

FORUM

Ebonics: Ghost of Paul Lawrence Dunbar

'Lawd, Say It Ain't So, Us Done Come Too Far!'

"Ebonics" and its pitfalls are nothing new to those who know about the life and times of Paul Lawrence Dunbar (1872-1906). Dunbar, the first African American to be recognized as a poet, was roughly 16 when his poems appeared in his hometown newspaper, the "Dayton (Ohio) Herald." After a work he published at 20, Dunbar gained instant fame, because it was so favorably reviewed in "Harper's Weekly" by William Dean Howells, one of America's most influential literary critics.

Dunbar flowered into his genius in the same generational span as many of today's black school children, like those in Oakland, Calif. The drama of his life instructs the school board there to rethink its misguided disdain for the learning ability of black kids. Dunbar rejected the reasons given by the white literary public of



LIFT EVERY VOICE

By DR. WILLIAM H. TURNER

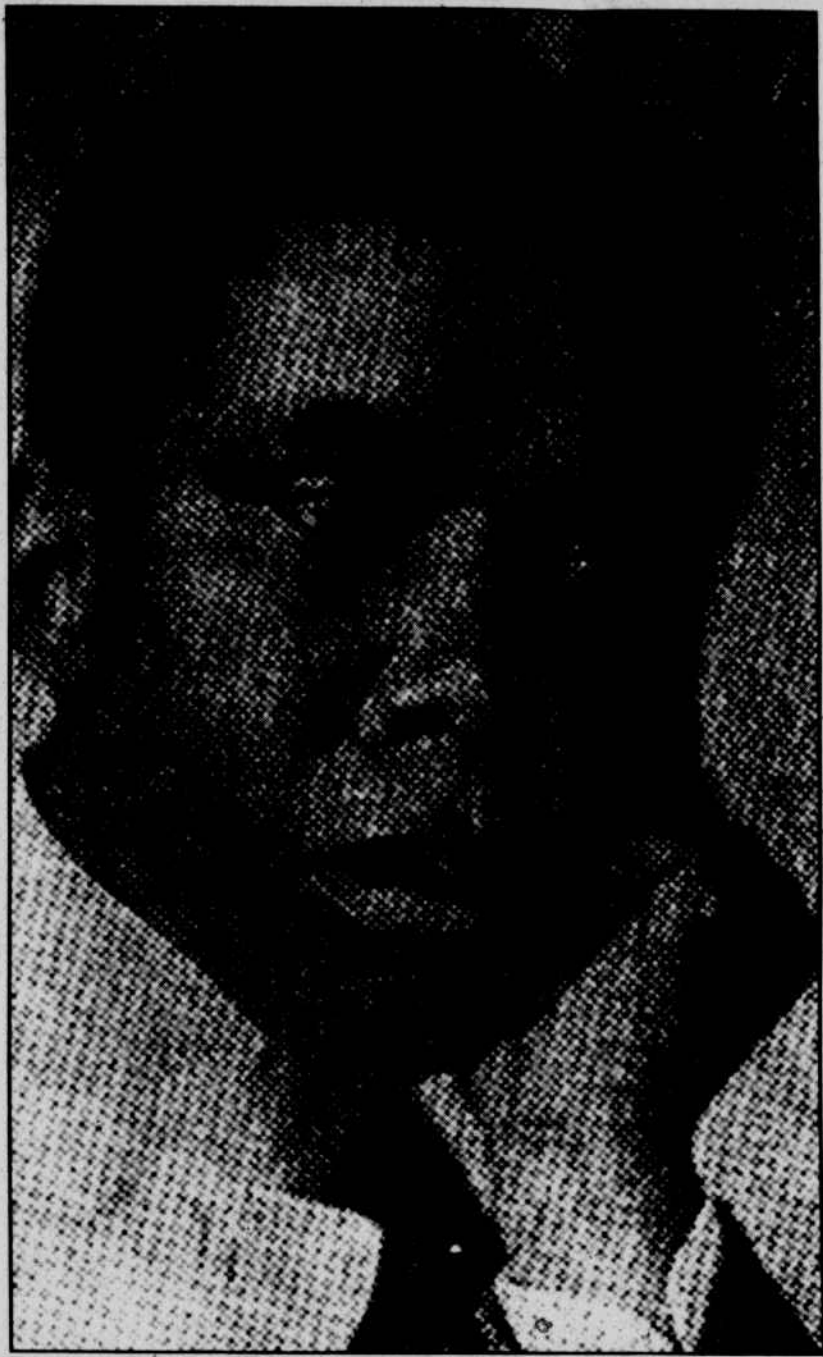
his day who praised his work. To him, the "jingles" he devised were explained in the poem, "We Wear the Mask." He was "skin-nin' and grinnin'." Making fun of the turbulence taking place in black life.

Dunbar, soon the "Negro bard and lyricist," traveled to London to recite his work before Queen Victoria, during her Diamond Jubilee. He could well speak the Queen's English, but she never knew! Dunbar's more serious — though rarely seen — poems were in the vein of standard English, like the works of John Keats, Robert Burns, and James Whitcomb Riley. But, it was Dunbar's "Negro dialect" poetry — the broken English of the newly-freed Negroes — that earned him widespread acclaim.

Paul Lawrence Dunbar died a broken, discontented, and despairing man, at 33, having written his own obituary: "May God in His great compassion, reward me with death." He felt that Howells had done him irreversible harm with his high-minded regard for Dunbar's "Negro dialect verse," disregarding completely his standard verse poetry.

Many African Americans may live separate and hopeless lives if the newest recognition of Dunbar's dialect — "Ebonics" — takes hold. Ebonics compresses and contracts two words. The "Eb" is from "Ebony," meaning black, the "onics" from phonics, or sound.

If the utterance — Ebonics — makes its way into popular



usage and educational practice, as recently suggested by the Oakland, Calif., school board, it may not only be a neat contraction, it will also be a cruel contraption. Time spent in schools trying to find the logic, to decode, and to interpret the ever-changing ver-

Oakland Unified School District

| | |
|-----------------------------|-----------------|
| Oakland School District | 52,000 students |
| | 53% black |
| Special education classes: | 71% black |
| Students retained last year | 64% black |
| Truant students | 67% black |
| Suspended students | 80% black |
| GPA of Black students | 1.8/4.0 |

naular of African-American youth is time well-wasted. Frankly, too many schools are already failing far too many African-American youths.

To take the time of teachers and students will only further delay and perhaps derail the full participation of millions of African Americans from the American mainstream. African Americans today, like Dunbar, who came of age just after slavery, must take in a full range of symbols used in mainstream culture.

No aspect of the culture is more important than language, both of the dominant culture and the subculture to which different groups in the total society belong. Those with a second language — like Black English — are richer for understanding its complexity and expressiveness. But, without a doubt, African Americans sidetracked by serious attention to Ebonics — as a legitimate language — will be destitute and on the margins of society's economic opportunities when they come up lacking a firm grasp of the principal language of global culture — standard English. At a more practical level, Ebonics is flawed, because it changes rapidly and is distinct in different geographical and cultural regions. Paul Lawrence Dunbar's "jingles in broken tongue" were fairly uniform, because rural black peasants all spoke the same language.

Dunbar's mastery of the dual uses to which his people could put the Queen's language gives him the distinction of having countless Dunbar High Schools — bygone black school buildings — named for him throughout the land, especially in the South.

Ebonics High School? Perish the thought!

(Dr. William Turner is a regular freelance columnist for the Chronicle.)

The Truth Behind Ebonics

The coverage of the Oakland School Board's decision to embrace the Standard English Proficiency program district-wide is an example of "straw-man journalism."

Some reporters have pulled a "gotcha" on high-ranking state and federal officials by asking them if they embrace the district "teaching Black English." Betrayed by their ignorance of the linguistics and pedagogy issues involved, those officials have issued truly loony statements.

Since 1991, it has been a policy of the State Board of Education to recognize Ebonics, the syncretism of African and European languages, while designing curriculum strategies. Dr. Ernie Noma Lemoine put the theory to work in Los Angeles with the Language Development Program for African American Students, which has been in effect in dozens of Los Angeles schools for five years.

Like many who hear a snap characterization of "Black English," I was somewhat skeptical of the concept before hearing Dr. Lemoine explain it. Simply, the primary human language acquisition occurs before the age of four. Any language learning after that has to occur on the foundation of that original language acquisition. A French person who learns English still thinks in French. The language patterns common to African-American communities across the Western Hemisphere, whether expressed in English, French, Spanish or Dutch, carry a common set of grammar and syntax rules that are traced to the languages of the Niger-Congo region of Africa. Those patterns are not just incorrect English, but an intentional retention of that culture.

Ebonics is far more than non-standard use of "to be" and combining consonants. It is also the magical use of simile and metaphor, the mastery of inflection and tone and the persuasive qualities that have made people like Paul Robeson, Sidney

Poitier, Mary McCleod Bethune, W.E.B. Du Bois and Martin Luther King Jr. some of the country's greatest treasures.

As teachers learn more about Ebonics, they not only gain a better understanding of their students but can show students how to turn those cultural attributes into strengths. The state of California and the federal government have been funding the research that has gleaned these simple truths for two decades. As long as a few academics banded the theories about, no one cared. But programs like Dr. Lemoine's have discovered that the targeted children do learn English better when taught this way. Oakland teachers have piloted the Standard English Proficiency program, often at their own expense, for three years, attending conferences, doing their own ad-hoc in-service and sharing their results with

being committed on their youngsters before they even reach the fourth grade. If school choice and parental input are meaningful concepts, then these programs that are making a difference must be nurtured, refined and duplicated. It is time to stop the systematic demotivation that Carter G. Woodson, father of Negro History Week, wrote about in "The Miseducation of the Negro." I would urge any critic of the Oakland program to read that book first before commenting on the program.

(San Francisco based writer John William Templeton manages an independent publishing house that provides social science and pedagogy books to California school districts. He is also editor of Groit, the African-American, African and Caribbean business daily.)

ANOTHER VIEW

By JOHN WILLIAM TEMPLETON

whoever would listen. The decision to adopt their strategies on a district-wide basis is an object lesson in school reform — not fodder for talk-show hosts.

People like Delaine Eastin, the superintendent of schools, who automatically attach lower standards with "Black" do not set foot in these schools where parents and teachers and students are tackling textbooks and curricula that do not meet their needs. Black parents particularly are fed up with the "soul murder"

The Winston-Salem Chronicle
will publish a special **MARTIN LUTHER KING**
SECTION AS A SALUTE TO THIS GREAT MAN
COMMEMORATING his
birthday.
Thursday, January 16, 1997
Space Reservations Jan 7 • Copy Deadline Jan 9
Call (910) 722-8624

Winston-Salem Chronicle

THE CHOICE FOR AFRICAN-AMERICAN NEWS
USPS 067910

617 N. Liberty Street
Winston-Salem, N.C. 27102

The Winston-Salem Chronicle is published every Thursday by the Winston-Salem Chronicle Publishing Co. Inc.

The Winston-Salem Chronicle was established by Ernest Pitt and Nubisi Egemonye in 1974.

The Chronicle is a proud member of:
• Audit Bureau of Circulation • National Newspapers Publishers Association • North Carolina Press Association • North Carolina Black Publishers Association, Inland Press Association
National Advertising Representative
Amalgamated Publishers, Inc. •
45 West 45th St • New York, NY 10036
(212) 869-5220

How to Reach us...

910-722-8624 • Fax 910-723-9173

NEWS STAFF
MAURICE CROCKER
SAM DAVIS
723-8428

PRODUCTION
ROGER MARTIN
DAVID SCHLOSSER

CIRCULATION
DON NAYLOR
722-8624

(Call to start or stop delivery or to report a delivery problem.)

SALES STAFF
FANNIE HENDERSON
LEXIE JOHNSON
722-8628

BUSINESS OFFICE
ERICKA ASBURY
VICKIE WARREN
722-8624

To subscribe...

722-8624
Call for new subscription information or any questions about your current subscription.

| Subscription Rates | |
|----------------------|---------|
| Single Copy 75 cents | |
| In County | |
| 2 years | \$40.95 |
| 1 year | 30.72 |
| 6 mos. | 20.48 |
| 3 mos. | 10.24 |
| Out of County/State | |
| 2 years | \$45.95 |
| 1 year | 35.72 |
| 6 mos. | 25.48 |
| 3 mos. | 15.24 |

Winston-Salem Chronicle

HOME DELIVERY SUBSCRIPTION ORDER

- YES, Please send me the **Winston-Salem Chronicle**
 2 Year - \$40.95 • 1 Year - \$30.72 • 6 mos. - \$20.48

Name _____
Address _____
City _____ State _____ Zip _____

check enclosed • please bill me

Mail to: Subscription Department
Winston-Salem Chronicle
P.O. Box 1636
Winston-Salem, NC 27102