; Aldrich was among the few who preferred it above Riley's dialectal work. According to Riley biographer Elizabeth

Van Allen, the most severe of Riley's critics "expressed the opinion that all works in dialect constituted bad writing. Moreover, it was said that Riley's dialect writings only served to disguise the fact that he was no poet" (240).

The most damning and well-known public criticism of Riley's work was written by *San Francisco Examiner* contributor Ambrose Bierce in 1892. Bierce, the perpetually cynical satirist, not only wrote a scathing rant about Riley's work but about Oscar Wilde's as well.¹ Even though Bierce frowned upon Riley's dialectal ventures, it is important to note that outside satire, Bierce found little to support in literature. Indeed, Bierce condemned not only Riley's dialectal works but dialect as a literary device in general, stating, "The talk of ignorant persons misusing their own language has value and interest to nobody but other ignorant persons and, possibly, the philologist. Literature, however, is not intended for service in advancing the interests of philology" (174 – 75). Dialect poetry scholar Nadia Nurhusein refutes Bierce's stance by arguing:

Because standard written English does not correspond to the standard prestige dialect any more strongly than it does to nonstandard dialects, there's no reason why the way a "fellow *speaks*" should predict or determine the way he "might *write*." The two are unrelated, but the resemblance between "bad" writing and good transcriptions of "bad" speaking is so striking visually that the connection has become deeply entrenched. (81)

The entrenchment Nurhusein speaks of is evidenced by Bierce's criticism of Riley.

¹ Bierce vilified Oscar Wilde in his March 31, 1882 article in "The Wasp," name-calling Wilde, amongst other insults, as "intellectual jellyfish" and "gawky gowk."

Conversely, an area of Riley's work that received little negative criticism was his poetry reading performance. One can argue that Riley's work would not have reached its prominence without his reading performances, an arena where Riley was regarded as gifted. His readings of his works gained him popularity and book sales, and "the stage success he enjoyed in 1887 and 1888 in New York and Washington almost undeniably did usher in a new beginning for his career" (Bush 32). Listening to vernacular during his reading performances was much easier for audiences to absorb than reading his dialect on paper. Reading dialect can be taxing, especially for readers who are unfamiliar with how the particular dialect sounds. The literary hub during the late-1880s centered on the Boston, Massachusetts, area; therefore, a New England reader who spoke with a New England-based vernacular might find it challenging to read Riley's Hoosier dialect poetry. If Riley performed his dialect poetry for a New England audience, appreciation for his dialectal efforts would be more enjoyable as Riley made the translation from print to voice for the audience. I do question, however, whether or not Riley would have been as successful had there not been the platform of literary readings for a live audience during the last quarter of the nineteenth century. Indeed, would Mark Twain have been so fond of Riley's poetry without Riley's performances?

That Mark Twain was enamored of Riley's performances is seen in a letter from Twain dated February 2, 1891. Note that Twain's comments concentrate mainly on Riley's performances, not his dialect itself:

Dear Riley: It's a darling poem ["Honest Old Sam Hungerford"], and I thank you ever so much for it. But – when it comes to reciting it, I can't even remotely

approach you. You are the only man alive that can read your poems exactly right.
– There are poets who can't read their works worth shucks; and if they should offer to read their poems to me I should easily have the grit to say, "Oh, gimme the book and lemme show you *how!* – You just make me tired." But I should never say that to you; no, I take my hat off to you, my boy; you *do* know how.
(Riley, *Letters* 329-330)

This focus on Riley's performances indicates Twain may have been captivated by Riley due to his ability to engross a live audience. Harold Bush summarized Riley's theatrical talents: "Riley embodied more skillfully than virtually any other American platform personality precisely what Twain valued in such a performer" (41). According to Bush, what Twain valued the most in performance was the performer's ability to "'absorb his characters,' rather than merely to mimic them" (41). In Hamlin Garland's lecture for The American Academy of Arts and Letters, he also noted Riley's prowess of performance by stating that Riley "possessed notable power to charm and move an audience, and everywhere he spoke, he left a throng of friends" (3). Riley's dear friend, Joel Chandler Harris, wrote to his daughter of Riley's stage presence following Riley's visit with Harris:

Mr. Riley is a very fine actor and mimic. One minute he'd be taking the part of a six-year-old boy, declaring he was "the goodest boy in the world," and the next he'd be a very old man talking about another old man, and saying, "He's a-ag'in' – he's a-breakin'!" This sounds very silly on paper, but to hear your Unc. Jim say it, and see his actions and the movements of his face, was a spectacle as good as a show. (qtd. in Harris, Julia 425)

On the reading circuit, Riley dominated and often outshone his peers with his talents but his popularity wasn't solely due to his performances. The United States was seeing a change in society from an agrarian-based society to an industrial-based society, and this change may have contributed to Riley's career on different levels.

This societal change may have contributed to, and also detracted from, Riley's career. The United States began to evolve in industry, and with the division in lifestyles came the division in culture as the U.S. "became increasingly stratified into worlds of high art for the upper classes and low art for the masses" with Riley's dialectal poetry being forced into the low art category as his career matured (Van Allen 198). This change toward industrial lifestyles at the end of the 1800s made people nostalgic for previous times. Hearing Riley's dialect poetry readings heavily laden with imagery and language from pastoral living initially fed people the nostalgia they yearned for. Eventually, however, those familiar with agrarian lifestyles aged, and the next generation began to become interested in the higher arts. That next generation was further detached from the agrarian living of their ancestors and subsequently unable to identify with the characters in Riley's work. Thus, "his sentimentality and optimism were no longer in tune with public taste" (Robertson 14). The nostalgia that the first generation of Riley readers sought waned with the second generation of readers in the latter part of Riley's career (circa 1900) because agrarian lifestyles were foreign to those readers.

Riley's Hoosier dialect poem "My Philosophy" (1882, See Appendix) illustrates well the generational shift, when the pastoral flavor is still alive. The narrator expresses his life philosophy which, as Riley puts it, is: "Jest do your best, and praise er blame / That

followers that, counts jest the same.” (*Complete Works* 821). This philosophical concept is one that previous generations could identify with but that younger generations would struggle to grasp. Additionally, the uneducated narrator might be more readily accepted by a population which was not focused on education as a means to improving its lifestyle. The narrator begins the poem by establishing that he/she is not an educated person. Through the narrator’s dialect, e.g., “I aint, ner don’t p’tend to be, / Much posted on philosophy,” readers understand that this person is humble as well as uneducated, something that Riley’s early fans could identify with. Riley’s dialect succeeds in establishing that the narrator has experienced little schooling by his inclusion of grammatical errors in the narrator’s syntax (“[...] aint, ner don’t [...]”) as well as misspellings (“philosofy”). Readers also understand that the narrator speaks with a regional dialect, as seen in the word “ner” for “nor” and “p’tend” for “pretend.” However, it is also clear that the narrator has some degree of education, or at least a fair amount of life experience. This is evidenced in the final stanza as the narrator’s vocabulary is somewhat advanced despite the pronunciation (“doctern” for “doctrine”) and spelling (“contensions” for “contentions”) being nonstandard: “My doctern is to lay aside / Contensions, and be satisfied” (*Complete Works* 821).

There are two instances when Riley uses the word “great” in “My Philosophy.” In the first instance, the spelling is standard (“great”), and in the second instance, the spelling is nonstandard (“grate”). Since the spelling of “grate” carries a different meaning than “great,” when spelled “grate,” readers pause with the knowledge that the meaning of “grate” is something different than intended. If Riley was insistent upon altering the spelling to something nonstandard, a spelling that does not carry meaning should have

been applied. The poem "My Philosophy" focuses on a character content in his simple lifestyle. This theme reverberates throughout Riley's dialect poetry. With a knack for writing poetry centered on dialectal, often uneducated, characters, Riley did not meet the approval of all who read it; however, the lasting wholesomeness within Riley's works remains a cherished contribution to the American literary annals, especially within Riley's beloved Indiana.

Chapter Two

Dunbar's Dialectal Mask and its "Power to Structure a Political Response"

Paul Laurence Dunbar, an Ohioan born June 27, 1872, became an American poet noted for his mastery of Southeastern U.S. black dialect poetry. Although Dunbar was exposed to Southeastern U.S. black dialect while living in Ohio, it wasn't until adulthood when he traveled south and immersed himself in the vernacular he mastered in poetry. As I will show, and as Gavin Jones has noted, Dunbar was "a complex poet with many voices and many, frequently contradictory, points of view" (186) who saw his dialect poetry most often criticized for the poems' content, not the dialect.

The separation of poem content and poem dialect was not present in critical conversations that occurred during the end of the nineteenth century. Both aspects of poetry received identical criticism whether positive or negative; for example, if readers rejected the content, the dialect was rejected by default. Readers were captivated by the dialectal texts and voiced opinions about them; however, discussions of whether or not the dialect within those texts was authentic were scarce. As seen below, discussions on dialectal texts did not begin with the topic of dialect; they began with the discussion of content.

Reader opinions surrounding Dunbar's dialect poetry are messy and ambivalent. The complexity of Dunbar's work is such that what may appear to be characters that are sympathetic caricatures of black people may actually be ironic characters that late-nineteenth century readers, including critics, did not detect. Dunbar's poetry spanned race and, similar to Riley's work, societal class. As scholar Michael Cohen noted, "Neither fully white nor black, aesthetic and yet authentic as well, Dunbar's dialect poems circulated as the fantasy of difference, seeming to come from the illiterate and inarticulate folk, but also available to literate and articulate readers" (252). Reasoning behind the polar criticism is related to Dunbar's "linguistic complexity of [his] dialect poetry, and the subtle act of masking in his nondialect poetry" (Jones 202). Often, readers interpreted Dunbar's dialect poetry as minstrelsy which reinforced sympathetic stereotypical black characters; however, Dunbar's dialect, if read properly, reveals irony and mocking of his white readers' – particularly Southern white readers' – preference for marginalized slanted black characters.

Stereotypical black characters as sympathizers for antebellum days were widely included in postbellum American literature such as Thomas Nelson Page's *In Ole Virginia* (1887). These characters, typically former slaves, yearned for a return to their pre-Civil War Southern lifestyle and never mentioned the horrors of slavery. Readers embraced this approach to literature, as evidenced in part by the popularity of the Plantation fiction at the end of the nineteenth century. In Dunbar's dialectal poetry, however, what may appear to be stereotypical characters are actually complex. Both the characters' nature and their dialect fooled white readers into accepting the poems as they appear, at face value. As Dunbar biographer Peter Revell explains, "the

characteristic device of these poems [...] is to speak in the words of the black man, [but] the point of view expressed is always that of the white Southerner, whose notion of the superiority of the old regime in the South is thereby ‘validated’” (79). Since the white readers and critics thought their beliefs were validated in the content of Dunbar’s poetry, they did not speak out against the dialect. However, Dunbar did receive a backlash from some African American readers who also failed to recognize that Dunbar had applied the mask to his characters.

A notable African American contemporary of Dunbar, James Weldon Johnson, was “critical of Dunbar’s dialect verse” for representing black people in marginalized stereotypical fashion which, as scholar Shira Wolosky claimed, “signaled cultural deprivation” (155). As Gavin Jones pointed out, Johnson was chief in the belief that “Dunbar inevitably conformed to the minstrel and plantation traditions that defined white depictions of black speech” (183). According to Jones, Johnson “is largely responsible for this shift in critical attitude, away from the opinion – popular in black magazines at the turn of the century – that Dunbar had truthfully captured black dialect” (183). Since lampooning black speech is at the heart of minstrelsy, Johnson’s criticism of Dunbar’s dialect poetry discredited not only the poetry’s content but the dialect expressing that content.

Contemporary scholar Michael Cohen defends Dunbar against critics who claimed his work was minstrelsy stating, “[M]instrelsy was merely one frame of reference for readers at the time, and culturally-prominent readers specifically distinguished ‘authentic’ dialect poems like Dunbar’s from the songs of the minstrel stage” (248). As a means to dispel the idea that Dunbar’s dialect poetry was minstrelsy,

“writers, readers, and critics of dialect poetry described dialect poems as though they were like ballads and spirituals [... which] authenticated dialect poems as the expressions of racialized folk groups, no matter who actually wrote the poems” (248). Associating dialect poetry, like Dunbar’s popular “Little Brown Baby” (1899), with ballads and spirituals separated his work from derogatory minstrel writings and also supported the argument that Dunbar’s dialect was authentic.

One critic who believed in the authenticity of Dunbar’s dialect poetry received criticism for not supporting Dunbar’s Standard American English poetry as well. Renowned literary critic William Dean Howells’ commentary on Dunbar has received nearly as much criticism as Dunbar’s work itself.

Most scholarship on the topic of Dunbar and Howells centers on the negative aspects of Howells’ June 1896 review of Dunbar’s *Majors and Minors* in *Harper’s Weekly*. The argument that Howells hindered Dunbar’s career by favorably endorsing Dunbar’s dialectical work above his Standard American English work overshadows the opportunity Howells gave to Dunbar through his criticism. In 1896, Howells’ review of *Majors and Minors* occurred during a time in America when literary accomplishments of black writers were rarely acknowledged. James Stronks accurately summarized the positive significance of Howells’ review:

Howells’ widely-read *Harper’s Weekly* review of *Majors and Minors* in 1896, re-worked into the much quoted introduction to *Lyrics of Lowly Life*, had linked his name with Dunbar’s from the start. Possibly the greatest single event in American Negro literature to this day, that perceptive and large-minded criticism by the country’s chief man of letters had given a priceless boost to the sorrowfully

short but significant career of Paul Dunbar, whose black skin and idiom made him unique among the other talented, hungry young authors whom Howells championed and befriended over the decades. (108)

Viewing Howells' favor of Dunbar provides a more complete picture of the relations between the two men. In an article Howells wrote for *The North American Review* in 1889, he discussed then-current trends in poetry as well as noteworthy poets as the twentieth century approached. Howells included Dunbar in that list of noteworthy poets stating, "It is a proof of the love of poetry in a time and country apparently so prosaic as ours that [Dunbar] has quickly made himself widely known, and has found not only favor but affection. It is not as a phenomenon that he has done this [...] it is as something far more positive, it is as an absolute poet" (*New Poetry* 590). Howells, in his assessment, did not criticize any one element of Dunbar's poetry over another element, and he never mentioned minstrelsy in conjunction with Dunbar's dialectal work. He considered Dunbar "an absolute poet," and reviewed his texts as whole, not divided.

Periodical reviews of Dunbar's poetry, while few in number, lauded his poetry. A 1914 *New York Times* review hailed Dunbar's collected works and offered a compelling comparison to Riley: "What Whitcomb Riley has done for Hoosier folk in Hoosier dialect, Dunbar has done for his negro fellows in their quaint negro English. [...] Unquestionably it is in his dialect work, his character studies and songs of his own people, that he is most significantly himself. [...] I may refer the reader to such masterpieces in their kind as 'A Cabin Tale' and 'An Ante-Bellum Sermon'" (LeGallienne BR17). In a 1904 *Critic* article, Dunbar's poetry is considered "very good, better than any negro dialect verse yet written, with the single exception of the songs of Joel Chandler Harris. Mr. Dunbar's

work is of especial value to his race because it has been voiced both in prose and verse” (Torrence 151). Lastly, renowned African American author Benjamin Brawley placed Dunbar alongside Charles Chesnutt and W.E.B. DuBois in his 1916 *Dial* essay, “The Negro in American Fiction,” as he said that collectively, their texts “have risen above the crowd,” and “Mr. Dunbar, of course, was better in poetry than in prose” (449).

Dunbar’s dialect poetry captured the daily lives of people in the black community, and even though some topics could be considered mundane – returning from a Kentucky visit in “After a Visit” (1896), for example – Dunbar’s storytelling talent and rich dialect engrossed readers. It is in this subgenre of the dialect poem that Dunbar’s work resembles Riley’s dialectal nostalgia for the simple times and simple lives that were not present during the writer’s life.

Additionally, Riley and Dunbar, along with Charles W. Chesnutt and Joel Chandler Harris, share a similar vision of creating morally upright dialectal characters. Dialectal characters are cast as wise, mannerly, and ethically upstanding individuals. They impart their wisdom to other characters as well as to readers of the texts. The dialect of Dunbar’s characters is not used as a measure of intellect or personal worth, unlike the dialectal characters of Page. This type of upstanding dialectal character is exemplified in Dunbar’s “The Spellin’-Bee.”

In “The Spellin’-Bee” (1895, See Appendix), Dunbar masterfully relates a story of small-town happenings without mention of racial communities. As Revell observed, “In the best of [Dunbar’s] dialect poems the narrators speak for themselves, frequently with no reference to their relationship with the white community” (79). The narrator of “The Spellin’-Bee” provides that type of narration. At first glance, some of the characters in

“The Spellin’-Bee” could be considered stereotypes (a dishonest lawyer, for example); however, upon deeper reading, it becomes clear that the characters needed to be identifiable to audiences and readers in order for Dunbar’s humor to be conveyed. Even in the late 1800s, one-liner jokes were present in everyday culture, and Dunbar applied that brand of humor throughout this community-centered poem.

Dunbar weaves a tale of a spelling bee which seemingly the entire town attends, and the spelling bee is open to anyone desiring to participate. Through the course of the poem, readers learn about the town’s residents and their characteristics through the words they spell. Irony abounds throughout the spelling bee audience when “folks ’u’d miss the very word that seemed to fit their cases” (*Majors* 99). For example, a long-winded pastor misspells “condensation,” a flirtatious gal misspells “coquettin’,” and a lawyer misspells “honest” (*Majors* 100). Dunbar creates a sense of community and normalcy amongst the townspeople in this homey poem of rural life and makes no mention of race within the poem. His ending, while sentimental, leaves readers feeling that they may believe in uplifting endings in life. That notion, while aimed at black readers, is something all people can understand. Dunbar excelled in creating a sense of harmony and mutual understanding that reached readers regardless of race. Because there were no specific references to race, readers were able to envisage themselves in the setting of the poem even if Dunbar implicitly set the poem in the black community. The neutral tone of the poem’s content was accepted by readers who also accepted the poem’s dialectal narrator. With a spelling bee as a hub for a community gathering and a “little blue-backed spellun’ book with fancy scarlet trimmin’” (a dictionary) as first prize

for the winning speller, Dunbar indirectly encourages literacy and education (both previously forbidden) to the black race (*Majors* 98).

Dunbar's dialect within the poem is neither too complicated nor unbalanced orthographically. Its readability is steady throughout without interruption of the reading flow. The narrator of "The Spellin'-Bee," a teenage boy, is one of the final contestants in the spelling bee. He is pitted against a teenage girl he admires and deliberately misspells a word in order that she win the contest. Since the poem's narrator is literate and educated, as evidenced by his ability to out-spell most of the townspeople, Dunbar's dialectal portrayal of the narrator matches the narrator's intellect. The dialect in "The Spellin'-Bee" conveys intelligence as well as regional vernacular with its few orthographical variants:

So when they giv' the next word out – I had n't orter tell it,
But then 'twas all fur Nettie's sake – I missed so's she could spell it.
She spelt the word, then looked at me so lovin'-like an' mello',
I tell you't sent a hundred pins a shootin' through a fello'. (*Majors* 100)

Written during the same timeframe and just as smoothly as "The Spellin'-Bee," Dunbar's poem "An Ante-Bellum Sermon" (1895, See Appendix) demonstrates Dunbar's writing confidence by addressing the controversial topic of slavery. As Shira Wolosky explains, "Dunbar's plantation poems in particular have disturbed readers, who fear they betray black self-representation in complicity with white versions of it" (155); however, what these readers may fail to notice within the poetry is Dunbar's irony and mockery of the Southern white communal belief through his highly sophisticated dialectal structure with narrators wearing the mask. The narrator, a preacher addressing

a slave congregation, tells the biblical story of how God, through Moses, freed the Israelites from Egypt. Throughout the poem, insightful readers can see how Dunbar parallels the events of Moses and Pharaoh with slavery, despite several times in the poem the narrator's telling the congregation: "Dat I'm still a-preachin' ancient, / I ain't talkin' 'bout to-day" (*Majors* 103). Dunbar refers to slavery throughout the poem to imply that the narrator is not simply talking about "ancient" times but is also referring to "to-day." Dunbar refers to slaves harvesting crops by describing how Pharaoh kept the Israelites "Down dah wukin' in his co'n" (*Majors* 102) and makes a powerful statement in the fourth stanza:

An' yo' enemies may 'sail you
In de back an' in de front;
But de Lawd is all aroun' you,
Fu' to ba' de battle's brunt.
Dey kin fo'ge yo' chains an' shackles
F'om de mountains to de sea;
But de Lawd will sen' some Moses
Fu' to set his chillun free. (*Majors* 103)

This covert reference to American slavery is quickly footnoted by the preacher's claim that he's referring to ancient days instead of the poem's setting of antebellum times. Additionally, Dunbar positions this stanza immediately following a stanza where the preacher refers to the biblical events of Pharaoh's fall. This linking of stanzas allows the narrator to discuss biblical events while in tandem referring to antebellum events. To

reiterate his point that he's not discussing antebellum times, the preacher, in the sixth and seventh stanzas, states:

Now don't run an' tell yo' mastahs
Dat I'se preachin' discontent.
'Cause I isn't; I'se a-judgin'
Bible people by deir ac's;
I'se a-givin' you de Scriptuah,
I'se a-handin' you de fac's. (*Majors* 103)

A final third time the pastor stops his sermon and declares that he is not talking about antebellum times: "But I think it would be bettah / Ef I'd pause agin to say, / Dat I'm talkin' 'bout ouah freedom / In a Bibleistic way" (*Majors* 104). In the poem's final stanza, the narrator masks, "We will praise de gracious Mastah / Dat has gin us liberty" (*Majors* 105). This poem exemplifies the mocking of the white readership through masterful manipulation of truth and mask. As Gavin Jones asserts, "Dunbar appreciated dialect not for its superficial 'realism' but for its power to structure a political response to larger social, cultural and racial issues" (207), and this is evidenced in "An Ante-Bellum Sermon." Dunbar's political message in the poem was present, but he provided himself a defensive argument against any reader who was unhappy and claimed that the poem's protagonist was a rebellious preacher speaking clandestinely to a slave congregation.

Dunbar's 1903 "To the Eastern Shore" (See Appendix), although written eight years after "The Spellin'-Bee" and "An Ante-Bellum Sermon," carries the thematic feel of a poem written when dialectal texts were becoming popular in the 1880s. In "To the

Eastern Shore,” Dunbar’s narrator is a former slave seemingly pining for antebellum times. Appropriately, Dunbar constructs the narrator’s dialect as someone illiterate and uneducated, and he effectively conveys the narrator’s lack of education through his dialectal speech. While “The Spellin’-Bee” contains dialect with minimal orthographical variants, the orthographical variation in “To the Eastern Shore” is significantly greater. Dunbar’s orthography in “To the Eastern Shore” is so altered that it leads to question whether or not it is exaggerated for the sake of parodying the idea of former slave sentimentality.

Read on a superficial level, “To the Eastern Shore” appears to contain the former slave sentimentality found in Plantation fiction such as Page’s *In Ole Virginia*. However, an in-depth reading of “To the Eastern Shore” shows that the mask is identifiable with the black narrator. This narrator is used as a vehicle by Dunbar to mask white community lines of thinking about blacks. Seen in this way, “Dunbar’s dialect [...] is a crucial means of emphasizing the artificiality of plantation nostalgia,” as Jones has pointed out (195).

A first reading of the poem suggests that the narrator’s thoughts are in disagreement with postbellum blacks’ supposed desire to return to the antebellum world of slavery. This seems to be evident in the final lines of the poem: “W’ile my little cabin beckons, / dough his mouf is closed an’ dumb, / I’s a-comin, an’ my hea’t begins to sing” (*Lyrics of Love* 114). Further reading, however, allows one to see that the narrator is mocking beliefs of the white community about former slaves’ views, which were propagandized throughout the Eastern United States during that period. In these final lines of the poem, Dunbar’s irony is evidenced in the line “his mouf is closed an’ dumb”

which can be interpreted as a reference to former slaveholders' loss of voice and power with the end of slavery. On a surface level, Dunbar's former slave narrator appears to be a stereotype with his illiterate dialect and yearning for antebellum days, but by ending the poem with the narrator revealing that he isn't really longing for plantation days, Dunbar dismisses the idea of nostalgia through cleverly controlled dialect and the mask: "dough his mouf is closed an' dumb."

As mentioned above, the orthography of the dialect in "To the Eastern Shore" is inconsistent and difficult to decipher throughout the poem. In particular, Dunbar spells "where" as "whaih": "**Whaih** de Chesapeake goes" (*Lyrics of Love* 112). As written, "whaih" leads readers to stumble over the "-ih" ending of the word. In Standard American English, the "-ih" ending is rarely seen, and this further confuses readers as they decipher the word "whaih." Dunbar uses a variant "waih" spelling when writing "wear": "F'om de life dat's des' **a-waihin'** you erway" (*Lyrics of Love* 113). This variant is also seen in his poem "Li'l' Gal" (1903): "'cause de clo'es he **waihs** is fine" (*Lyrics of Love* 126). In Dunbar's "Little Brown Baby" (1899) another variant for "where" is presented with "whah": "**Whah** did you git dem teef? My, / you's a scamp! / **Whah** did dat dimple come f'om / in yo' chin" (*Lyrics of the Hearthside* 139). Dunbar seems to have struggled with the best dialectal spelling for "where." Additionally, Dunbar applies the same ending ("-ih") to "fair" which produces "faih," and that also confuses readers. The "-ah" ending commonly seen throughout Dunbar's dialect poetry for vernacular words ending with the "-ah" sound (nevah, bettah, silvah, neah, weathah) would have better served his use of "where," "wear" and "fair."

Dunbar's creation of this challenging dialect in "To the Eastern Shore" was a deliberate attempt to convey illiteracy of his narrator to readers and not an indication of Dunbar's inability to create authentic dialectal poetry. The challenging dialect in "To the Eastern Shore" contrasts the easier dialect of "The Spellin'-Bee." The narrator in "The Spellin'-Bee" is educated and has distanced himself from the topic of slavery, instead focusing on personal enrichment in society. Conversely, the narrator in "To the Eastern Shore" is uneducated and seems to be longing for the former "comfort" of slavery.

By 1895, when "To the Eastern Shore" was written, a generation of black people who had never been enslaved were maturing in adulthood, and Dunbar implicitly addressed this generation through masked dialect. Dunbar implied that yearning for the days of slavery was a sign of ignorance and that instead former slaves, indeed all black people, should concentrate on the future and strive to improve themselves through education and racial uplift.

White readers held polar interpretations of Dunbar's poetry. The first interpretation found Dunbar's work sympathetic to the antebellum era while the second saw the truth behind Dunbar's dialectal mask. These two types of whites were exemplified in the husband and wife characters of Charles Chesnut's dialect short stories. As the couple interacted with a dialectal former slave narrator named Julius, the husband John failed to see the significance of Julius' stories which tacitly addressed the horrors of slavery, while his wife Annie easily identified Julius' covert intentions. Although Annie was written as a progressive late-nineteenth century white person, in reality most white people were unable to view a text through the lens of a different race,

and Dunbar's encouragement of the black race to reach for advancement went chiefly unnoticed.

Criticism of Dunbar, in general, does not address the issue of the authenticity of Dunbar's dialect, and most scholarship and turn-of-the-century reviews are centered on the content of Dunbar's dialectal texts. Discussions either strongly support Dunbar for being a forerunner of black American literary authors or strongly reject Dunbar's dialectal texts as further marginalizing the postbellum black population. Therefore, if Dunbar's content and agenda are supported, his dialect is as well, and if Dunbar's content and agenda are rejected, his dialect is as well. Typically, as seen above, Dunbar's content and dialect usage are considered inseparable.

Dunbar's ability to mask his poetry helped develop a readership within the white-dominated literary field of the late nineteenth century. Had his poetry been explicit in divulging hardships suffered by the Southern black population, his poetry would have been dismissed by the general public as well as by his literary peers. His shrewd writing, moreover, exposed readers to complex issues and difficulties of black people, most often without their conscious awareness of such an exposure. Dunbar's dialect poetry was often homey and it appealed to readers' sense of community and nature, but his complex masked dialect allowed white readers to recognize and identify with his stories, despite the stories' settings in the black community. Only the keenest reader understood the subversive anti-slavery and racial uplift messages behind the mask Dunbar's dialect poems.

Chapter Three

Natural but Neutral: The Impartiality of Harris' Uncle Remus

Joel Chandler Harris (1848 – 1908) was born and reared in Eatonton, Georgia. At the age of 14, he began his journalism career as a printer's apprentice at the Turnwold Plantation, nine miles from Eatonton in Putnam County, Georgia. Harris apprenticed at Turnwold from 1862 – 1866 as a typesetter for *Countryman*, the weekly newspaper produced by the plantation's owner, Joseph Addison Turner. It was during his time spent at Turnwold that Harris listened to slaves tell many of the folktales which would become the Uncle Remus tales. Harris' journalism career at the Atlanta-based newspaper, *The Constitution*, began in 1876, and the newspaper published the first Uncle Remus folklore story, "The Story of Mr. Rabbit and Mr. Fox as Told by Uncle Remus," on July 20, 1879. Harris worked 24 years at *The Constitution* serving as a journalist and editor. The first collection of Uncle Remus tales, *Uncle Remus: His Songs and His Sayings*, was published in late 1880.

Harris gained popularity through his Uncle Remus tales and while grateful for the success, he did not anticipate the attention given to his folklore tales; nor did he initially comprehend the historical importance of documenting the black oral stories of the antebellum era. Included in Harris' biography, written by his daughter in-law Julia Collier

Harris, is a letter to an unnamed Englishman dated June 28, 1883. In that letter, Harris explained his purpose in writing the Uncle Remus tales:

The Remus legends, it should be said here, were not written with an eye to their importance as folk-lore stories. I had no more conception of that than the man in the moon. The first one was written out almost by accident, and as a study in dialect. [...] I took the pains to verify every story anew, and, out of a variety of versions, to select the version that seemed to be most characteristic of the negro: so that it may be said that each legend comes fresh and direct from the negroes. My sole purpose in this was to preserve the stories dear to Southern children in the dialect of the cotton plantations. (qtd. in Harris, Julia 155-56)

Harris prioritized authenticity of content and dialect in his reproduction of Southern folklore and viewed himself as a type of amanuensis of the folktales. His thoroughness in researching the folktales for accuracy prior to transcribing them is indicative of his concern for preserving Southern culture. His verification process served as a means to capture the folktales in their truest Southern rendition so Harris could uphold the version common to the region. Harris' painstaking research of and detailed adherence to the folktales' variants and dialect paid off, as seen by the positive reception *Uncle Remus: His Songs and His Sayings* received. Had Harris offhandedly researched and written the folktales, Southern readers would have rejected the collection as being an insincere attempt to capture Southern culture. By remaining true to the tales and dialect "of the cotton plantations" and not focusing on ethnological origins, Harris introduced readers to a previously unrecorded aspect of Southern culture.

As Harris biographer Paul Cousins confirmed, Harris made it clear that “ethnological considerations had formed no part of the undertaking and that whatever the origin or allegorical interpretations of the legends might be, he had primarily intended them to be characteristic of the old-time Negro” (113). Harris was driven to provide written versions of the black oral stories regardless of their metaphorical meanings. Noted Southern Literature expert and founder of the *Southern Literary Series* and the *Southern Literary Journal*, Louis Rubin explained the metaphorical implications within the folklore: “The hero commonly is Brer Rabbit, and it should be obvious that not only are the Uncle Remus stories set back in the days when the animals could talk, but also that the animals are not really animals at all, but people. [...] What I am suggesting is that Brer Rabbit, hero of the Uncle Remus stories, was very much in the situation of the black man in the South” (1018). Had Harris been a proponent of the Old South regime, he would not have endeavored to catalog the black oral history of the South with its allegorical messages. Harris understood the allegorical interpretations of the folklore he was writing, as suggested in his June 9, 1883 letter (unsent) to Laurence Goome, editor of the *Folk-Lore Journal* in London. In this letter, Harris reiterates his purpose in writing the folk stories. His tendency toward self-effacement is evident as he opens with an unnecessary remark of his perceived writing inadequacy:

It is a misfortune, perhaps, from an English point of view, that the stories in that volume are rendered in the American negro dialect, but it was my desire to preserve the stories as far as I might be able, in the form in which I heard them, and to preserve also if possible, the quaint humor of the negro. It is his humor that gives the collection its popularity in the United States, but I think you will find

the stories more important than humorous should you take the trouble to examine them. (qtd. in Harris, Julia 157)

Uncle Remus: His Songs and His Sayings was successfully marketed as humor; however, as Harris indicated in his letter, the Uncle Remus stories have deeper, significant meanings (as mentioned by Rubin) which are veiled in humor. William Baskervill, Vanderbilt University English professor and early civil rights activist, also classified Harris as a humorist. He further elaborated by stating that Harris' humor prevented him from being classified as a realist: "This school of humorists are not realists at all in the modern sense; for nothing is farther from their writings than sadness, morbidness, and pessimism. Naturalism is the term by which their literary method may best be characterized. They look frankly and hearken attentively" (3-4). As a Southerner, Baskervill understood that Harris' writings were not an attempt to realistically glorify the bygone era of the Old South but were an attempt to share Southern black oral culture.

Although Baskervill used the term "naturalism" to describe Harris, his use does not align with the literary naturalism movement which began in the late 1800s. English professor and naturalism scholar Donna Campbell described the characteristics of naturalism in her 2011 article "American Literary Naturalism: Critical Perspectives." Those characteristics include: "settings of urban poverty or an inhospitable wilderness, an interest in heredity and environment, [and] a deterministic philosophy" (501). When Baskervill used a variant of "natural" to describe Harris' writing, he was referring to Harris' characters who exhibit naturalness of mannerisms, behaviors, and speech commonly found in people living in the Southern United States. Therefore, Baskervill's

variation of the term “naturalism” actually suits Harris’ writing, as he faithfully constructed Uncle Remus with familiar mannerisms and authentic dialect being spoken in a natural state. Harris’ close friend James Whitcomb Riley wrote to Harris on September 18, 1888 and made observations about his work similar to Baskervill’s: “Your work is Nature’s – exactingly honest – purely human – wholly artless” (*Letters* 84). Uncle Remus was chief in Harris’ attempt to accurately represent Southern black people whom he personally knew while apprenticing at Turnwold, with their high moral character and spoken vernacular.

The description of Uncle Remus in Baskervill’s 1896 essay “Joel Chandler Harris” demonstrates how likable Harris’ folklore narrator is:

Before the war Uncle Remus had always exercised authority of his fellow-servants. He had been the captain of the corn pile, the stoutest at the log rolling, the swiftest with the hoe, the neatest with the plow, the leader of the plantation hands. Now he is an old man whose tall figure and venerable appearance are picturesque in the extreme, but he moves and speaks with the vigor of perennial youth. (28)

Although Baskervill’s description of Remus was created from a white perspective, the admirable traits in the character of Harris’ Remus that Baskervill highlights resonate across races. White readers couldn’t identify with Remus’ life experiences, but his charm and dialect wooed them into being comfortable with him and his tales despite the absence of any sympathetic attitudes toward the antebellum days on his part. Harris created Remus to be wistful at times but not sympathetic toward slavery. This is

evidenced in the tale “Mr. Rabbit Nibbles Up the Butter.” Remus narrated the tale, and then the following exchange with the young boy occurred:

“But, Uncle Remus, Brother Possum didn’t steal the butter after all,” said the little boy, who was not at all satisfied with such summary injustice.

“Dat w’at make I say w’at I duz, honey. In dis worril, lots er fokes is gotter suffer fer udder fokes sins. Look like hit’s mighty onwrong; but hit’s des dat away.

Tribbalashun seem like she’s a waitin’ roun’ de cornder fer ter ketch one en all un us, honey.” (Harris, *Uncle* 86)

Noted African American literature scholar Darwin Turner echoed that Harris created Uncle Remus as a whole person and not a one dimensional figure: “More fully delineated than any other character in Harris's works, Uncle Remus transcends the stereotype of the ‘old-time darky’” (29).

Part of the acceptance of Remus by both black and white readers has to do with his being a morally conscious character. Although Remus doesn’t propagate the Old South the way Thomas Nelson Page’s Sam in *Marse Chan* does, Remus’ upstanding persona makes him one that readers admire. In “A Story About the Little Rabbits,” for example, Uncle Remus discusses proper behavior of children:

“Fine um whar you will en w’en you may,” remarked Uncle Remus with emphasis, “good chilluns allers gits tuck keer on. Dar wuz Brer Rabbit’s chilluns; dey minded der daddy en mammy fum day’s een’ ter day’s een’. W’en ole man Rabbit say ‘scoot,’ dey scooted, en w’en ole Miss Rabbit say ‘scat,’ dey scatted.

Dey did dat. En dey kep der cloze clean, en dey ain't had no smut on der nose nudder.” (Harris, *Uncle* 107)

Although this trait could be considered a mask to appeal to the white readership, more plausible is the likelihood that Harris constructed Remus as such in order to encourage goodwill amongst all people regardless of race. A second incident of Remus encouraging upright behavior occurs in “The Fate of Mr. Jack Sparrow.” Here, Uncle Remus discusses the pitfalls of tattling on others: “‘Lemme tell you dis,’ said the old man, laying down the section of horse-collar he had been plaiting, and looking hard at the little boy – ‘lemme tell you dis – der ain’t no way fer ter make tattlers en tail-b’arers turn out good. No, dey ain’t. I bin mixin’ up wid fokes now gwine on eighty year, en I ain’t seed no tattler come ter no good een’. Dat I ain’t” (Harris, *Uncle* 93).

Harris didn’t need a controversial narrator to distract readers from the folklore within the story; therefore, Remus was created as benign and natural. And although Harris didn’t deliberately construct Remus as an antebellum-era sympathizer, a point that Rubin makes clear, Harris’ “stories played a leading role in casting a golden aura over the earlier, agrarian South” whether he intended to or not (qtd. in Cousins ix). Harris didn’t aim to distort the image of Southern living, but the fact that the Uncle Remus tales were authentic folktales told with authentic dialect caused readers to perceive Harris’ Uncle Remus character as authentic and uncritical of the Old South’s political position. Readers were unable to separate the fictional narrator from the authentic folktales and dialect. The impression gleaned from the collection of stories was: if the stories came directly from the Southern plantations and if the dialect was identifiable as authentically Southern, then people who are characteristic of Remus

must also exist in that setting and feel neutral toward the Old South, as he seems to be. Without any bitterness cast into Remus' character, the perception that Harris fostered through him was a lack of resentment. If Harris had situated him within a white-race perspective, Remus would have been resentful toward the North for the Civil War. On the other hand, had Harris situated Remus within an authentic black lens, he would have been resentful toward the South for slavery. Therefore, while Remus can be considered to exhibit natural characteristics in his mannerisms and dialect, the notion that Remus reflected Southern opinion, black or white, falls short. He was neutral.

The dialect Uncle Remus spoke hails from middle Georgia, Putnam County, close to where Harris was raised. An extensive study of Harris' dialect was completed by dialectician Sumner Ives in 1954, and he summarized his findings as follows:

[T]here is enough agreement between the representation and the evidence from actual speech to show that Harris has developed his literary dialect from genuine materials. [... T]he development of Uncle Remus as a fictional character and the use of Negro speech as a literary medium are on equivalent levels of reliability. Both are products of Harris's own genius, but both are created from authentic raw materials. Such slight exaggerations as might be discovered are in the spirit and practice of the dialect and do not shadow its authenticity. Thus Harris has given us literature not life, but literature which is so infused with life that its truth is apparent, a truth even more vivid because it is artistic truth – for Harris was an artist first and a historian only second. (7)

Ives, as Baskervill and Riley had observed in the late-1800s, supported the idea that Harris' literature was naturalistic not realistic. The main components found within *Uncle*

Remus: His Songs and His Sayings – the folklore, the dialect and the character Uncle Remus – are amalgamations of real world elements and Harris’ creativity.

Harris’ literary peers identified his genius in dialect writing and complimented him often; they also pressed him to join them on a reading tour. One close friend of Harris’ was James Whitcomb Riley. The two authors had a strong friendship for decades, wrote each other frequently and visited one another as time permitted. They admired each other’s work and expressed so in their correspondence. The salutation in Riley’s letters to Harris progressed from a formal “Dear Mr. Harris” in 1881 to “Dear Uncle Remus” in 1902 and “Dear friend” in 1904 (*Letters*). Fellow journalist, H.E. Harman, who spent time with the two dialect writers during a 1902 excursion near Atlanta admired the relationship between the two writers:

For two weeks these rare characters loafed about the broad verandas of the hotel, rarely ever being separated, and only occasionally having with them a few select friends as guests of their story-telling bees. Riley would tell one of his best ones and hold his sides in laughter as he watched the effect of the story on “Uncle Remus.” Then “Uncle Joe,” as we called him in those golden days when he was in his prime, would bat his eye a few times, the lips would curl in a suppressed laugh, and he would put over at Riley a story which would make a stoic laugh. In all my experience I never saw such comradeship between two men. Each seemed absolutely happy in the company of the other. (qtd. in Julia Harris 427)

A mutual respect for one another’s dialectal work was at the heart of their relationship. Riley wrote to Harris on September 14, 1881: “I like dialect when managed

as you do it, - voiced by true character and genuine nature. The touch of the master is in all you do – in verse as in prose” (*Letters* 34). As seen in Riley’s letter to Harris dated August 9, 1883, he appreciated when an author was absorbed by the character: “I like all you have written, because in it you make your characters speak – until there seems no artist anywhere” (*Letters* 47). In this respect, Riley is similar to Twain who paid like compliments to Riley for his ability to embody dialect characters.

Mark Twain also admired Harris’ dialectal work. As Albert Bigelow Paine, editor of *Mark Twain’s Letters*, noted: “The Uncle Remus tales of Joel Chandler Harris gave Mark Twain great pleasure. He frequently read them aloud, not only at home but in public” (*Twain’s Letters* 401). Publicly reading the works of other writers was not uncommon at the century’s turn, and Twain’s excitement about reading Harris’ work was evident in a letter to William Dean Howells dated February 27, 1881: “I read in Twichell’s chapel Friday night and had a most rattling high time – but the thing that went best of all was Uncle Remus’s Tar Baby” (*Mark Twain’s Letters*, 395).

Twain lauded Harris’ talent for dialect in 1883’s *Life on the Mississippi* where he also made note of Harris’ diffidence: “[I]t turned out that [Harris] had never read aloud to people, and was too shy to venture the attempt now. Mr. Cable and I read from books of ours, to show him what an easy trick it was; but his immortal shyness was proof against even this sagacious strategy; so we had to read about Brer Rabbit ourselves. Mr. Harris ought to be able to read the negro dialect better than anybody else, for in the matter of writing it he is the only master the country has produced” (423).

In a letter dated August 10, 1881, Twain clarified to Harris that his admiration of Harris' work is not because of the folklore story meshed with the dialect but because the character Uncle Remus is meritorious beyond the folklore:

You can argue *yourself* into the delusion that the principle of life is in the stories themselves and not in their setting; but you will save labor by stopping with that solitary convert, for he is the only intelligent one you will bag. In reality the stories are only alligator pears – one merely eats them for the sake of the salad-dressing. Uncle Remus is most deftly drawn, and is a lovable and delightful creation; he, and the little boy, and their relations with each other, are high and fine literature, and worthy to live, for their own sakes; and certainly the stories are not to be credited with them. (*Mark Twain's Letters* 401-02)

Twain attempted to coerce Harris into touring with him and Riley. In early spring 1882, Reverend Joseph Twichell, Twain's closest friend, met with Harris in an attempt to convince Harris to join Twain on tour. Paine explained the outcome of that meeting in *Mark Twain's Letters*: "Twichell, during a trip South about this time, had called on Harris with some sort of proposition or suggestion from Clemens that Harris appear with him in public, and tell or read, the Remus stories from the platform. [... T]he word which Twichell brought home evidently did not encourage the platform idea" (416-17).

In the late-1800s, Twain was not alone in being rejected by Harris for a reading tour. Southern plantation-fiction author, Thomas Nelson Page, was also rejected by Harris as a reading tour partner. Page's appreciation for Harris' work was apparent in his essay "Immortal Uncle Remus" (originally published in *The Book Buyer* in December 1895) where he wrote of Harris' talent for dialectal writing: "No man who has ever

written has known one-tenth part about the negro that Mr. Harris knows, and for those who hereafter shall wish to find not merely the words, but the real language of the negro of that section, and the habits and mind of all American negroes of the old time, his works will prove the best thesaurus.” (56).

Renowned lecture manager Major James Pond suffered two reading tour proposal rejections by Harris. Pond’s first rejection was in 1885, but he wasn’t dissuaded, and as Harris’ daughter in-law noted: “Major Pond later made a second proposal, telegraphing an offer of \$10,000, if father would consent to read with James Whitcomb Riley and Mark Twain. On receipt of the offer, father remarked to a friend, ‘I would not put on a dress-suit every night in the winter for \$10,000, much less go on a stage and make a fool of myself’” (qtd. in Harris, Julia 214 n1). Harris’ diffidence prevented him from touring, not only with Twain but with anyone. The public would never hear the writer perform the folklore that brought him so much success.

The lack of a reading tour did not hinder Harris’ success; however, other literary figures were quick to offer praise to Harris upon his release of his Uncle Remus collection at the close of 1880. Author and literary editor of the *Evening Post*, James Wood Davidson, wrote Harris on December 14, 1880, regarding the Uncle Remus tales: “It is the only true negro dialect I ever saw printed. It marks an ear in its line--the first successful attempt to write what the negro has actually said, and in his own peculiar way. After so many dead failures by a hundred authors to write thus, and after the pitiful niaiseries of the so-called negro minstrels, ‘Uncle Remus’ is a revelation” (qtd. in Harris, Julia 163). Poet Sidney Lanier’s 1880 essay “The New South” went even further:

Uncle Remus [...] is a fiction so founded upon fact and so like it as to have passed into true citizenship and authority[. ...] It is as nearly perfect as any dialect can well be; and if one had only some system of notation by which to convey the tones of the speaking voice in which Brer Remus and Brer Ab would say these things, nothing could be at once more fine in humor and pointed in philosophy. [...] But half the point and flavor is in the subtle tone of voice, the gesture, the glance, and these unfortunately, cannot be read between the lines by any one who has not studied them in the living original. (122)

Lanier's point is accurate when assessing reader response to dialect. If a reader is familiar with the regional dialect within a text, reading that text will be more comfortable than for a reader unfamiliar with the dialect. Lanier observed that language markers such as register, body language, and pauses do not readily lend themselves to inclusion in dialect writing; however, neither do they lend themselves to inclusion in Standard English writing. In order for these markers to be noticed by readers, an author must strategically place indicators within a text for readers to interpret. This may be included within dialogue but is more frequently seen in the form of narration. In the folktale, "Why Mr. Possum Has No Hair on His Tail," Uncle Remus is disturbed because he saw Miss Sally's boy playing with children who did not meet the approval of Uncle Remus. He reprimands the boy for playing with the children and then remains quiet as his mood settles. The exchange appeared as such:

"Dar now!" exclaimed the old man, indignantly. "Dar now! w'at I bin sayin'? Hit's des a born blessin' dat you wa'n't brung home on a litter wid bofe eyeballs hangin' out en one year clean gone; dat's w'at 'tis. Hit's des a born blessin'." [...]

T]here was a long period of silence, broken only by the vigorous style in which Uncle Remus puffed away at his pipe. This was the invariable result. Whenever the old man had occasion to reprimand the little boy [...] he would relapse into a dignified but stubborn silence. (132-33)

Curiously absent in the body of criticism of Harris' work is William Dean Howells. A single letter to Howells is included in *The Life and Letters of Joel Chandler Harris*. The letter, dated June 1, 1900, is in response to Howells' request for a manuscript for publication. Harris shared two manuscript ideas with Howells: "One Mile to Shady Dale" (a novel which would eventually be retitled *Gabriel Tolliver* and dedicated to James Whitcomb Riley) and "Qua: A Romance of the Revolution." The first was serialized in *The Era* in 1901 – 02 and the second was never written. One can only speculate as to the reasoning behind the absence of Howells in connection with Harris. Most likely, the topic of folklore wasn't suitable for *The Atlantic Monthly* because it wasn't considered high literature. The February 1881 review of *Uncle Remus: His Songs and His Sayings* in *The Atlantic*, while favorable, only yielded eight lines. Another plausible reason for the lack of connection between the two literary figures was that Harris had already established himself with *Scribner's Monthly*, so Howells didn't pursue him for *The Atlantic* because of that commitment. By the time Howells reached out to Harris for manuscript suggestions, he had branched away from folklore and was writing novel-length fiction.

Responses to Harris' *Uncle Remus: His Songs and His Sayings* in periodicals had a commonality not found in the criticism of Harris' literary peers. Upon release of the Remus collection, a wave of curiosity swept over readers and critics alike. Since

Harris did not pursue the tracing of origins of the folklore, readers across the country contributed their opinions about where the stories originated. Ironically, as journalist and daughter-in-law Julia Collier Harris notes: “I am certain that when ‘Uncle Remus’ received his first greeting from the English-speaking public, his creator was ignorant of the fact that variants of the legend were to be found among so many of the primitive peoples” (161).

Not only was Harris unaware of variations of the folklore tales, but his knowledge on folklore in general was limited, as he confirmed and was recorded by Julia Collier Harris:

To be frank, I did not know much about folklore, and I did n't [sic] think that anybody else did. Imagine my surprise when I began to receive letters from learned philologists and folk-lore students from England to India, asking all sorts of questions and calling upon me to explain how certain stories told in the rice-fields of India and on the cotton-fields of Georgia were identical, or similar, or at least akin. [...] These letters came from royal institutes and literary societies, from scholars and from travelers. What answer could I make to them? None – none whatever. (162)

In reviews of *Uncle Remus: His Songs and His Sayings*, writers complimented Harris' work and supported his endeavors to capture folklore in print. They also wholly praised his dialect and his characters. Then, inevitably, the subject changed from reviewing the text to discussing where the folklore tales originated. It is a pattern well established. The December 1, 1880, review from the *New York Times*, for example, discussed the dialect and accepted it as authentic. The writer observed that Harris' tales

included: “strange myths [...] and the dialects, which curious subjects Mr. Harris has cleverly arranged and presented to us with a great deal of skill and judgment” (“Negro” 3). The anonymous writer then provided a type of translation guide in his discussion of the dialect; for example, the vernacular “gwineter” is translated as “is-going-to-be” and “dunner” as “don’t know.” Additionally, the writer went beyond a typical book review and contemplated the origins of the tales. This trend occurred often in reviews for *Uncle Remus: His Songs and His Sayings* and serves as an example of how Harris’ work sparked excitement throughout the Northern and Southern United States. With the release of the Uncle Remus collection, Northern readers were exposed to an unfamiliar culture and Southern readers had documentation of familiar tales preserved for future generations.

Curiosity and speculation was evident in many of the periodical reviews of Harris’ collection. Discussion surrounding Harris’ writing talent, including character development and dialect, was minimal, and discussion centering on the origins and first United States appearances of the folktales was prominent. *The Nation* review mentioned early occurrences (1868 and 1869) of similar folk stories published in United States periodicals and speculated that Harris’ stories ranged locally from South Carolina to Florida and originated in Africa (“Review” 398). Similar analyses were found in other periodicals. W.F. Allen’s review in *The Dial* asked of the folklore origins: “Did the Indians get them from the negroes, or the negroes from the Indians?” (184). Allen then concluded the subject of the mystery of folklore origin by writing: “We must wait for a careful examination of the native folk-lore of Africa as the next stage in the investigation” (184). The reviewers were more interested in trying to unravel the genealogical threads

of the stories than in reviewing Harris' work. T.F. Crane's April 1881 review "Plantation Folk-Lore" in *The Popular Science Monthly* explicitly dismissed reviewing Harris' dialect in favor of analyzing the folktales' origins:

Too much praise can not [sic] be bestowed upon Mr. Harris for the manner in which he has executed his task: not only is the representation of the dialect better than anything that has heretofore been given, but he has shown himself a master in the difficult art of collecting popular tales. [...] It is not, however, in their literary character, interesting as it is, that we intend to examine briefly these fables, but simply in their relations to the similar tales of other countries. (825)

The remainder of Crane's article addressed the folktale origins as well as their distribution throughout the United States. Harris, with the release of the Uncle Remus collection, began conversations on the topic of folklore for many readers, but these conversations centered on the stories themselves and not on the authenticity of dialect within Harris' book which was implicitly accepted as authentic.

Harris was wise when he stated in the introduction to the Uncle Remus collection: "It is fair to say that ethnological considerations formed no part of the undertaking which has resulted in the publication of this volume" (*Uncle ix*). Entering into discussions on where the folklore originated would have distracted readers away from the tales and moved his work away from historical preservation and literature. Had Harris begun his endeavor from a purely folklorist perspective, he would have lost the general public as well as literary reading audiences. Even though *Uncle Remus: His Songs and His Sayings* was of a high quality worthy of further folklore study, by

pursuing publication from an entertainment perspective, as opposed to a scientific approach, Harris thereby engaged a larger reader base.

Chapter Four

“The Illusion of Credibility”: Dialect as Page’s Tool of Misrepresentation

Thomas Nelson Page (1853 – 1922) was a pedigreed son of Virginia whose ancestors belonged to the first families of Virginia and boasted a Declaration of Independence signer, Thomas Nelson, Jr., as well, and “while his immediate ancestors lacked the wealth and influence of the earlier ones, they were characterized by the same high-mindedness and refinement” (Mims, *Atlantic Monthly* 111). Page’s immediate family would not have been considered an elite Virginia family in the late nineteenth century; his father was a lawyer and in the Page’s Hanover County home, named Oakland, resided 11 immediate and extended family members.

Page was eight years old when the Civil War began in 1861, and both his father and uncle left Oakland to fight for the Confederacy. Although war activities occurred in Hanover County, Page’s Oakland and its inhabitants did not experience direct impact from the war. As with most children, Page’s youthful years left a deep impression on him, as he stated: “[The war was] the most remarkable and vital thing in my childhood, or for that matter, in my entire life. It not only affected my growth of both body and mind, but after the actual conflict had passed, the consequences of it were such, in my part of the world, that they continued to impress themselves on us, which ever way we turned” (qtd. in Aaron 286). Those childhood impressions formed the foundation of his writing as

Page's fiction carried the feel of childhood naivety and romantic notions of Southern life during the Civil War. Noted African American poet and English scholar Sterling Brown, in his well-known essay "The Muted South," concurred that "Page's feeling [within his writing] is honest if child-like" (23). While Brown's statement was aimed at Page's 1904 essay, "The Old-Time Negro," it is also applicable to his fiction.

In 1887, when *In Ole Virginia* was initially published, readers noted the child's-eye view and child-like fantasy in Page's fiction. A reviewer for *The Literary World* observed: "His material is slight, but he has made the most of it. He has dared to be faithful to simple impressions, and therein lie his strength and his limitation ("Minor Fiction" 203). However, what can be considered a strength of Page can also be considered a weakness, as Edwin Mims, Vanderbilt University English Department Chair for 30 years, also noted: "Mr. Page has some of the sensitiveness of the men about whom he writes – an almost fatal obstacle to insight. I hasten to say, however, that this is a failing of nearly all romantic writers" (Mims, *Southern Writers* 142). Southern Literature scholar and North Carolina State University professor emeritus, Lucinda MacKethan considered that Page's child-like naivety was due to an imbalance in his positive/negative life experiences: "He seems to have been provided with the opportunity to know all the pleasures of rural life while avoiding its hardships" (314).

Page's limitations as a writer benefitted him because *In Ole Virginia* was a popular success among Northern as well as Southern readers. Literary scholar David Kirby assessed the likeability of Page's fiction: "The wide appeal of Page's vision, in the North as well as in the South, seems directly related to its departure from historical reality. To readers everywhere, Page's daydreams were more desirable than the

nightmares of war and Reconstruction” (398). His portrayal of the Southern United States mollified readers, but it also blurred their understanding between authentic and inauthentic representations of the South.

Northern readers who had never traveled to the South accepted his stories as representative of that region. Additionally, some Southern readers viewed Page’s account of the harmonious existence between slaves and their owners as confirmation that slavery never should have been abolished. To those readers, Page’s stories were an escape from the issues of regional animosity and struggles of Reconstruction, but the stories also came to serve as representations of Southern people, black and white, as well as Southern culture. Ironically, “[i]n an address delivered at Washington and Lee in 1887 [Page] closed by appealing to the men of that institution to look forward to the true historian of the South. ‘What nobler task can be set himself than this: to preserve from oblivion or, worse, from misrepresentation a civilization which produced as its natural fruit Washington and Lee?’” (Mims, *Southern Writers* 140 – 41). Obviously, what Page feared most – misrepresentation of his civilization – he perpetuated through his own writing and evolved into a leading figure in misrepresenting the South.

Page’s characters in the short story “Marse Chan” are primary examples of his misrepresentation of the South through his Plantation fiction. The term “plantation myth” seems to have been created specifically for Page’s work, and “Marse Chan” epitomizes romanticism of the Civil War era. The short story contains a pedigreed well-mannered courageous Southern hero, an obvious villain, a fair maiden, and a former slave character who serves as narrator.

The stereotypical characters in “Marse Chan” drew negative criticism, but notably left from the criticism was the former slave character. Page biographer Theodore Gross provides an example of such criticism: “The only credible person in [‘Marse Chan’] – and in those that follow – is the Negro. The other creatures belong to a mythical past that can not [sic] be realistically created because it is not real; it is Page’s evocation [...]” (345). Gross is incorrect in his claim that the black narrator, Sam, is the only credible person in “Marse Chan.” Gross’ form of criticism perpetuated assumptions that former slaves were truly living the way Page’s fictional character Sam was living: hopelessly loyal and unwilling to surrender their lives of servitude. As MacKethan has so boldly stated: “Page was trying to make the point in ‘Marse Chan’ that it would have been better for Sam if slavery had never ended [...]” (328). Sam is no more credible than the other characters in Page’s short story, but Page constructed him as a sympathetic dialectal character, which led readers to believe in his authenticity. Gross further elaborated on this construction of Sam: “By telling the story from the Negro’s point of view, Page successfully creates his idyll, a sentimentalized past which no one can refute; for the Negro – romantic and superstitious and nostalgic – summons up that past with complete recall: he was there, and though at times he seems a bit of a voyeur with a phenomenal memory, he is credible as the witness of that vanished era of glory” (342).

A brief look at the “Marse Chan” characters demonstrates Page’s application of the romance of Southern ideals that did not truly exist. Sam is hyper-nostalgic toward slavery as evidenced in his infamous soliloquy on the pre-war South:

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

Marse Chan is as over exaggerated in his nobility as Colonel Chamberlin is in his maliciousness as seen in their duel. Accordingly, Colonel Chamberlin fires his pistol early at Marse Chan and misses, but Mars Chan, instead of shooting the villain, “tilted his pistil up in de a’r an’ shot – bang; an’ ez de pistil went bang, he sez to Cun’l Chahmb’lin, ‘I mek you a present to yo’ fam’ly, seh!’” (*In Ole Virginia* 20-21). Lastly, the fair maiden, Miss Anne, is as proud as she is beautiful:

“De moon come out, an’ I cotch sight o’ her stan’in’ dyar in her white dress, wid de cloak she had wrapped herse’f up in drapped off on de groun’, an’ she didn’ look like she wuz ’feared o’ nuthin’. She wuz mons’us purty ez she stood dyar wid de green bushes behine her, an’ she hed jes’ a few flowers in her breas’ – right hyah – and some leaves in her sorrel hyar; an’ de moon come out an’ shined down on her hyar an’ her frock, an’ ’peared like de light wuz jes’ stan’in’ off it ez she stood dyar lookin’ at Marse Chan wid her head tho’d back, jes’ like dat mawnin’ when she pahss Marse Chan in de road widout speakin’ to ’im, an’ sez to me, ‘Good mawnin’, Sam.’” (*In Ole Virginia* 26)

It is illogical to separate Sam from the hero Marse Chan, the villain Colonel Chamberlin, or the fair maiden Miss Anne as they are all part of the same mythical

existence that includes fantastical behaviors and comments. Ironically, Page would argue that the supporting characters are equally as credible as Sam because Page believed the myth he wrote to be authentic.

Even readers who understood Page's characters to be stereotypical enjoyed his stories. As Civil War scholar Michael Flusche explained: "Into these stock characters Page poured not individuality, for they all remained types, but life. Deeply felt emotion and rich atmosphere compensated in these sketches for the insubstantial plots. By describing the lives of a few heroic characters, these stories seemed to depict a whole civilization" (465). The problem was, the civilization that Page depicted did not exist, and having a sympathetic black narrator only served to reinforce Page's agenda of white supremacy.

In "Marse Chan" the former slave narrator, Sam, exists strictly to elevate the white race through storytelling. Even though slavery had been abolished for over 20 years by the time *In Ole Virginia* was published in 1887, Page still had black characters implicitly serving white characters in his fiction. Page did not treat his black characters as people but as vehicles to move the white characters through his stories. Southern Literature expert Louis Rubin elaborated on the plight of Page's former-slave characters:

Not only are they absolutely loyal, but they define their lives from beginning to end in accordance with [white man's] needs and convenience. Of their own lives – marital arrangements, desires, interests, needs – we know little. They are not simply black men as seen by a white man; they are black men who exist entirely as extensions of the white man's identity and requirements. Page was utterly

uninterested in Negroes as Negroes; as [an] artist his blacks were voices designed to exhibit the dependence of the slave and the ex-slave on the white man for his identity and existence. (1016)

As Rubin noted, Page wasn't interested in "Negroes as Negroes" but was interested in them only as a continuance of their servitude to the white population. This is in contrast with Harris' construction of Uncle Remus, as literary historian Taylor Hagood explains. While Harris has his African American narrators

[...] offer stories about animals who represent the interrelations among blacks, Page makes the disturbing move of having his African-American, former-slave narrators tell stories about aristocratic Southern whites. Whereas one can see Harris [...] writing against the grain in favor of [...] regionalized figures, Page's African Americans tell stories that actually serve the aristocratic white cause. (427-28)

During the 1890s, critics drew comparisons between Harris' Uncle Remus and Page's Sam. Edwin Mims, for example, in his 1903 portrait of Page in the *Southern Writers* series, provided this common comparison: "[Sam] is an accessory to the white man, set up to see him as the author sees him. Mr. Harris, on the other hand, gives the negro a separate existence" (147).

Although literary criticism tended to compare Sam and Uncle Remus, once Chesnutt's Uncle Julius appeared in 1887 it became evident that Sam was structured more like Julius. However, instead of creating a mask to subversively reveal slavery's woeful truths as Chesnutt had done for Julius, Page applied the white lens to Sam to

further propagandize white supremacy. Page's dialect for Sam paralleled Chesnut's dialect for Julius as both dialects lulled readers into a false sense of security with the narrated story. Southern literature scholar Matthew Martin has observed that "Sam allows Page to perform in dialect and thus appeal to the local color predilection of his audience, but even more, [the dialect] gives the illusion of credibility to Page's image of the edenic South" (22). Page's dialect captivated readers the way Chesnut's did, and the two authors used dialect as a device to veil their diametrically opposed political commentaries about the South and slavery. Page's short stories, unfortunately, were more widely read than Chesnut's in their time and thus did inherently more damage by promoting falsities as truth.

Those falsities are highlighted by Sam's romantic dialectal recollections of a life spent centered on his master. Page applied humor as well as pathos to disguise notions of racism throughout "Marse Chan." He established a harmonious image early in the short story through the use of dialect coupled with "humor" as Sam stopped to move fence rails for Marse Chan's old English setter to pass through, talking to the dog as he did: "Now, I got to pull down de gap, I s'pose! Yo' so sp'ilt yo' kyahn hardly walk. Jes' ez able to git over it as I is! Jes' like white folks – think 'cuz you's white and I's black, I got to wait on yo' all de time. Ne'm mine, I ain' gwi' do it!" (*In Ole Virginia* 2 – 3). By indirectly mentioning slavery in what Page considered to be a light-hearted manner, he relaxed readers by demonstrating that Sam, who was Page's embodiment of all former slaves, harbored no ill-will toward the white race for enslaving him. So void of any bitterness, Sam was able to off-handedly joke about the institution of slavery.

Page's sentimentalities overflowed as Sam told the story of how Old Marster appointed him to be Marse Chan's body servant: "So up I goes tippin', skeered like, an' old marster sez, 'Ain' you Mymie's son?' 'Yass, seh,' sez I. 'Well,' sez he, 'I'm gwine to give you to yo' young Marse Channin' to be his body-servant,' an' he put de baby right in my arms (it's de truth I'm tellin' yo'!) [...] 'Now, Sam, from dis time you belong to yo' young Marse Channin'; I wan' you to tek keer on 'im ez long ez he lives. You are to be his boy from dis time'" (*In Ole Virginia* 6). Two components make this scene believable for readers: the narrator and the dialect. With Sam relaying this story in his own vernacular, the concept of a young slave being introduced to his newly born master is endearing instead of offensive. Page constructed this scene to propagate the old regime and was able to convey innocence and compassion with no better characters than a young boy and an infant.

In the final scenes of "Marse Chan," Page situated Sam as a member of the family not because Sam was thought of as a family member, as readers interpreted him to be, but because Page needed his narrator to complete the story of the heroic white Southerner and would have been unable to do so had Sam been excluded from the scenes. Therefore, Page situated Sam amid Miss Anne, Ole Missis, and Ole Marster during the early mourning stages for Marse Chan.

The pathos of the scene distracted readers from noticing where Sam was positioned. A turning point in the scene occurred when the white characters "went in arfter a while in de parlor, an' shet de do' [...]" which left Sam alone outside the home, a clear symbol of Sam being an outsider. But despite being excluded, Sam continued to narrate: "[...] an' I heahd 'em say, Miss Anne she tuk de coffin in her arms an' kissed it,

an' kissed Marse Chan [...]" (*In Ole Virginia* 37). Had Page sincerely considered Sam important to Marse Chan, as he steered readers to believe he was, he would have included him in the grieving process.

Complicating Page's writing was the question of philological authenticity surrounding his dialect. Readers believed it to be authentic which gave credibility to Page's sympathetic characters as well as his argument in support of white supremacy in the South. Even though *what* the characters said was misrepresentative of the Southern peoples, the dialect used to say it can unfortunately be considered plausible. This was confirmed by linguist Philip Leigh in his 2012 study "Literary Forensics: Fingerprinting the Literary Dialects of Three Works of Plantation Fiction." The three dialectal works Leigh analyzed were: Harris' *Uncle Remus: His Songs and His Sayings*, Page's *In Ole Virginia* and Chesnut's *The Conjure Woman*. Leigh explains his study as "the first comparative, descriptive, and quantitative treatment of three dialect texts that are frequently compared qualitatively based on the racial politics of each author" (Leigh, "New Data" n.p.). He bluntly states that his data reveal "these literary dialects do not come from the moon, even if they may come from the pens of avowed racists like Page" (Leigh, "Literary" 368).

Although the authenticity of Page's dialect can be considered plausible, when reading Page's prefatory note to *In Ole Virginia*, questions arise surrounding his means of distinguishing between Eastern Virginia dialect and Deep South dialects. In his note, Page explained the ethnography of the dialect employed within the text: "The dialect of the negroes of Eastern Virginia differs totally from that of the Southern negroes, and in some material points from that of those located farther west" (Page, *In Ole Virginia* [vii]).

A reviewer from *The Critic* refuted Page's claim in his 1887 review of *In Ole Virginia*: "[Page] is wrong when, in his Note, he tells us that the dialect of Eastern Virginia (the dialect of 'Marse Chan') differs 'totally' from that of the more Southern negroes; this could not be and is not so. All over the South, Eastern Virginianisms in pronunciation and idiom have propagated themselves through immigration and the slave-trade" ("Reviews" 14). Linguist Charles Foster's 1971 phonological study of Charles Chesnut's dialect amounted to a confirmation of this by pointing out that "the much celebrated mobility of the American people has tended to cause regional dialects to 'run together' or overlap [...]" (Foster 30).

While Page claimed that his dialect was limited to Eastern Virginia, how he knew that without having been directly exposed to or having studied the dialect found in the Southern-most states remains unanswered. Page is known to have traveled briefly to Kentucky and Tennessee, but biographies of him written by Gross, Holman, and his brother Rosewell Page show no record of any travel in the Deep South, a requirement for Page to credibly assert that the regional dialects varied.

It is conceivable that Page, noting Twain's 1885 success with *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, two years earlier, emulated Twain's prefatory note in *In Ole Virginia*. Page's note is comparable to Twain's explanatory which began as such: "In this book a number of dialects are used, to wit: the Missouri negro dialect; the extremest form of the backwoods Southwestern dialect; the ordinary 'Pike County' dialect; and four modified varieties of this last" (Twain, *Adventures* [iii]). Harris also provided an introduction to *Uncle Remus: His Songs and His Sayings* in 1880 which dealt mostly with the folktales themselves, but he did explain that the dialect within the text was from the Georgia

cotton plantations. Page may have felt this type of disclaimer customary for dialect texts or he may have felt that a prefatory note would grant him credibility in the area of dialect writing.

Whether or not Page's prefatory note improved his credibility is unknown, but prominent literary figures, when speaking in regard to Page's texts, often commented favorably. This is seen in William Dean Howells' mention of Page in his 1898 essay, "The Southern States in Recent American Literature":

To tell the truth, I think the best of [his stories] are in dialect; not only because he employs it with perfect knowledge and with scrupulous conscience, but because his art in these is freest and finest. Elsewhere he appeals to literature in his readers, but though even his dialect work savours of the romantic tradition which he loves, he appeals primarily to nature; and I think nature is above literature, in the meaning I have here. He likes, better than I do, the heroic and the ideal, but that is no reason why I should not say his Marse Chan and Meh Lady are masterpieces in their kind, which is almost entirely his own kind. (204)

James Whitcomb Riley wrote to Page on June 19, 1888 with fondness for his "bully good 'Old Virginia'" and relayed, "Both with prose and verse, head-up, and tail-over-the-dash, you lope foremost into my affections – same as everybody's else" (qtd. in Holman 215). Louisiana author Grace King, in her *Memories of a Southern Woman of Letters*, approved of Page's writerly approach: "[...H]is stories, short and simple, written in Negro dialect, and, I may say, Southern pronunciation, showed us with ineffable grace that although we were sore bereft, politically, we had now a chance in literature at least" (377). George Washington Cable sided with King and waxed poetic about Page's

“beautiful stories of old Virginia, and of those lofty pleadings for the nobler civic and social relics of the old South, which have made him famous and shown the sincerity and ardor of his patriotism as citizen of a whole America” (140). A third Southern writer, Virginia novelist Ellen Glasgow, also found that “[t]he early dialect stories of Thomas Nelson Page are firm and round and as fragrant as dried rose-leaves [...]” (qtd. in Holman 210). Noted Edgar Allan Poe biographer, and personal acquaintance of Page, Arthur Hobson Quinn, praised Page but also exposed his own white supremacy views: “No one can read ‘Marse Chan’ or ‘Meh Lady’ without a thrill as the old negro tells in simple, unaffected language a story of devotion so deep and lasting that to it the gates of death are but an incident. It is a great tribute to the race that showed this devotion, but indirectly it proves a far greater one to the race that inspired it” (143).

Page had his share of naysayers within the literary field as well. As historian Daniel Aaron explained:

J.B. Cabell successfully parodied Page in *The Rivet in Grandfather’s Neck* ([...] 1915). Here is a sample: “Why, jes arter dat, suh, a hut Yankee cap’en, whar some uv our folks done shoot in de laig, wuz lef on de road fer daid’ – a quite notorious custom on the part of all Northern armies – ’un Young Miss had him fotch up ter de gret house, un nuss im same’s he one uv de fambly, un dem two jes fit un argufy scanlous un never spicion huccom dey’s in love wid each othuh till de War’s ovuh’.” (380)

In 1905, Page was also mocked in *The Colored American Magazine* with an anonymously written poem titled “Thomas Nelson Page”:

Page, Page

Ye Virginian Sage,
Champion of slavery's bestial pen;

Rage, Page

In your mansion-cage –
You'll learn that slavery's dead, when? (303)

Some reviewers found Page's writing problematic as well, especially because of the daunting dialect. In 1889, for example, the London literary magazine *The Athenaeum* reviewed *In Ole Virginia*, and the reviewer dismissed Page's dialect entirely:

At the first glance, Mr. Thomas Nelson Page's *In Ole Virginia* (Ward, Lock & Co.) appears to be written in a strange language, chiefly consisting of apostrophes. The volume contains half a dozen stories almost entirely in the negro dialect of Eastern Virginia, which the author says, too enthusiastically, differs totally from that of the Southern negroes. He then gives some rules to aid the reader. To be sure, there is a terrible amount of elision, and a page strewn with apostrophes is very uncomfortable reading; but the dialect does not differ much from the specimens of negro dialect which other writers have offered, and without which, indeed, no American novel of the second class would be complete. [...] One need not be ashamed to confess that *In Ole Virginia* cannot be read with pleasure, and that the stories do not appear to be worth the trouble of deciphering and construing. ("Our Library Table" 220)

Although Page's *In Ole Virginia* received negative reviews, they were outnumbered by the positive reviews. *The Athenaeum* in fact reversed itself when *In Ole*

Virginia was included in William Heinemann's "Dollar Library" in 1902. That year *The Athenaeum* wrote:

Several of the stories [...] are narratives told entirely in negro dialect, which at first is somewhat trying to a careless reader's patience. But the quaint phraseology deserves careful perusal. It is pleasing when once its outstanding peculiarities are mastered; and in his management of it the author has been both deft and consistent" ("Short Stories" 16).

London's *The Saturday Review* also found favor with *In Ole Virginia* when it was first published in London in 1889: "This is an interesting and thoroughly readable collection. The sketches of negro character are capital, and the dialect needs no glossary" ("New Books and Reprints" 776).

In Northern periodicals, some reviewers unfortunately subscribed to the plantation myth that Page was proselytizing. Upon the initial 1887 release of *In Ole Virginia*, a *New York Times* reviewer glanced over the dialect but praised Page's development of black characters: "It is not the dialect, the elisions, the substitution of one letter for another, nor the grotesqueness of phrasing that make Mr. Thomas Nelson Page's stories such pleasant reading. Dialect stories may be philologically curious and nothing more." ("New Books" 14). The reviewer went on to say that "Mr. Page gives the Virginia negro [...] life and throughout his stories shows dramatic power" ("New Books" 14). In 1896, a holiday edition of *In Ole Virginia* was released, and a *New York Times* reviewer again found favor in it: "It is not the perfection of dialect which is so telling, but the humor of Mr. Page's stories and the kindness in them. [...] Such a good book as is "In Ole Virginia" has helped to soothe what may be left of sectional irritation"

(“Christmas Books” A5). Philadelphia-based *Lippincott’s Monthly Magazine* published a December 1887 review of *In Ole Virginia* that concluded:

After you have got through the preliminary difficulties of the dialect, which are by no means inconsiderable, you find that Mr. Page has command of both pathos and humor, and can paint the high-souled, impetuous, generous Southerner as well as any one who has ever tried his hand on the character; indeed, he once more makes a living and breathing man out of a person who in less competent hands has degenerated into a mere lay-figure. (Book-Talk 939)

And Boston-based *The Literary World* commended *In Ole Virginia*:

The narrative in each instance is related to the words of a negro, and the admirable management of the dialect, the quaint turns of expression, and the incidental revelations of character undoubtedly heighten [sic] the charm. But the motives are genuine, and in them elements of humor, pathos, and tragedy are intermingled. (“Minor Fiction” 203)

To some white Southerners, Page’s Plantation fiction was simply putting into writing the myth they perpetuated, as seen in A.H. Wilson’s 1893 essay in the literary magazine *The Vanderbilt Observer*. “[...T]he negro is introduced into the tale for a far higher and better purpose – to preserve an underrated and almost forgotten trait of the old negro slave; a type of character reflecting a fidelity and devotion well-nigh inconceivable to the present generation [...]” (237). Wilson, however admiring of Page’s work, did acknowledge his shortcomings as a writer: “[T]here is still about [his short stories] a monotony which tires one, and mars the pleasure of reading a collection of his

stories, and at the same time shows a decided lack of inventive power” (236). Wilson was not alone in drawing attention to Page’s writing deficiencies. A reviewer for *The Critic* admired Page’s texts but found fault in them as well: “All that Mr. Page had to do – and he has done it well, - was to be a faithful ‘recording angel,’ to open a sympathetic and retentive ear, to reproduce in firm outlines what everyday life in Virginia abundantly provides [. . .] It is only now and then that he errs in his dialect and lifts his ‘uncles’ and ‘aunties’ linguistically a trifle above themselves” (14).

Page’s dialectal texts played a significant part in creating a false image of slavery and the people of the Southern United States. Northerners accepted *In Ole Virginia* and its stereotypical characters as representative of that region. For them, reading Page’s fiction served as confirmation that the region that had been destroyed by the Union was recovering and progressing. Elite Southerners took Page’s fiction as confirmation that the South’s old regime based on slavery better served the region and despite being ravaged by war, the people had maintained idyllic spirit and charm. Both types of readers were misled by a Virginian who took it upon himself to become “a spokesman for his generation of Southerners” (Kirby 398).

Chapter Five

“Dialect as the Language of a Crafty Individual”: Chesnutt’s Evolved Former Slave Character

Charles W. Chesnutt (1858 – 1932) was born to free black parents in Cleveland, Ohio; however, his family relocated to Fayetteville, North Carolina, when he was nine years old. Chesnutt spent a large portion of his childhood and young adult years living and working in the Fayetteville area which would later serve as the model for the fictitious town Patesville, the setting of Chesnutt’s Uncle Julius conjure short stories collected in *The Conjure Woman* (1899).

By the time Chesnutt’s first Uncle Julius story, “The Goophered Grapevine,” was published in *The Atlantic Monthly* in August 1887, readers were accustomed to dialectical texts in United States literary magazines. This familiarity stemmed from the popular Plantation fiction which came to rise during the post-Reconstruction years. Typical Plantation-fiction texts centered on Southern lifestyles during the antebellum period and appealed to Southern readers because they reinforced sympathizer attitudes toward slavery and romanticized daily Southern life prior to the Civil War. Additionally, the texts appealed to Northern readers who were able to experience an unfamiliar Southern region, albeit a false one, through literature. Chesnutt used the Plantation-

fiction formula in his writing but modified it to express the former slave's perspective on a more authentic level.

As previously discussed, Joel Chandler Harris and Thomas Nelson Page were established dialect writers by the time Chesnut's initial dialect short story was published. Chesnut, like his predecessors in the genre, utilized the frame narrative within his short stories. The frame narrative of Plantation fiction opens and closes with a white narrator, but the story's epicenter revolves around a black narrator. Chesnut's protagonist Uncle Julius, however, was different from Uncle Remus and Sam. As literary scholar William Andrews explains, "More often than not the motive behind Julius's storytelling is not nostalgia for the old times (as is the case in Page's stories) or a delight in entertainment (as is the case in the Uncle Remus tales), but rather the economic self-interest of old Julius himself who, as [John] gradually learns in *The Conjure Woman*, has no intention of allowing the white man's economic encroachment on his holdings to go unchallenged" (85). Scholar Kenneth Price concurs: "Harris presents black dialect as the language of an ignorant slave incapable of equality with his master; in contrast, Chesnut presents dialect as the language of a crafty individual who steers his employer to a desired way of seeing" (263). Uncle Julius was constructed as an individual who out-thought his co-narrator, John, a wealthy, white, Northerner recently relocated to the South. Although the recognizable framework of Plantation fiction is still evident in Chesnut's texts, the former slave character has evolved since Harris' Uncle Remus and Page's Sam. Julius' ability to think with his own personal interests in mind are counter to earlier Plantation fiction former slave

characters who thought primarily of the white people whom they served. An example of Julius' self-serving tendencies appears in "Hot-Foot Hannibal."

During an early scene in "Hot-Foot Hannibal," John and Julius engage in a conversation about why the mare taking them to town balked in the road and refused to continue on. "I don't know what to make of this,' [John] said. 'I have never known her to balk before. Have you, Julius?' 'No, suh,' replied the old man, 'I neber has. It's a cu'ous thing ter me, suh'" (*Conjure* 201). In this scene, John relies on Julius to explain what to do to get the mare walking again. "'What's the best way to make her go?' 'I 'spec's, suh, dat ef I'd tu'n her 'roun', she'd go de udder way'" (201). Julius has manipulated John (by feigning that the mare balked) in order to pursue his own agenda which involves turning the mare around and proceeding in the opposite direction. The evolution of former slave characters in late-1800s fiction is significant, as Harris' Uncle Remus would not have challenged anyone of the white race. Uncle Julius not only mentally challenges John but outsmarts him to suit his personal interests.

Much as Dunbar utilizes the mask in his poetry, Chesnutt also uses a mask to covertly provide insight into a dark antebellum era that other authors of the genre do not. Within Chesnutt's conjure stories, through Julius' narrative, only the most insightful readers learn truths of slavery and its lasting damage upon the black race. In the following excerpt from "Po' Sandy" (1888), if read on a superficial level or strictly through the lens of the white race, readers miss Chesnutt's subversive message.

In this scene from "Po' Sandy," Uncle Julius describes Sandy to the co-narrator and his wife, John and Annie. Sandy belongs to Mars Marrabo and is a "monst'us good" worker (*Conjure* 41). He is so valuable that Mars Marrabo's children all "wanted dey

daddy fer ter gin 'em Sandy for a weddin' present" (41). In the short story, Mars Marrabo devises a plan for all of his children to benefit from Sandy's service. Julius explains this during his storytelling:

[S]o w'en dey wuz all done married, he fix it by 'lowin' one er his chilluns ter take Sandy fer a mont' er so, en den ernudder for a mont' er so, en so on dat erway tel dey had all had 'im de same lenk er time; en den dey would all take him roun' ag'in, 'cep'n' oncet in a w'ile w'en Mars Marrabo would len' 'im ter some er his yuther kinfolks 'roun' de country, w'en dey wuz short er han's; tel bimeby it got so Sandy did n' hardly knowed whar he wuz gwine ter stay fum one week's een' ter de yuther. (41-42)

The description of Sandy's daily living can be viewed from two different racial lenses, but rarely did white readers of the late nineteenth century look through the alternate lens. When viewed from the white perspective, Mars Marrabo is seen as a generous man who shares his property with not only his children but also with others throughout the country who are in need of a laborer. When viewed from the black perspective, one sees how Sandy is unable to have a family or develop close relationships with others because he is continuously farmed out as a transient laborer. The second perspective is implicitly constructed into Chesnut's tale with only the sharpest reader discovering the interwoven stories.

"Po' Sandy" also serves as a sound example of how Julius displays his intellect yet remains unassuming while pursuing his objective. Again, it also shows how Chesnut wove a darker story of slavery into a seemingly benign conjure tale. In "Po' Sandy," Julius tells the conjure story of how Sandy was turned into a tree by his

sweetheart, Tenie, in order that he remain at home instead of being farmed out to others for labor. As with all of Chesnutt's conjure tales, there are two stories (a story within a story) being told in "Po' Sandy." The first story is the conjure tale that Julius recounts for the purpose of gaining something from John. In "Po' Sandy," what Julius wants is John to not tear down the old schoolhouse on the property so Julius can use it as a place for church services. The second story within "Po' Sandy" is implicitly told within the conjure tale and demonstrates how slaves were abused by both nature and man until they reached their demise, many times, at the hands of a white man. The implicit story was lost on John but not on his wife, Annie. This is seen through John's bafflement over Annie's reaction to Julius' tale: "'What a system it was,' she exclaimed, when Julius had finished, 'under which such things were possible!' 'What things?' [John] asked, in amazement" (*Conjure* 60). Throughout Chesnutt's stories, the character of Annie consistently understands the masked messages in Julius' tales whereas, John does not. John's bewilderment at the conclusion of Julius' story is Chesnutt's indicator that Julius has out-thought John. Having Julius speak in dialect only further disguises the implicit message within "Po' Sandy" as readers find Julius unassuming because he speaks vernacular.

Part of the evolution of the former slave character in Plantation fiction included the character's dialect. Chesnutt gave Uncle Julius a more sophisticated dialect with a stronger vocabulary than was typical of his character type. A linguistic analysis of the dialect of the three dialectal characters (Remus, Sam and Julius) indicates that Chesnutt's Uncle Julius had a more sophisticated vocabulary than the others. Philip Leigh, in his 2012 study "Literary Forensics: Fingerprinting the Literary Dialects of Three

Works of Plantation Fiction,” found that “Chesnutt’s narrators and dialect characters [...] have ‘richer’ vocabularies” than Harris’ or Page’s narrators and characters (372).

Indeed, as linguistic scholar Charles W. Foster revealed in his study, *The Phonology of the Conjure Tales of Charles W. Chesnutt*:

An examination of the dialect of the Negroes in *In Ole Virginia* and that of *Uncle Remus: His Songs and His Sayings* indicates that the phonology represented in these works is significantly different from that of *The Conjure Woman*; it is clear, therefore, that Chesnutt’s literary dialect is not merely a *potpourri* of forms taken from the works of earlier dialect writers. (31)

Such complex dialect proved taxing to Chesnutt. In a letter to Walter Hines Page dated May 20, 1898, Chesnutt remarked on such challenges:

Speaking of dialect, it is almost a despairing task to write it. What to do with the troublesome r, and the obvious inconsistency of leaving it out where it would be in good English, and putting it in where correct speech would leave it out, how to express such words as ‘here’ and ‘hear’ and ‘other’ and ‘another,’ ‘either’ and ‘neither,’ and so on, is a “stractin” task. (*To Be* 105)

Depth to former slave characters and sophisticated dialect are where Chesnutt’s Uncle Julius tales strategically deviate from the prescriptive outline of the Plantation-fiction genre. The combination of these two character improvements create a full-bodied confident former slave character. For example, in “The Goophered Grapevine,” as Julius discusses the taste and ripeness of the vineyard grape named scuppernong, his rich vocabulary and mature communication skills are evident: “Dey ain’ nuffin dat kin

stan' up side'n de scuppernon' fer sweetness; sugar ain't a suckumstance ter scuppernon'. W'en de season is nigh 'bout ober, en de grapes begin ter swivel up des a little wid de wrinkles er ole age, - w'en de skin git so' en brown, - den de scuppernon' make you smack yo' lip en roll yo' eye en wush fer mo'" (Conjure 13).

No matter how sophisticated Julius' dialect was, it was still used as a literary marker for unintelligence by nineteenth century white readers. These readers were lulled into believing Julius was a well-meaning but unintelligent story-telling former slave because he spoke in vernacular. English scholar Keith Byerman elaborates: "The heavy dialect speech [by Julius] fits precisely the conventions of linguistic representation of illiterate and ignorant blacks that dominated regional literature of the time. No markers are apparent to suggest an ironic use of the convention, and the contrast with the speech of the frame narrator reinforces the difference" (103). Having Julius speak in dialect allowed white readers to consider him non-threatening to Southern white dominance and intellectually inferior to white character(s) when he was actually the opposite.

Since nineteenth century readers used dialect to gauge intellect of literary characters, if Chesnut was to improve upon the formula for a former slave character, it was crucial that he craft Julius as more intelligent than similar character types in the works of Harris and Page. In addition to vernacular improvement (seen above), Julius also needed intellectual advancement with the ability to make decisions independent of a white person's involvement. Chesnut granted Julius that ability and went so far as to construct Julius as being intellectually equal (and in some instances superior) to his white co-narrator, John. In "Mars Jeems's Nightmare," Julius tells a conjure story and

explains the moral to John and Annie: “Dis yer tale goes ter show [...] dat w’ite folks w’at is so ha’d en stric’, en doan make no ’lowance fer po’ ign’ant niggers w’at ain’ had no chanst ter l’arn, is li’ble ter hab bad dreams, ter say de leas’, end dat dem w’at is kin’ en good ter po’ people is sho’ ter prosper en git ’long in de worl’” (*Conjure* 100). Julius’ motivation for telling a conjure story that includes the benefits of being “kin’ en good” is done to surreptitiously manipulate John into re-hiring Julius’ grandson, whom John fired due to ineptness. At the story’s conclusion, Julius’ grandson is re-hired, but by the insightful Annie.

Chesnutt masks to white readers the dangerous equality that he gave Julius and John. Kenneth Price confirms this masking in Chesnutt’s Uncle Julius tales: “Because the form gives John the first and last word, many people have taken the white man to be an authoritative commentator on Julius’s yarns” (264). For example, at the conclusion of “Mars Jeems’s Nightmare,” following Julius’ conjure story, John becomes the readers’ focal point by assuming the narrator role, and he asserts his authority by proclaiming: “[...A]s I did not wish the servants to think there was any conflict of authority in the household, I let the boy stay” (*Conjure* 102). Despite John’s assertions, insightful readers recognize by story’s end that Julius not only manipulated circumstances to serve his purpose of gaining re-employment for his grandson but ultimately achieved authority over John.

By the time Chesnutt’s Uncle Julius tales were collected in *The Conjure Woman* (1899), readers had grown accustomed to Julius’ wily ways and identified with him and not the white co-narrator. This anonymous *New York Times* review of *The Conjure Woman* dated April 15, 1899 emphasizes this point: “The seven tales in Mr. Chesnutt’s

book are curious and interesting, and the shrewdness with which Uncle Julius relates each one at the moment when it will be most effective in his own interest suggests that the black man is no more above making his superstition profitable than his white brother" ("A Foil" 246). This review also indicates that most readers, including literary critics, only saw the conjure story, not the concealed implicit story.

Literary criticism based on dialect has evolved much like the former slave characters in Plantation fiction have evolved. As linguistic scholar Charles Foster astutely noted, "As is usually the case with writers of literary dialect, Chesnutt has been praised for his accuracy in representation of Negro dialect as well as damned for grossly misrepresenting and exaggerating it" (1). By the time Chesnutt's *The Conjure Woman* gained attention in 1899, criticism focused specifically on dialect as a literary device had quelled. This is evidenced by the lack of such criticism of Chesnutt's dialect. The shift away from criticism of dialect, positive or negative, indicates that readers were accustomed to dialect's literary presence. Additionally, most reviewers did not have the authoritative knowledge to critique it. Criticism of Chesnutt's texts rarely mention his use of dialect. Instead, critics focused on the content, and if the content was found undesirable, the dialect (if mentioned) inevitably was as well. Beginning with Chesnutt's initial publication of an Uncle Julius tale, "The Goophered Grapevine," in *The Atlantic Monthly* in August 1887, criticism for his work was favorable.

The editor of *The Atlantic Monthly* from 1881 – 1890, Thomas Bailey Aldrich, was the first to publish Chesnutt's works (1887) in a major literary magazine. That "Aldrich seems to have had no idea that he was publishing an African-American author" leads to the question of whether or not Aldrich would have published Chesnutt's stories had his

race been revealed (Price 260). This question stems from the fact that whatever tolerance or appreciation Aldrich held for literary dialect in the late-1800s had soured by the turn of the century because, as previously discussed, Aldrich wrote to poet R.E. Lee Gibson in 1900 that literary dialect “mutilated and vulgarized” the English language (Greenslet 211). *Atlantic* scholar, and grandson to former *Atlantic* editor Ellery Sedgwick, Ellery Sedgwick, III further substantiated Aldrich’s snobbery in his 1994 book, *The Atlantic Monthly, 1857 - 1909: Yankee Humanism at High Tide and Ebb:*

The further Aldrich became immersed in the world of refinement, wealth, taste, and privilege, the more constricted his sympathies with those outside it became. In fact, his sympathies often seemed appallingly circumscribed by class and race. During his editorship, Howells had grown increasingly empathetic with the social and economic outsider in America, but during the eighties Aldrich grew progressively more bigoted and misanthropic toward those outside the pale of his own social circle. (168)

Ironically, Aldrich’s failure to see beyond the lens of the elite white race favored Chesnutt because Aldrich read Chesnutt’s conjure tales at face value only and missed Chesnutt’s subversive message. Had Aldrich understood the truths shrouded in Chesnutt’s short stories, there is little doubt that he would have rejected publication of the stories. Chesnutt “produced an alternative [to stereotypical Plantation fiction] not out of thin air but with the tools and assumptions, thick with impediments, provided by a white-dominated culture” (Price 258). Chesnutt’s deft writing was also seemingly lost on Aldrich’s predecessor at *The Atlantic Monthly*, William Dean Howells. In Howells’ 1901 review of *The Marrow of Tradition* (1901), Chesnutt’s historical novel recounting the

Wilmington Insurrection of 1898, he states, “Though his book [...] is of the same strong material as his earlier books, it is less simple throughout, and therefore less excellent in manner” (“Psychological” 882). Howells’ implication that Chesnut’s earlier works were “simple” demonstrates that he, too, missed the underlying subversion in the texts. In Howells’ May 1900 review of Chesnut’s body of work, Howells first demonstrated his unawares of the depth of Chesnut’s characters as he casually, but not maliciously, referred to them as “the simple black lives in these enchanting tales” (“Mr.” 700). Had Howells realized the subversive message in each story as well as the character equality of Julius and John, his initial appreciation for Chesnut (evident in his 1900 review) would have been less enthusiastic.

The dialect within Julius’ character shrouds his cunningness to white readers, and while Howells was known to endorse dialect, as evidenced by his decision to publish Dunbar’s poetry, he might have rethought publishing dialectal texts which could be read at something other than face-value. According to the editor of Chesnut’s letters, Joseph McElrath, Chesnut’s friend Albion Tourgée, an attorney, writer, early civil rights advocate, and supporter of Chesnut’s dialectal stories, opposed “what he viewed as the distasteful kind of literary realism then advocated by the influential novelist and critic William Dean Howells” (*To Be* 45 n1).

While Tourgée supported Chesnut’s endeavors to become a successful author, their correspondence did not center on the inner-workings of Chesnut’s fiction. During the turn of the century, discussion of African Americans in literature had progressed toward activism for social reform and civil rights; therefore, as Tourgée and Chesnut had a vested interest in African American rights, their correspondence centered on that.

To a varying degree, Chesnutt had the same type of relationship with George Washington Cable. During Chesnutt's rise to success with his fiction (1889 – 1899), the two wrote often, frequently discussing Chesnutt's manuscript progress but the topic of dialect never surfaced. Although Cable mentored and advised Chesnutt on his writing, the editor of Cable and Chesnutt's letters, Matthew Wilson, states: "[Overall] Cable's letters [...] show someone who wants an ideological ally, particularly an African American one, in his effort to agitate for the political rights of African Americans" (Cable 10).

Walter Hines Page, the third *Atlantic* editor to leave an imprint on Chesnutt's career, can be credited as suggesting a collection of Chesnutt's conjure stories for a book. In his letter to Chesnutt dated March 30, 1898, Page suggested to Chesnutt that "if you had enough 'conjure' stories to make a book, even a small book, I cannot help feeling that you would succeed. All the readers who have read your stories agree on this – that 'The Goophered Grapevine' and 'Po' Sandy,' and the one or two others that have the same original quality that these show, are stories that are sure to live – in fact, I know of nothing so good of their kind anywhere" (qtd. in H. Chesnutt 92). With that encouragement, Chesnutt wrote and submitted enough conjure stories to Page for the collection *The Conjure Woman* (1899).

Page proved quite the cheerleader for Chesnutt. When Chesnutt's dialectical tale "The Wife of His Youth" was published in the July 1898 issue of *The Atlantic Monthly*, Page forwarded favorable comments about the story to Chesnutt including a letter from an enthusiastic James Lane Allen (June 27, 1898): "Who – in the name of the Lord! – is Charles W. Chesnutt? [...] I went through ["The Wife of His Youth"] without drawing a

breath – except to laugh out two or three times. It is the freshest, finest, most admirably held in and wrought out little story that has gladdened – and moistened – my eyes in many months” (qtd. in H. Chesnutt 96). Neither Page nor Allen, both respected literary men, mentioned Chesnutt’s dialect in their letters about Chesnutt’s stories. Their letters addressed the quality of Chesnutt’s writing and the difficult task he had in writing black characters without the element of sympathizer tendencies but at the same time appealing to white audiences. Chesnutt’s dialectical texts had widespread appeal to literary peers and to *most* reviewers in periodicals as well.

Chesnutt’s *The Conjure Woman* was published at the end of March 1899, and the collection included seven Uncle Julius tales. The reviews that appeared in the months following the book’s release varied in their assessment of the text.

This portion of an April 1899 review by an anonymous writer of the *Washington, D.C., Times* summarizes the point that throughout the reviews of Chesnutt, the dialect and the content within the text are not reviewed as separate entities: “They are told in the dialect of the North Carolina negro, and the story-teller, who is called Julius, is in his way as impressive a character as the world-famed Uncle Remus. Shrewd, wily, picturesque, ingratiating, deprecatory in manner, rich in imaginative lore, and withal kindly and simple of heart, he is a distinct addition to American literature, and there is not a line out of place in the portrait of him” (qtd. in McElrath 32). If the reviewer or critic found the dialect unpleasant, the content of the text was also found to be unpleasant. Sometimes, reviewers had problems with Chesnutt in an area outside his writing ability, and this resulted in a negative review of his book.

Often, differences in reviews were dependent upon where the reviewer was located. One review in question hails from Tennessee and was written by Anne Pendleton of the *Nashville American* (April 23, 1899). Pendleton compliments Chesnut by stating he “writes very well and makes interesting matter of his tales of negro superstition, astuteness and wit” (qtd. in McElrath 36). The following sentence in the review reveals Pendleton’s reasoning for discrediting Chesnut’s work: “Nevertheless, to a Southern mind there is just the least suspicion of a false note in his delineations of negro character. There seems to be lacking that fullness of understanding which only those born and reared in dominance over this peculiar people can wholly possess” (qtd. in McElrath 36). Evidently, even though Pendleton does not have a problem with Chesnut’s writing, she didn’t positively endorse his book because he isn’t a white Southern person “born and reared in dominance” over black people. A similar view drawing lines between the North and South comes from the *Richmond Times* on July 9, 1899. The anonymous writer begins the review by immediately dividing the North and South: “*The Conjure Woman* purports to be a story of Southern plantation life. Mr. Chesnut is an Ohioan, and the book is written from his point of view” (qtd. in McElrath 42). With respect to Chesnut’s dialect, the writer dismisses Chesnut’s talents: “In a dialectic point of view, the same ground has been covered by ‘Unc Remus’ of delightful memory, by ‘Mars Chan,’ and ‘Meh Lady,’ both perfect examples of negro speech and perfect expositions of negro character at its best and finest” (qtd. in McElrath 42). This demonstrates how readers and critics of dialectical texts did not differentiate between dialect and the content surrounding it. They were either appreciated or dismissed together. The reviewer ends the review with suggestions for which setting Chesnut

should be focusing his efforts on: “An Ohio pastoral or a Cleveland idyl we think would be much more in his line. He can safely leave the South and her institutions with their explanation and vindication to less biased and more familiar pens than his own [...]” (qtd. in McElrath 42). The agitation evident in the Southern periodical reviews is missing when the reviews are written and published in the Northeast. An anonymous review in the *New York Commercial Advertiser* (June 20, 1899) praises Chesnutt in the following manner: “Mr. Chesnutt, who shows an intimate knowledge of the superstitions, weaknesses, and character of the negro, gives us in a delightfully natural dialect a number of curious and whimsical stories [...]” (qtd. in McElrath 43). A review written by Florence Morgan in *Bookman* (a New York City-based literary journal) summarized Chesnutt’s book as follows:

The Conjure Woman is a collection of quaint tales, with an admirable Southern setting, replete with the humour and tragedy of slavery, so skillfully blended that often one does not know where the one begins and the other ends. The dialect in which the story-teller speaks is smooth and readable, evidently a means and not an end, and Mr. Chesnutt’s English is remarkable for its literary style and quality. (qtd. in McElrath 41)

A lone anonymous reviewer from the *Nashville Banner* (April 1, 1899) does take the time to analyze Chesnutt’s dialect against dialectical standards and assesses the dialect and content as separate entities. The reviewer approved of Chesnutt’s subject matter but admonished the Southern population for not being the first to write about similar topics: “The conjure experiences of the black man afford excellent material for literary work, and it is a reproach to the South that a Northern man has been the first to

make use of it” (“For Literary Folks” 14). For this reviewer, as with other Southern reviewers, allegiance with the South is strong: “[T]he fact that he is a Northern man causes the chief defect in Mr. Chestnut’s [sic] stories” (“For Literary Folks” 14). At the heart of the issue is Chesnut’s version of negro dialect; the reviewer labeled it “Yankee rehash” and listed dialect words “noo” and “crick” as examples found throughout Chesnut’s *The Conjure Woman* which, the reviewer claimed, were “so distinctly Northern that each often served during the civil war as a shibboleth by which to detect Northern spies” (“For Literary Folks” 14). The reviewer also bemoaned that Chesnut’s use of “turnt” is a “Westernism[...]more like the dialect one reads in James Whitcomb Riley’s Hoosier poems[...]” (“For Literary Folks” 14). The reviewer found Chesnut’s stories “very true to nature and to their Southern environment” and concluded the review with the affirmation, “The novelty of these tales and the artistic and entertaining manner in which they are told are sure to win for them a wide popularity and give the author an enviable place among American storywriters” (“For Literary Folks” 14). This reviewer, above other reviewers as well as renowned literary critics, was able to analyze the dialect separate from the content (subject matter and writing skill) of Chesnut’s stories, thereby providing a comprehensive picture of the complexity Chesnut faced when writing for not only white readers but Southern readers defensive of their region since the Civil War.

Chapter Six

Agency in Twain's Dialect Characters

In November 1874, Mark Twain published his first two Southern negro dialect sketches. "Sociable Jimmy" appeared in the *New York Times* and "A True Story, Repeated Word for Word as I Heard It" appeared in *The Atlantic Monthly*. Both stories were remarkable for their dialectal characters based on people Twain knew. Also in both stories, Twain introduced the dialect character and then surrendered control of the story to that character by minimizing himself to a secondary narrator. This contrasted with the typical frame narratives of the late nineteenth century which began with a Standard English speaking narrator, transitioned to a dialect narrator and concluded with a reintroduction of the Standard English speaking narrator in order to reclaim supremacy of the narrative. Twain had successfully used a frame narrative with his popular "The Celebrated Jumping Frog of Calaveras County" (1865) which included Old Southwestern dialect. In these two texts, however, Twain narrated the introduction of each story and then permanently minimized his narrator role which left the dialectal black characters in power through to the sketches' conclusions.

Twain's narrative technique gave black dialectal characters positions of power, a controversial gesture in the Southern postbellum era. The agency exhibited by the dialectal characters of the two texts was remarkable in another way. Typical late

nineteenth century dialectal characters were inextricably bound to the white race in Plantation fiction, and Twain's writing went against that notion. Not only did he exclude the white race as a centerpiece to the sketches, but in each sketch he even went so far as to expose shortcomings of the white race. As Twain scholar David Smith noted: "Mark Twain pokes fun at both the white and the black townfolk, but in making the whites more ridiculous, he distinguishes himself from most of his literary contemporaries" (437).

These two dialect tales were predecessors for *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* (1876) and *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1885) as Twain's enthrallment with Southern negro dialect was clearly beginning to command his attention in 1874. This evolution of Southern dialect writing seems natural for Twain who, as biographer Ron Powers noted, "[e]ven as a small child [...] could disgorge entire sections of adventure novels to move along the 'plot' of some fantasy enactment with his friends. His rote memorization skills at school became legendary. Some of his best sketches – 'Sociable Jimmy,' 'A True Story Just as I Heard It' [sic] – are, if not virtual transcriptions of recollected dialogue, masterful approximations of it" (28). Twain's keen ear for dialect helped form his art of authentic dialectal writing, and his decision to create dialect characters with agency demonstrated his socially and politically progressive thinking that went against nineteenth century white race norms.

On November 29, 1874, the *New York Times* published "Sociable Jimmy," a short sketch with a dialectal child character named Jimmy. "Sociable Jimmy" was Twain's "first published work in which the voice of a child took center stage" (Fishkin 26). Twain met Jimmy, a local boy whose real name was William Evans, while on the

lecture circuit in Paris, Illinois, in either late 1871 or early 1872. Jimmy brought Twain his evening meal in his room at the Paris House Hotel, and the encounter between the two left such an impression on Twain that he penned “Sociable Jimmy” “in a private letter” (Twain, “Sociable Jimmy” 7) which highlighted the child’s youthfulness and vernacular. Even after he had written the sketch, Jimmy was still in his thoughts as he mentioned the boy in his January 11, 1872 letter to his wife Livy: “I think I could swing my legs over the arms of a chair & that boy’s spirit would descend upon me & enter into me” (Twain, “SLC to OLC”).

Although meeting young Jimmy was permanently imprinted on Twain, as Powers has pointed out, the sketch “received little notice and [Twain] did not collect or reprint it in his lifetime. It wasn’t republished until 1943, in the *Twainian*, a journal for Mark Twain enthusiasts. It received no scholarly commentary until 1978” (313). At that time, Twain scholar Paul Fatout addressed it in *Mark Twain Speaks for Himself* and considered Twain to have been “attuning his ear to the variations of Negro dialect” (qtd. in Fishkin 163n88). Furthermore, “[n]either after its first republication in 1943, nor after its second in 1978, did the piece elicit any additional critical comment” (Fishkin 32). Awareness of the sketch peaked with Twain scholar Shelley Fisher Fishkin’s *Was Huck Black?* (1993) which theorized that the character Huckleberry Finn is a descendent of the character Jimmy.

“Sociable Jimmy” has a milder vernacular than that found in the later writings of Harris, Page or Chesnutt. The typical orthography is present in common words: “an’,” “de,” “dat,” “dey,” and “mawnin’.” Although Twain used eye dialect to convey pronunciation, he did not use eye dialect to diminish Jimmy’s intellectual or educational

level. For example, Twain did not alter the orthography of words that did not need phonetic changes such as “wud” for “would” or “blu” for “blue.” That decision allowed readers to see Jimmy as an intellectual equal to the narrator (Twain) as well as to the only other character in the sketch, the landlord Bill. Twain’s Jimmy speaks with a fair amount of Standard English as well. The shortened endings of words like “never” and “river” are absent. Heavier dialect would have demanded the orthographical variants: “nebah” and “rivah,” for example. Young Jimmy, who Twain placed at age ten but was actually six or seven at the time of their meeting, easily pronounced polysyllabic words such as, “considerable” and “another” in Standard English, words that in dialect of Plantation fiction would have been altered to heighten the dialect or diminish the character’s intellect level, for example “consid’able” and “nurr.”

“Sociable Jimmy,” unlike the fiction of Harris, Page and Chesnut, is devoid of mention – implicit or explicit – of the Civil War. Although Twain never established the sketch’s setting, it does not *feel* as though it is set in the postbellum Southern United States. The sketch’s actual setting of Paris, Illinois, wasn’t discovered until over one hundred years after “Sociable Jimmy” was written. Indeed, Jimmy’s personality, with his exuberance and carefree approach to life, and behaviors are unlike those of the Southern dialect narrators (Uncle Remus, Sam and Uncle Julius) who are relegated to their respective plantations. Jimmy entered the sketch fully displaying personal agency when he directly engaged Twain and “sat down in a big arm-chair, hung both his legs over one of the arms, and looked comfortable and conversational” (Twain, “Sociable Jimmy” 7). His nonchalance is primarily due to being a child; however, *Southern* black

children would have had reservations approaching an adult white male in such a casual manner despite slavery's abolishment more than a decade prior.

Twain was caught unawares by Jimmy's openness but fascinated by his unfamiliarity with or disregard of social conversational boundaries. Twain willingly accepted Jimmy into his hotel room and openly listened to Jimmy talk. The story progressed without racial weightiness, and the young boy's personality was seen without interference from or negative influence of the white race, which was in sharp contrast to the black storytellers in Plantation fiction. Readers of "Sociable Jimmy" were able to fully know Jimmy's character uninhibited by the constraints of racial tension and the ghosts of slavery. For example, when Bill the landlord enters Twain's hotel room, Jimmy speaks to him as confidently and unhindered as he does to Twain:

"Bill, didn't you say dat dey was only thirty-three hund'd people in dis city?"

"Yes. [A]bout thirty-three hundred is the population now."

"Well, some folks says dey's fo' thousan'."

"Yes, I know they do; but it isn't correct."

"Bill, I don't think dis gen'lman kin eat a whole prairie-chicken, but dey tole me to fetch it all up."

"Yes, that's all right – he ordered it." (Twain, "Sociable Jimmy" 7)

Refreshingly, Jimmy's sense of agency is so advanced that he considers himself equal to the other individuals in the sketch, regardless of race or age. During his storytelling, Jimmy even clarifies to Twain that the drunk people he was discussing were not black but "de *white* folks" get drunk "every Christmas and carries on" (Twain, "Sociable Jimmy" 7). Jimmy's comfortableness in talking about the raucous behavior of white people demonstrates that he has lived his young life thus far with less dominance from

the white race than previous generations had experienced. Twain's decision to leave this clarification in the sketch demonstrates that he was not intimidated to address political issues such as white supremacy. Twain's young black dialectal character was further developed than dialectal characters still tethered to the white race in Plantation fiction, and Jimmy has a light-heartedness that the former slave characters, such as Uncle Remus, Sam and Uncle Julius, are unable to achieve despite the authors' best attempts to portray it.

In Twain's "A True Story, Repeated Word for Word as I Heard It," the youthful lightheartedness found in "Sociable Jimmy" is absent, but the dialect character with agency is still present. The character Aunt Rachel is based on Mary Ann Cord who was a servant at Quarry Farm in Elmira, New York, where the Twain family spent their summers beginning in the early-1870s. She had been previously enslaved in Virginia and her husband and seven children had been sold away from her. She told Twain the story of losing her family and being reunited with her youngest child, the only one of her children she ever saw again, 13 years later. The story she shared with Twain became "A True Story, Repeated Word for Word as I Heard It."

The short story was Twain's first contribution published in *The Atlantic Monthly* (November 1874). He downplayed its worth in his September 2, 1874, submission note to *Atlantic* literary editor, William Dean Howells: "I enclose also a 'True Story' which has no humor in it. You can pay as lightly as you choose for that, if you want it, for it is rather out of my line. I have not altered the old colored woman's story except to begin it at the beginning, instead of the middle, as she did—& traveled both ways." (Twain, "SLC to William Dean Howells 2 Sept"). Howells responded favorably to Twain's submission,

proclaiming on September 8, 1874: "I've kept the True Story which I think extremely good and touching with the best and reallest kind of black talk in it" (Twain, *Mark Twain – Howells* 24). On September 17, 1874, Howells wrote again stating that "A True Story" "delights me more and more; I wish you had about forty of 'em" (Twain, *Mark Twain – Howells* 25). In further correspondence during the negotiating process of "A True Story," Twain explained his early methodology of writing dialect in a letter to Howells dated September 20, 1874:

All right, my boy, send proof sheets here. I amend dialect stuff by talking & talking it till it sounds right—& I had difficulty with this negro talk because a negro sometimes (rarely) says "goin'" & sometimes "gwyne." & they make just such discrepancies in other words —& when you come to reproduce them on paper they look as if the variation resulted from the writer's carelessness. But I want to work at the proofs & get the dialect as nearly right as possible. (Twain "SLC to William Dean Howells 20 Sept")

In his 1907 "Recollections of an Atlantic Editorship," Howells recalled that "'A True Story' was but three pages long, and I remember the anxiety with which the business side of the magazine tried to compute its pecuniary value. It was finally decided to give the author twenty dollars a page, a rate unexampled in our modest history. [...] I have never regretted that we paid him so handsomely for his first contribution" (Howells, "Recollections" 601).

Howells was so enamored of "A True Story" that he twice requested Twain send more stories in its vein. His first request came shortly following Twain's submission of "A True Story." On September 30, 1874, Howells wrote, "Couldn't you send me some such

story as that colored one, for our Jan'y number – that is, within a month?" (Twain, *Mark Twain – Howells* 32). And on October 5, 1874, he wrote: "Are you going to give me another of those little stories?" (Twain, *Mark Twain – Howells* 32). Twain responded in an October 24, 1874, letter:

[...] Twichell & I have had a long walk in the woods & I got to telling him about old Mississippi days of steamboating glory & grandeur as I saw them (during 5 years) from the pilot house. He said "What a virgin subject to hurl into a magazine!" I hadn't thought of that before. Would you like a series of papers to run through 3 months or 6 or 9? – or about 4 months, say? (Twain, *Mark Twain – Howells* 34)

The subsequent submission to Howells became "Old Times on the Mississippi" which was serialized in *The Atlantic Monthly* in 1875. Howells wrote in his "Recollections of an Atlantic Editorship" about Twain:

He came first with "A True Story," one of those noble pieces of humanity with which the South has atoned chiefly if not solely through him for all its despite to the negro. Then he came with other things, but preeminently with "Old Times on the Mississippi," which I hope I am not too fondly mistaken in thinking I suggested his writing for the magazine. (Howells, "Recollections" 601)

Similar to "Sociable Jimmy," "A True Story" begins with Twain placing himself in the text as a narrator, named "Misto C-." In the story's opening lines, he describes Aunt Rachel in a manner that lulls readers into believing the story is written in the plantation-style with stereotypical characters. For example, Aunt Rachel is described as "a

cheerful, hearty soul, and it was no more trouble for her to laugh than it is for a bird to sing” (Twain, “A True Story” 591). The short story, however, is not structured as a plantation-style tale. Southern literature scholar Ed Piacentino observed that Twain seemed “to have a divided purpose: to address the issue of race relations through the medium of African American voice but in a manner that would not undermine or seriously challenge the racial ideology of the *Atlantic Monthly’s* white readers” (42). In order to be published in the white-reader dominated literary magazines of the late nineteenth century, authors addressing race had to exercise a degree of conformity in their writing. Whether the authorial intent of writing dialectal texts was like Chesnut’s, who crafted Uncle Julius to surreptitiously convey slavery’s atrocities, or Twain’s, who used mild humor to convey the same, both *Atlantic Monthly* contributors saw the political and social importance of educating readers on the inhumanity of slavery through their writing and both used dialect as their medium to do so.

After Misto C–’s introduction to the sketch, he surrenders the story to Aunt Rachel’s voice whose dialect further relaxes readers into ease with the text. Aunt Rachel’s animated personality coupled with her dialect adds humor to her story before she begins the poignant portion of it: “Well, sah, I was raised in ole Fo’ginny, but my mother she was raised in Maryland; an’ my *souls!* she was turrible when she ’d git started! My *lan’!* but she’d make de fur fly!” (“A True Story” 592). As Aunt Rachel’s story progresses it is revealed that, unlike Page’s former slave narrator Sam, her story isn’t centered on her previous owners, and she doesn’t relish her days in slavery. Conversely, her personal agency is evident as she fearlessly explains to Misto C– how her husband and seven children were sold away from her during slavery. Twain

successfully conveyed a firsthand account of slavery from a survivor and had that account published in a major literary magazine at a time when sectionalism and racial tensions were still heightened in the United States.

Having Aunt Rachel speak in dialect added credibility to her story. Her credibility was important because she explains how she and her husband loved each other as well as their children, something that white people had long promulgated that slaves were unable to do: “Well, sah, my ole man – dat ’s my husban’ – he was lovin’ an’ kind to me, jist as kind as you is to yo’ own wife. An’ we had chil’en – seven chil’en – an’ we loved dem chil’en jist de same as you loves yo’ chil’en” (“A True Story” 591). By speaking in authentic dialect, she deflates myths about black people. Aunt Rachel’s connection to slavery in the short story is unlike that of Plantation fiction former slave narrators because she does not mention the institution except to relay the damage it caused her and her family; there is no mention of her former owners in a haloed light. Twain’s portrayal of a dialect-speaking black woman with a high sense of agency was a previously unexplored phenomenon in dialectal texts.

Twain ended the story with Aunt Rachel proclaiming, “Oh, no, Misto C–, / ain’t had no trouble. An’ no *joy!*” which left readers wondering if they should laugh or cry as Misto C– is humbled by the feisty narrator (Twain, “A True Story” 594). Misto C–’s false assumption that Aunt Rachel had “lived sixty years and never had any trouble” only to learn her life’s tragedies was an embarrassment for the white narrator (Twain, “A True Story” 591). And Twain, in reality the one being embarrassed, was brave enough to write about his error because he saw the importance of exposing the problem of looking through the white-race lens without consideration of the black race. White authors

commonly suffered from the limitation of writing strictly with the white-race in mind. Southern Agrarian “[Allen] Tate names Mark Twain as the only writer of the period whose artistic scrutiny of his world included adequate self-questioning, an alert critical temper, and the genius to match these to a sincere attachment to a deeply felt Southern experience” (MacKethan 218).

Writers were not the only ones to suffer from short-sightedness; white readers did as well. This inability to comprehend “A True Story,” since it was not one of Twain’s humorous sketches, left readers unsure what to make of the sketch. The following year (1875) when “A True Story” was collected in *Mark Twain’s Sketches: New and Old*, Howells included in his review the dilemma the story evoked:

Mostly the story was described in the notices of the magazine as a humorous sketch by Mark Twain; sometimes it was mentioned as a paper apparently out of the author’s usual line; again it was handled non-committally as one of Mark Twain’s extravagances. Evidently the critical mind feared a lurking joke. Not above two or three notices out of hundreds recognized A True Story for what it was, namely, a study of character as true as life itself, strong, tender, and most movingly pathetic in its perfect fidelity to the tragic fact. (Howells, “Review” 39)

Howells recognized that Twain’s “A True Story” was a pivotal text in Twain’s writing career because not only had Twain successfully written the story in black dialect, but he had also stretched beyond humor sketches. Twain’s progressive “A True Story” hosted a black protagonist making critical sarcastic political statements about her life spent as a slave, at the expense of a white man, but readers were uncertain how to interpret Twain’s incorporation of such weightiness in dialect literature.

Readers familiar with Twain's previous work anticipated that "A True Story" would be a humorous sketch, and they were confused when they encountered a complex dialectal character who showed not only bits of humor but also pathos. If readers weren't astute enough to stop looking for humor within the text, they were certainly disappointed, and Howells encouraged people to reread the text: "We beg the reader to turn to it again in this book. We can assure him that he has a great surprise and a strong emotion in store for him. The rugged truth of the sketch leaves all other stories of slave life infinitely far behind, and reveals a gift in the author for the simple dramatic report of reality which we have seen equaled in no other American writer" (Howells, "Review" 39).

Like "Sociable Jimmy," there is little critical comment on "A True Story." What was written, however, varied between favor and dismay at Twain's subject matter. The *Every Saturday* reviewer wrote neutrally and briefly about Twain's sketch: "The November *Atlantic* will contain a faithful sketch of a Southern negro woman, by 'Mark Twain.' The humorist scarcely appears at all in his own person, but he puts the character he draws in a very clear light" ("Notes" 471). The *New York Times* allotted one sentence to the sketch, calling it "amusing," and the *New York Herald* labeled it "a semi-humorous, semi-serious sketch" ("The November Magazines" 2; "Literary Chit-Chat" 5).

Outside of Howells' praise, there was sparse comment from Twain's literary peers. Howells passed along praises to Twain from author John William De Forest who wrote: "By the way, tell Mark Twain to try pathos now & then. His 'True Story,'—the story of the old negress,—was a really great thing, amazingly natural & humorous, & touching even to the drawing of tears" (Twain, "Explanatory Note"). Writer and critic

Louise Chandler Moulton was not impressed with “A True Story,” proclaiming in her *New York Tribune* review that “Mark Twain can be so very funny that we are as naturally dissatisfied with him, when he is not funny at all, as we should be with a parrot that could not talk, or a rose that had no odor” (6).

Twain’s two 1874 dialectal sketches were ahead of their time and unfortunately went largely unnoticed upon their release. Dialectal texts were just gaining popularity when Twain penned “Sociable Jimmy” and “A True Story.” Had they been published later, in the mid- to late-1880s when Plantation fiction was at its peak in popularity, they might have had a significant impact of increasing social awareness surrounding the truth of slavery’s injustices and black oppression caused by attitudes of white supremacy. As they stand, “Sociable Jimmy” and “A True Story, Repeated Word for Word as I Heard It” are admirable for their boldness in endorsing agency in black characters who spoke a vernacular in which the author did not use as a tool for humor or further subjugation.

Conclusion

Each author in this study contributed to the American dialect movement in the latter part of the nineteenth century. Although the commonality among the authors is dialect, the approaches and purposes for writing that dialect differ significantly. Each author contributed to the preservation of regional dialects found in the United States at that time. Comparisons between the authors' texts are challenging as each, while outwardly appearing to be like the others, is unique in linguistic style and content. The Midwestern poets Riley and Dunbar, the former 23 years older than the latter, had little in common during their careers outside of writing dialectal poetry. The short story authors approached their dialectal texts differently, often from polar opposite political stances. While collectively they contributed to the dialectal literary movement, each author individually deserves credit for being original in his contribution to dialectal literature.

Dialect in the late-1800s evolved from the skits of the Old Southwest humorists whence Twain began. This evolution reached its pinnacle when dialectal texts were published in national literary magazines such as *The Atlantic* and *The Century*. Readers in the late-nineteenth century, including critics, did not separate their analysis of dialect from analysis of the content of the text; if they liked the dialect, then they liked the text and vice versa.

Indiana Hoosier James Whitcomb Riley, whose pastoral dialect poetry was consumed by Indiana readers (child and adult) for generations, had a significant impact on poetry in that region of the United States. Unlike the other authors in this study, Riley did not associate a race with his dialectal characters. His dialect was region-specific and even age-specific but it did not designate race. Whereas most authors elected to write only one type of dialect, Riley wrote poetry in regional (Hoosier) dialect as well as child dialect as seen in “She ‘Displains’ It.”

In some respects, Riley’s writing finds a common thread with Thomas Nelson Page’s writing. Both authors wrote from a nostalgic point of view. Riley was as proud of his Indiana heritage as Page was of his Virginia heritage, and this pride was evident in their writings. Both authors also witnessed significant change to their region during their lifespan and were melancholy toward that change. Riley felt the strain of industrialization stretching into the Midwestern region of the U.S. and Page experienced the abolishment of the slave-based agricultural industry in the Southeast. Riley wrote wistfully about Indiana agrarian lifestyles as seen in his poem “When the Frost is on the Punkin” and conveyed the pleasures of rural living with easy-going personalities found in those circles such as in his poem “My Philosophy.” This retrospective tone coincides with Page’s approach which yearned for the days of slavery and white supremacy found in his Virginia homeland.

African American authors achieved recognition in the late-1800s with works published in major literary magazines. Through the use of masked dialect, Paul Laurence Dunbar and Charles W. Chesnutt became successful African American writers in the midst of a white-dominated publishing industry in the United States. Both

authors applied the dialectal mask to their texts in order to implicitly convey messages about the egregious treatment of the black race at the hands of the white race.

In addition to his masked dialect poems “An Ante-Bellum Sermon” and “To the Eastern Shore,” which implicitly addressed slavery, Dunbar also masked his poetry to subversively send messages of empowerment to black readers. In “The Spellin’-Bee,” for example, Dunbar did not introduce the topic of race directly but reinforced the view that black people should strive for literacy. It was through his deliberate absence of mentioning race in his poems that allowed people, black and white, to identify with the characters on an individual basis. Dunbar’s dialectal characters, like those found in the works of Harris and Chesnut, were morally upstanding in their words and actions. Their existence was not that of minstrel-type jokesters but ones based on everyday human nature, and it was through the normality of these characters’ actions that made them easy for the readers to identify with.

Uncle Remus, Joel Chandler Harris’ famous good-natured narrator in his collection of African American folktales, was a former slave character who guided readers through stories about Br’er Rabbit and Br’er Fox, metaphorical representations of the black and white races. Harris placed Uncle Remus as a benign narrator in the folktales in order that readers not focus on him but on the folktales he was telling. This type of framed story was constructed not unlike the Plantation fiction of Page; however, Harris wrote with a higher purpose than Page. Where Page used dialect to campaign for white supremacy, Harris, by serving as an amanuensis, used it for historical preservation of African American folktales. By remaining neutral in the folk stories, Uncle Remus held appeal to readers: Northern and Southern, black and white.

By contrast, Thomas Nelson Page's Plantation fiction disregarded any consideration of neutrality by propagating white supremacy through short stories set in the post-Civil War era. With characters of inauthentic nature, Page's 1884 best-known short story "Marse Chan" misled readers into accepting these characters as representative of black and white people living in the Southeast United States after the Civil War. The dialect of the former slave character Sam further lulled readers into acceptance of him as a legitimate representation of Southern black people. By having Sam speak in black vernacular with a tenderness about having been a slave, Page perpetuated the myth of a magnificent courtly Southern culture in which black people were proud to have been a part.

Page wrote from the perspective of a white lens, even going so far as to give this lens to the black dialectal character Sam. Charles W. Chesnutt, however, revamped Plantation fiction in 1887 with his dialectal character Uncle Julius who spoke in a masked dialect. Through Uncle Julius, Chesnutt implicitly introduced readers to the truths about slavery and feelings felt by the black population that experienced the institution firsthand. This was especially seen in "Po' Sandy." Not only did Chesnutt forego the white perspective in his short stories, but he gave his dialectal character superiority over his white counterpart John. In the Uncle Julius tales "Hot-Foot Hannibal" and "The Goophered Grapevine," Uncle Julius manipulated John into following Julius' personal agenda. Unlike the dialectal characters of Harris and Page, Chesnutt's Uncle Julius mentally challenges and outsmarts white people. With the evolution of the former slave character came the maturation of the dialect he spoke. Uncle Julius' dialect was sophisticated with a richer vocabulary than that of Uncle Remus and Sam.

Vexing the matter of dialectal characters in late-nineteenth century American literature were two early Mark Twain sketches. In 1874, Twain wrote his first sketches with negro dialect characters “Sociable Jimmy” and “A True Story, Repeated Word for Word as I Heard It.” Both stories went largely unnoticed by readers and critics alike. Twain’s representation of African Americans who spoke in dialect differed significantly from the short stories to come in the Plantation fiction of the 1880s. Had the texts received greater reader attention, the future of the genre of dialectal American literature would be altered.

The dialectal characters in Twain’s texts, Jimmy and Aunt Rachel, were spirited autonomous figures who did not exhibit any of the characteristics of being oppressed that were typically found in postbellum-fiction characters. Twain’s progressive writing even went so far as to include jocularly at the expense of white people, which also was not evident in postbellum fiction. In “A True Story,” Twain himself is the white person who is humbled by Aunt Rachel.

Although Twain’s sketches went largely unnoticed, one key literary critic of American literature, William Dean Howells, took note and encouraged Twain to continue writing dialect in the vein of “A True Story.” Howells championed dialect and, with the exception of Harris’ work, his influence is evident on the careers of all the authors herein. He lauded Riley’s poetry. He wrote accolades proclaiming Dunbar’s uniqueness. He wrote kindly of Page’s romantic viewpoint although differing in his own beliefs. Lastly, he wrote approvingly of Chesnut’s short stories despite seemingly missing the underlying subversion. Howells, like most other reviewers, rarely analyzed dialect as a separate entity from the content of the text it was in.

Like the general public, if a critic approved of the text then approval of the dialect within the text followed. Overall, criticism of dialectal poetry and fiction concentrated on the actions and attitudes of characters that supposedly represented people native to the region in which the text was based, not on the linguistic analysis of the dialect. Dialect fascinated and perplexed readers to the extent that they did not think to (or were unable to) analyze dialect for its linguistic accuracy. Textual elements, like subject and characters that surrounded the dialect, captured readers' attention and prevented them from distinguishing dialect as a separate feature within the narrative, prose or poetic. Instead, readers analyzed textual content combined with dialect as a whole. Therefore, when readers expressed approval of a dialectal text, that approval included content and dialect, and disapproval of a text included both parts as well. This pattern of reader analysis is seen repeatedly. Riley's poetry performances captivated Twain to the extent that Twain equally lauded Riley's dialect. Dunbar and Chesnut were praised for their dialectal texts, but had white critics understood the complex dialectal mask that existed beneath the surface of their writings, approval of both the subject matter and the dialect would surely have diminished. Harris' rendering of African American folklore reached nationwide acclaim for authenticity of the folktales, and admiration for the authentic negro dialect followed. Page's romanticized stories of nineteenth century Piedmont Virginia, however, received negative criticism for both stereotypical characters and challenging dialect. Twain's first sketches incorporating negro dialect received little critical attention, but the criticism the sketches did receive was comprehensive approval for both dialect and content. Critical discussion of dialect authenticity and linguistic accuracy formally developed after the turn of the century. However, through

examination of critical commentary and literary correspondence, it is evident that late-nineteenth century readers found favor in vernacular if they found the text subject matter agreeable to their political taste and popular liking.

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Appendix

“When the Frost is on the Punkin” (1882) by James Whitcomb Riley (*Complete Works*)

When the frost is on the punkin and the fodder's in the shock,
And you hear the kyouck and gobble of the struttin' turkey-cock,
And the clackin' of the guineys, and the cluckin' of the hens,
And the rooster's hallylooyer as he tiptoes on the fence;
O, it's then's the times a feller is a-feelin' at his best,
With the risin' sun to greet him from a night of peaceful rest,
As he leaves the house, bareheaded, and goes out to feed the stock,
When the frost is on the punkin and the fodder's in the shock.

They's something kindo' harty-like about the atmusfere
When the heat of summer's over and the coolin' fall is here—
Of course we miss the flowers, and the blossums on the trees,
And the mumble of the hummin'-birds and buzzin' of the bees;
But the air's so appetizin'; and the landscape through the haze
Of a crisp and sunny morning of the airy autumn days
Is a pictur' that no painter has the colorin' to mock—
When the frost is on the punkin and the fodder's in the shock.

The husky, rusty russel of the tossels of the corn,
And the raspin' of the tangled leaves, as golden as the morn;
The stubble in the furries – kindo' lonesome-like, but still
A-preachin' sermons to us of the barns they growed to fill;
The strawstack in the medder, and the reaper in the shed;
The hosses in theyr stalls below – the clover overhead!—
O, it sets my hart a-clickin' like the tickin' of a clock,
When the frost is on the punkin and the fodder's in the shock!

Then your apples all is getherd, and the ones a feller keeps
Is poured around the celler-floor in red and yeller heaps;
And your cider-makin' 's over, and your wimmern-folks is through
With their mince and apple-butter, and theyr souse and sausage, too! ...
I don't know how to tell it – but ef sich a thing could be
As the Angels wantin' boardin', and they'd call around on *me*—
I'd want to 'commodate 'em – all the whole-indurin' flock—
When the frost is on the punkin and the fodder's in the shock!

“My Philosophy” (1882) by James Whitcomb Riley (*Complete Works*)

I ain't, ner don't p'tend to be,
Much posted on philosophy;
But thare is times, when all alone,
I work out idees of my own.
And of these same thare is a few
I'd like to jest refer to you—
Pervidin' that you don't object
To listen clos't and rickollect.

I allus argy that a man
Who does about the best he can
Is plenty good enough to suit
This lower mundane institute—
No matter ef his daily walk
Is subject fer his neighbor's talk,
And critic-minds of ev'ry whim
Jest all git up and go fer him!

I knowed a feller onc't that had
The yellor-janders mighty bad,—
And each and ev'ry friend he'd meet
Would stop and give him some receet
Fer cuorin' of 'em. But he'd say
He kindo' thought they'd go away
Without no medicin', and boast
That he'd git well without one doste.

He kep' a-yellerin' on — and they
Perdictin' that he'd die some day
Before he knowed it! Tuck his bed,
The feller did, and lost his head,
And wundered in his mind a spell—
Then rallied, and, at last, got well;
But ev'ry friend that said he'd die

Went back on him eternally!

It's natchurl enough, I guess,
When some gits more and some gits less,
Fer them-uns on the slimmest side
To claim it ain't a fare divide;
And I've knowed some to lay and wait,
And git up soon, and set up late,
To ketch some feller they could hate
Fer goin' at a faster gait.

The signs is bad when folks commence
A-findin' fault with Providence,
And balkin' 'cause the earth don't shake
At ev'ry prancin' step they take.
No man is grate tel he can see
How less than little he would be
Ef stripped to self, and stark and bare
He hung his sign out anywhare.

My doctern is to lay aside
Contensions, and be satisfied:
Jest do your best, and praise er blame
That follers that, counts jest the same.
I've allus noticed grate success
Is mixed with troubles, more er less,
And it's the man who does the best
That gits more kicks than all the rest.

"The Spellin' Bee" (1895) by Paul Laurence Dunbar (*Majors*)

I never shall furgit that night when father hitched up
Dobbin,
And all us youngsters clambered in an' down the road
went bobbin'
To school where we wuz kep' at work in every kind o'
weather,
But where that night a spellin' bee wuz callin' us
together.

'Twuz one o' Heaven's banner nights, the stars wuz all
a glitter,
The moon was shinin' like the hand o' God had jest
now lit her.
The ground wuz white with spotless snow, the blast
wuz sort o' stingin';
But underneath our round-about, you bet our hearts
wuz singin'.
That spellin' bee had be'n the talk o' many a precious
moment,
The youngsters all wuz wild to see jes' what the
precious show meant
An' we whose years wuz in their teens, was little less
desirous
O' gittin' to the meetin' so's our sweethearts could
admire us.
So on we went so anxious fur to satisfy our mission
That father had to box our ears, to smother our ambition,
But boxin' ears wuz too short work to hinder our
arrivin',
He jest turned roun' an' smacked us all, an' kep' right
on a drivin'.
Well, soon the schoolhouse hove in sight, the winders
beamin' brightly;
The sound o' talkin' reached our ears and voices laffin'
lightly.
It puffed us up so full an' big 'at I'll jest bet a dollar,
There wan't a feller there but felt the strain upon his
collar.
So down we jumped an' in we went ez sprightly ez you
make 'em,
But somethin' grabbed us by the knees an' straight
began to shake 'em.
Fur once within that lighted room, our feelin's took a
canter,
An' scurried to the zero mark ez quick ez Tam
O'Shanter.
Cause there wuz crowds o' people there, both sexes an'
all stations;
It looked like all the town had come an' brought all
their relations.
The first I saw wuz Nettie Gray, I thought that girl
was dearer
'N' gold an' when I got a chance, you bet I aided up
near her.
An' Farmer Dobbse's girl wuz there, the one 'at Jim

was sweet on,
An' Cyrus Jones an' Mandy Smith an' Faith an'
Patience Deaton.
Then Parson Brown an' Lawyer Jones were present –
all attention,
An' piles on piles of other folks too numerous to
mention.
The master rose an' briefly said: "Good friends, dear
brother Crawford
To spur the pupils' minds along, a little prize has
offered.

To him who spells the best to-night – or 't may be 'her'
– no tellin' –
He offers ez a jest reward, this precious work on
spellin',
A little blue-backed spellun' book with fancy scarlet
trimmin';
We boys devoured it with our eyes – so did the girls
an' women.
He held it up where all could see, then on the table
set it,
An' ev'ry speller in the house felt mortal bound to
get it.
At his command we fell in line, prepared to do our
dooty,
Outspell the rest an' set 'em down, an' carry home the
booty.
'Twas then the merry times began, the blunders, an'
the laffin',
The nudges an' the nods an' winks an' stale good-
natured chaffin'.
Ole Uncle Hiram Dane wuz there, the closest man a
livin',
Whose only bugbear seemed to be the dreadful fear o'
givin'.
His bear was long, his hair uncut, his clothes all bare
an' dingy;
It wuzn't 'cause the man wuz pore, but jest so mortal
stingy.
An' there he sot by Sally Riggs a smilin' an' a smirkin',
An' all his children lef' to home a diggin' an' a workin'.
A widower, he wuz an' Sal was thinkin' 'at she'd wing
him;
I reckon he wuz wond'rin' what them rings o' her'n
would bring him.

An' when the spellin' test commenced, he up an' took
his station,
A-spellin' with the best o' them to beat the very nation.
An' when he'd spell some youngster down, he'd turn to
look at Sally,
An' say: "The teachin' now-a-days can't be o' no great
vally."
But true enough the adage says, "Pride walks in
slipp'ry places,"
Fur soon a thing occurred that put a smile on all our
faces.
The laffter jest kep' ripplin' 'roun' an' teacher couldn't
quell it,

Fur when he give out "charity," ole Hiram couldn't
spell it.
But laffin's ketchin' an' it throwed some others off
their bases,
An' folks 'ud miss the very word that seemed to fit
their cases.
Why, fickle little Jessie Lee come near the house upsettin'
By puttin' in a double kay to spell the word coquettin'.
An' when it come to Cyrus Jones, it tickled me all
over—
Him settin' up to Mandy Smith an' got sot down on
"lover."
But Lawyer Jones of all gone men did shorely look
the gonest,
When he found out that he'd furgot to put the "h" in
"honest."
An' Parson Brown whose sermons were too long fur
toleration,
Caused lots o' smiles by missin' when they give out
"condensation."
So one by one they giv it up – the big words kep' a
landin',
Till me an' Nettie Gray wuz left, the only ones
a-standin',
An' then my inward strife began – I guess my mind
was petty—
I did so want that spellin' book; but then to spell
down Nettie
Jest sort o' went agin my grain – I somehow couldn't
do it,
An' when I git a notion fixed, I'm great on stickin
to it.

So when they giv' the next word out – I hadn't orter
 tell it,
 But then 'twas all fur Nettie's sake – I missed so's she
 could spell it.
 She spelt the word, then looked at me so lovin'-like an'
 mello',
 I tell you 't sent a hundred pins a-shootin' through a
 fello'.
 O' course I had to stand the jokes an' chaffin' of the
 fello's,
 But when they handed her the book I vow I wasn't
 jealous.
 We sung a hymn an' Parson Brown dismissed us like
 he orter,
 Fur la! he'd learned a thing er two an' made his
 blessin' shorter.
 'Twas late an' cold when we got out, but Nettie liked
 cold weather,
 An' so did I, so we agreed we'd jest walk home
 together.
 We both wuz silent, fur of words we nuther had a
 surplus,
 'Till she spoke out quite sudden like, "You missed
 that word on purpose."
 Well, I declare it frightened me; at first I tried
 denyin',
 But Nettie, she jest smiled an' smiled, she knowed that
 I was lyin'.
 Sez she: "That book is your'n by rights;" sez I: "It
 never could be –
 I – I – you – ah —" an' there I stuck, an' well she
 understood me.
 So we agreed that later on when age had giv' us tether,
 We'd jine our lots an' settle down to own that book
 together.

"An Ante-Bellum Sermon" (1895) by Paul Laurence Dunbar (*Majors*)

We is gathahed hyeah, my brothah,
 In dis howlin' wildaness,
 Fer to speak some words of comfo't
 To each othah in distress.
 An' we chooses fer ouah subjiç'
 Dis – we'll 'splain it by an' by;
 "An' de Lawd said Moses, Moses,
 An' de man said, 'Hyeah am I.'"

Now ole Pher'oh, down in Egypt,
Was de wuss man evah bo'n,
An' he had de Hebrew chillun,
Down dah wukin' in his co'n;
'Twell de Lawd got tiahed o' his foolin',
An' sez he: "I'll let him know—
Look hyeah, Moses, go tell Pher'oh
Fu' to let dem chillen go.

An' ef he refuse to do it,
I will make him rue de houah,
Fu' I'll empty down on Egypt
All de vials of my powah."
Yes, he did – an' Pher'oh's ahmy
Wasn't wuth a ha'f a dime;
Fu' de Lawd will he'p his chillun,
You kin trust him ev'ry time.

An' yo' enemies may 'sail you
In de back an' in de front;
But de Lawd is all aroun' you,
Fu' to ba' de battle's brunt.
Dey kin fo'ge yo' chains an' shackles
F'om de mountains to de sea;
But de Lawd will sen' some Moses
Fu' to set his chillun free.

An' de lan' shall hyeah his thundah,
Lak a blas' f'om Gab'el's ho'n,
Fu' de Lawd of hosts is mighty
When he girds his ahmor on.
But fu' feah some one mistakes me,
I will pause right hyeah to say,
Dat I'm still a-preachin' ancient,
I ain't talkin' 'bout to-day.

But I tell you, fellah christuns,
Things 'll happen mighty strange;
Now, de Lawd done dis fu' Isrul,
An' his ways don't nevah change,
An' de love he showed to Isrul
Wasn't all on Isrul spent;
Now don't run an' tell yo' mastahs
Dat I'se preachin' discontent.

'Cause I isn't; I'se a judgin'
Bible people by deir ac's;
I'se a givin' you de Scriptuah,
I'se a handin' you de fac's.
Cose ole Pher'oh believed in slav'ry,
But de Lawd he let him see,
Dat de people he put bref in,—
Evah mothah's son was free.

An' dahs othahs thinks lak Pher'oh,
But dey calls de Scriptuah liar,
Fu' de Bible says "a servant
Is a worthy of his hire."
An' you caint git roun' nor thoo dat,
An' you cain't git ovah it,
Fu' whatevah place you git in,
Dis hyeah Bible too 'll fit.

So you see de Lawd's intention
Evah sence de worl' began,
Was dat His almighty freedom
Should belong to evah man,
But I think it would be bettah,
Ef I'd pause agin to say,
That I'm talkin' bout ouah freedom
In a Bibleistic way.

But de Moses is a comin,
An' he's comin, suah and fas'
We kin hyeah his feet a-trompin',
We kin hyeah his trumpit blas'.
But I want to wa'n you people,
Don't you git too brigity;
An' don't you git to braggin'
'Bout dese things, you wait an' see.

But when Moses wif his powah,
Comes an' sets us chillen free,
We will praise de gracious Mastah
Dat has gin us liberty;
An' we'll shout ouah halleluyahs,
On dat mighty reck'nin' day,

When we'se reco'nized ez citiz'–
Huh uh! Chillen let us pray!

“To the Eastern Shore” (1903) by Paul Laurence Dunbar (*Lyrics of Love*)

I's feelin' kin' o' lonesome in my little room to-night,
An' my min's done los' de minutes an' de miles,
W'ile it teks me back a-flyin' to de country of delight,
Whaih de Chesapeake goes grumblin' er wid smiles.
Oh, de ol' plantation 's callin' to me, Come, come back,
Hyeah 's de place fu' you to labouh an' to res',
Fu' my sandy roads is gleamin' w'ile de city ways is black;
Come back, honey, case yo' country home is bes'.

I know de moon is shinin' down erpon de Eastern sho',
An' de bay 's a-sayin' “Howdy” to de lan';
An' de folks is all a-settin' out erroun' de cabin do',
Wid dey feet a-restin' in de silvah san';
An' de ol' plantation 's callin' to me, Come, oh, come,
F'om de life dat 's des' a-waihin' you erway,
F'om de trouble an' de bustle, an' de agernizin' hum
Dat de city keeps ergoin' all de day.

I 's tiahed of de city, tek me back to Sandy Side,
Whaih de po'est ones kin live an' play an' eat;
Whaih we draws a simple livin' f'om de fo'est an' de tide,
An' de days ah faih, an' evah night is sweet.
Fu' de ol' plantation 's callin' to me, Come, oh, come.
An' de Chesapeake 's a-sayin' “Dat 's de t'ing,”
W'ile my little cabin beckons, dough his mouf is closed an' dumb,
I 's a-comin', an' my hea't begins to sing.