Histories of African American Short Stories: A Digital Humanities Exhibit

Sponsored by
The Project on the History of Black Writing

Despite all the important and exciting digital humanities projects taking place in the academy, there have been relatively little few sustained engagements involving African American literary study. Our exhibit offers a glimpse at our efforts to fill this void. This walk-through, multimedia exhibit allows audience members to use MP3 players to listen to commentaries and view displays related to the histories of African American short stories.

The representation of predominately black characters and settings across a 100 year history of short stories reveals linguistic commonalities, overlapping publishing patterns, concentrated interest in representing the South, and urban environments among a select group of writers, including Charles Chesnutt, Zora Neale Hurston, Richard Wright, Toni Cade Bambara, and Edward P. Jones. This exhibit showcases key features of short stories by black writers and at the same highlights the possibilities of digital technologies, especially text-mining to present information about African American literature.

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Charles Chesnutt—1

Charles Chesnutt’s “The Wife of His Youth” has a language density of over 302.5 different words in the story, which also suggests the story has a richer vocabulary than “The Goophered Grapevine,” which has a language density of 244.1. An excerpt from the poetry of 19th century poet Alfred Lord Tennyson; the language of the story’s middle-class protagonist, Mr. Ryder; the vernacular speech of a formerly enslaved black woman, Liza Jane; and the standard English of the narrator all account for the density of “The Wife of His Youth.”

Samples:

- “At length I saw a lady within call, Stiller than chisoll’d marble, standing there” —Alfred Lord Tennyson
- “scuse me, suh, I’s lookin’ for my husban’”—Liza Jane
- “Do you really expect to find your husband? He may be dead long ago.” —Mr. Ryder
- “Mr. Ryder might aptly be called the dean of the Blue Veins.” —narrator from “The Wife of His Youth”

Lexical density or word density constitutes the estimated measure of content per functional (grammatical) and lexical units (lexemes) in total. Language density formula = Number of tokens/number of types * 1000. In other words, the word density is a simple measurement of the documents word density—the higher the value, the richer the vocabulary.
African American Vernacular English constitutes a crucial element of Chesnutt’s short fiction - a distinctive linguistic feature of his southern characters. Uncle Julius, a vernacular-speaking, recurring figure in stories, serves as the driving force for much of the linguistic diversity in Chesnutt’s works.

**Samples:**

- “Dey ain na’er a man in dis settlement w’at won’ tell yer ole Julius McAdoo ‘uz bawn an’ raise’ on dis yer same plantation”

- “Well, sur, you is a stranger ter me, en I is a stranger ter you, en we is bose strangers ter one anudder, but ‘f I ‘uz in yo’ place, I would n’ buy dis vimya’d.”
Edward P. Jones often pinpoints specific locations in Black D.C. He mentions the word “street” 42 times in his story “Bad Neighbors” and 32 times in his story “All Aunt Hagar’s Children.” He typically uses the word “street” in conjunction with a specific location such as “F Street,” “Eighth Street,” and “Tenth Street.” In six different stories that appeared in The New Yorker, Jones utilizes over 311 words and phrases, including avenue, home, place, Southwest, Southeast, Northwest, Northeast, and street to highlight the particularity of D.C.
Edward Jones’s high frequency and usage of location-specific phrases allow him to display a geographically-precise body of narratives about Washington, D.C. In “All Aunt Hagar’s Children,” the word “street” is mentioned 31 times, and 24, that is 78%, of those mentions indicate exact locations such as F, M, Sixth, Fourth, Third, and L streets, revealing Jones’s interest in presenting detail-rich portraits of the city.
Text-mining software reveals the extent to which character dialogues and narration styles contribute to a writer’s linguistic range. While Wright’s “Big Boy Leaves Home” has over 11,000, his story has word density of 175.6. In “Big Boy Leaves Home,” dialogues, on average, consists of about 8 - 12 words and include brief one-sentence responses between characters. The narrator of Wright’s story, though, plays a prominent role, conveying the inner sentiments of the characters and providing in-depth descriptions of the environment.
King Solomon, the protagonist of Rudolph Fisher’s “The City of Refuge,” stands out because of his deep vernacular, which distinguishes him as a southern transplant from his New York counterparts. In the story’s opening, King Solomon asks for directions, “Wha’ dis hyeh at, please, suh?” and Uggam responds, “See that second corner? Turn to the left when you get there. Number forty-five’s about halfway down the block.” Consequently, the linguistic diversity of “City of Refuge” raises the story’s amount of unique words and phrases.
A slight correlation exists between the number of characters and word density in fiction in general. Toni Cade Bambara’s “Raymond’s Run,” with speaking roles from a pre-teen narrator, Squeaky, children, and 1 adult, has a word density of 261.5. Bambara’s “The Lesson,” with speaking roles from a young narrator, Sylvia, 6 additional children, and one adult, has a word density of 290.4. Bambara diversifies the speaking patterns of children from the same neighborhood, and, in “The Lesson,” she places those children in an environment that is unfamiliar, which leads them to further expand their language use.
The characters in “Spunk,” “Sweat,” and “The Gilded Six-Bits” employ a diverse set of phrases in their animated exchanges with each other, and even the communities of onlookers, who speak in the vernacular, contribute to the originality of words that appear in the stories. In “Sweat,” for example, a group of men gathered on a porch talking and generate 460 of the total 1406 unique words in the story.

**Samples:**

- “like dat”
- “skeer me”
- “Ah’m goin’ tuh drop dead”
- “Gawd knows”
- “Ah’m gointer stay right heah”
- “wid yo’ big ole yeahs flappin’ on each side lak uh paih uh buzzard wings.”
- “Ah’m goin’ tuh de white folks bout you, mah young man”