

## Editor's Introduction

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Douglas B. Chambers

In the South, even today with sixty-some channel basic cable and all that super-standardized talk on TV 24/7, one can still tell quite a bit about someone by their accent. A twangy, clipped, quick kind of speech, often tumbling out pell-mell (and maybe smoking one), where an aunt is an “aint” and cash is “caysh” and oil is “earl”; the kind of rapid country-southern accent favored by some stand-up comedians for too-easy laughs seems to say something not altogether favorable about the speaker, and we recoil behind an often self-deprecating humor. Think *Talladega Nights*, or “Gih'ter duhn!”<sup>1</sup>

And then there is the other stereotypical, and fast-disappearing, accent – mellifluous, drawn-out, slooooooow speech, a tidewater or (at least supposedly, or rather *supposedly*) old-money *drawl*, all plummy and from way back in the throat, where an aunt is “awnt” and cash is “ca-yash” and oil is “ohl.” Of course, this latter accent still renders insurance as IN-surance and umbrella as UM-brella, and th'owing something or toting it and carrying you to the stoah; where coffee is caw-fy and lawyers are lahw-yuhs, and one takes first dinnuh and *then* suppuh, all magnolias and julips and red brick and white columns, and all y'all know just e'xactly what ahm tawkin 'bout wi' bo-ath. Think Ashley Wilkes in *Gone With The Wind*, or any officer's voice-over in Ken Burns' *Civil War*.

But one hears more than 'class' in varieties of Southern speech, more than just country versus classic (the latter which William A. Kretzschmar Jr. terms the “plantation accent” in his contribution to this volume; in my experience it is increasingly rare to hear the full-blown plantation accent in someone under the age of 50 or perhaps 60). But there are many clearly marked regional southern accents, and a practiced ear can often tell where someone is from. People also generally claim to hear 'race' and perhaps 'sexual orientation' as well – and thus learn to mask those markers of speech on the telephone, or on radio, even TV, when they want to or need to. There is still a market for “accent-abatement” programs, though I would bet that the real target is that clipped country-southern accent (whether white or black) rather than what's left of the better-regarded drawling classic or plantation-southern accent; unless one wants to go into broadcasting, however, where anything distinctively regional bumps up against the exemplar of a completely unaccented, standardized, and basically boringly mid-western, American English.

In fact, as Kretzshmar shows, the ‘plantation’ Southern accent may well be of quite recent origin, and has been changing all along. All local accents are actually “normal” for that particular speech community precisely because they are *spoken* language, what the French term *parole*. Spoken English is endlessly local, and therefore endlessly “normal.” So-called “correct” (that is, standard, written) English is rarely spoken – perhaps the closest thing is that special category of hifalutin speech we call “oratory.” People who talk like that all the time are pedantic, or maybe just stuffy, and certainly not ‘normal’ – whether in the South or anywhere (think Al Gore, a well-heeled Tennessean). But it *is* one of the occupational hazards of professors, and of course, also of politicians.

In this issue then, which is inspired by the 18<sup>th</sup> annual Natchez Literary and Cinema Celebration,<sup>2</sup> we listen to “the voices” of Southern speech. From Donald M. Kartiganer’s consideration of the contrast between Faulkner’s fictional and public voice, to the changing sounds of Country Music; to the significant (if rather pugnacious, and by now seriously overlooked) research by the late J.L. Dillard into the history of African American English – research so suggestive and yet now so overlooked that I decided to reprint a key chapter from his main popular work, *Black English: Its History and Usage in the United States* (1972) – for what it tells us of historical southern speech and to remind us that African Americans historically were at the core of the speech of at least some Southerners.

We are honored to include the revised written version of Senator Thad Cochran’s engaging presentation to the Natchez Literary and Cinema Celebration last year. Not only does Senator Cochran (R.-Miss.) appreciate the literary and historical arts, of which he is a significant supporter, he also has a good ear for the telling story.

We continue with a serious personal story, told with charm and honesty by Rev. Will D. Campbell, the ‘bootleg preacher’ of southern civil rights fame. Ostensibly a memoir of Ole Miss’ 1956 Religious Emphasis Week, in his account you hear the echoes of both Kretzschmar’s and Dillard’s academic points, respectively, and just plain old storytelling of the best sort, and in real southern speech, ‘normal’ speech, expletives and dialect and all. We also thank Charles Reagan Wilson for his gracious appreciation of Rev. Campbell.

Tisha M. Zelner provides a very useful annotated bibliography of reference works for scholars of the South, which we recommend to our readers.

In gathering these voices, we also hear from the prolific screenwriter and film director Charles Burnett (who has over thirty films to his credit), this year's winner of the Horton Foote Award for Special Achievement in Screenwriting. He reflects on growing up in southern California, but as a black boy born in Mississippi. It was the news of "back home" that fired his imagination as a kid, and, in ways which he only understood as an adult, helped sustain him. As he writes, "The South that my parents and their generation talked about is the South that fed my imagination." By listening to those private family voices, literal and figurative, Burnett unintentionally echoes Faulkner, who stated that the best writers *imagine* rather than simply *recount* the 'voices' that they hear.<sup>3</sup>

Listening to, rather than simply hearing, Southern speech and imagining the many ways that language speaks to questions of regional and personal identity, makes me think of a poem by Billy Collins (b.1941). Though a life-long resident of New York City, the two-time U.S. poet laureate (2001-03), gets it just right when he imagines a "Sunday morning in a perfect Georgia" by listening to a gospel group, on his way to the store. Here is an excerpt of his poem, "Sunday Morning with the Sensational Nightingales" (1995):

It was not the Five Mississippi Blind Boys  
who lifted me off the ground  
that Sunday morning  
as I drove down for the paper, some oranges, and bread.  
Nor was it the Dixie Hummingbirds  
or the Soul Stirrers, despite their quickening name,  
or even the Swan Silvertones  
who inspired me to look over the commotion of trees  
into the open vault of the sky.

No, it was the Sensational Nightingales  
who happened to be singing on the gospel  
station early that Sunday morning  
and must be credited with the bumping up  
of my spirit, the arousal of the mice within.

I have always loved this harmony,  
like four, sometimes five trains running  
side by side over a contoured landscape –  
make that a shimmering, red-dirt landscape,  
wildflowers growing along the silver tracks,

lace tablecloths covering the hills,  
 the men and women in white shirts and dresses  
 walking in the direction of a tall steeple.  
 Sunday morning in a perfect Georgia.<sup>4</sup>

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Even with my negligible accent, I once said to my step-sister, who grew up in the North, something like “I’m o-enta stor’ – b’ back soon” and she said “WHAT did you say?” [‘I am going to the store – will be back soon’].

<sup>2</sup> Southern Accents: Language in the Deep South, 22-25 February 2007, Natchez, Mississippi. Special thanks to the founder and co-chair, Carolyn Vance Smith, for her inspiration and assistance, and to friends and colleagues including Dr. Dixon McDowell for providing the digital audio of Senator Cochran’s original presentation, and Dr. Curtis Austin (and his staff) and the Center for Oral History and Cultural Heritage here at The University of Southern Mississippi for professionally transcribing it; Jesse Kelley, the *Southern Quarterly* graduate editorial assistant, and Laura Ingram, our undergraduate assistant, for their invaluable editorial assistance; Kay Webber, executive assistant to Senator Cochran; and the participants and supporters of the 2007 NLCC in general.

<sup>3</sup> See Professor Kartiganer’s discussion in this volume.

<sup>4</sup> from *The Art of Drowning*, reprinted in *Sailing Alone Around the Room: New and Selected Poems* (New York: Random House, Inc., 2001), pp.53-54.