

Interview with Professor Maryemma Graham

From Exclusion, Rejection and Dismissal to the Revival of the Lost and the Unknown: A Dialogue with Professor Maryemma Graham on an Extraordinary Journey of African American Writers and their Language

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Prof. Maryemma Graham is a University Distinguished Professor in the Department of English at the University of Kansas, Kansas, USA. Her areas of research are Genre Studies, including fiction and autobiography; African American literature; Archival Studies; Diaspora and Transnational Criticism and theories; and Digital humanities. She has been very active in recovering lost and little known works by black writers. A wonderful and well known professor on campus, she is equally beautiful as a person. During my sojourn in the United States as a Fulbright fellow, I got a chance to attend her classes and to know her personally, which increased my awareness of African American writing. This interview was taken in Prof. Graham's office as a part of the requirement of the course at Kansas. This interview explores a number of topics in addition to her background, life, and career, African American English, the journey of the language, the status that it enjoys and its representation in literary texts. The most interesting part of this interview is that a lot of unquestioned issues have been answered implicitly within an answer and they open new avenues for discussion on different other topics and areas.

MS: Thanks Professor Graham for agreeing to give an interview, and it is really an honor to get to know you even more than I actually do. First, could you please

give me a little information about your background and then tell me what brought your into literature and into archival studies?

MG: Good question! I was born in Augusta, Georgia. Two sides of my family represent I think the different traditions that come out of the Black South. My father comes from the line of Gullah culture in Georgia and South Carolina. My mother comes from the mixed race Native American and African American or Native American and White. We are not sure because she was adopted, and there are no records that we can find. I grew up curious about these mixtures, which my mother knew very little about because she was adopted by a black family. And my father was very clearly aware of his Gullah or Geechee heritage. But it was probably the visit to my paternal grandparents that started me on this archival quest because my grandfather had so many stories. He was a house painter by profession. So he was in and out of everybody's house and everybody had a story... he painted homes of wealthy people, he painted Flannery O'Connor's house once. He had such an interesting life just as a painter, always listening to stories as he was painting. Every Sunday we went to visit my grandparents to have dinner-ninety two miles to have dinner-and the whole dinner table was storytelling. Eating, passing food and telling stories. And after dinner, neighbors would stop by to visit and tell more stories. By the time I went to first grade, I had heard so many stories, when I was asked to tell something about my family, apparently I said to my teacher I don't have just one; I have too many. She said you must have only one. I said I have too many to choose from. That continued to inspire me. When you have that many stories, how do you decide which one is yours? I concluded that all of the stories are valuable, not just a single story.

My father was also an English teacher who always taught through stories. I sailed through high school without a problem because I was with my family. But when I got to college and started studying literature, I realized there were so little that represented the stories that I had grown up with. Every now and then you might see a book that somebody would recommend for a reading list. I read all those books because my early teachers were very good, and they made sure I grew up what we called Negro literature. When I talked to my college professors about this, they would say, "Well, you know there really isn't any good literature like the literature you are looking for." My first response was how is that possible? I didn't understand they were making a value judgment, and I said I just don't agree with it. There must be lots of books you just don't know about. They said, no! People weren't writing then, they said. They couldn't read and write. What I was led me to believe was that Blacks started writing literature in 20th century and that good literature didn't really exist before 1940s and Richard Wright's *Native Son*. They acknowledged there was some good poetry written in 1920s but the literature as we know it, fiction or auto biography, was primarily associated with Richard Wright and those who came afterwards. This was before autobiographies like

Frederick Douglas's slave narrative; it was before most literary scholars became interested since the historians were the major scholars studying the body of the slave narratives.

By the time I finished grad school there was all this literature being recovered, so I refused to believe that a much fuller tradition in black writing did not exist. Whenever you refuse to believe something you have to show why. If you say I don't believe that people weren't writing, you have to prove that people were. So while I was in grad school I decided that the first thing I would do after I graduated was to create a research project to identify books that people don't know about. That's when my project, the project of History of Black Writing, was born. It began by basically compiling a bibliography of black writers from the earliest known publication to at that time 1980. That's how long I have been doing this. I thought that I would be finished in 5 years. So I applied for a 3 year grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities, which is part of the federal government to start this project. When I got the money, I expected to leave this project and return to some of my graduate school research rather quickly. But the more I looked there was more I knew I had to find. The more I talked to people about it, they would say but you haven't looked here, you haven't gone there. And true enough this was the period when everyone was recovering black writing. This big explosion in recovery work caught the attention of publishers who began reprinting these books that nobody ever knew existed. But when you start talking about discovery you can't just limit it to novels. We had speeches that people had written that had never been published. We had poems or collections, or autobiographies, all these books began to resurface and became reprinted. So my work intersected with this boom in recovering texts. The project couldn't stop after 5 years because there was too much work still to be done. Once you think you have a handle on all of these newly republished works, you have to teach people about them because they don't know. They are like me: they go to school only to have people tell them this or that doesn't exist. The archival part of this was researching, identifying, cataloging texts and developing approaches for critiquing them. A lot of my early work was editorial. And I still see myself as an editor. I think that was the first half of my career. I became a literary historian because I was gathering so much information about all of these books, but primarily I was a literary detective following leads people gave me that eventually lead to finding books, recovering writers, and challenging people to study a book that was written at the same time as a book they had read that told them something they did not know. It is this discovery part and sharing with others which kept me excited. I think if I just had to sit down and write I would have given up sooner. But I was constantly finding books and interested publishers then having to unlock the mystery of an unknown writer. Recovering writers was particularly hard because if a book is published, the information about writer exist but if a book is published, nobody talks about it in

a review for example, and the writer dies, you have no information. I was literally struggling to track down biographical information about authors just as I was bringing their books before a new and often disbelieving public.

MS: So how do you find the lost history of an unknown African American author?

MG: I admit that doing this is a very different kind of work because you have to start where the author grew up and the places where he lived etc. In the U.S. you know we have segregation, and many do not understand its history. The division into black and white was so great that writers were simply eliminated or dismissed; no records of them existed, as if they never were born. I was dealing with literal history, social history and history of segregation. We had to do different methods of research, including oral history; we had to go to archives and museums that people didn't necessarily use; we had to go to communities and talk to people who would have known individual writers, their relatives and descendants. These were always old people, who knew somebody who knew somebody who knew the writer when they were living and if we were lucky, they would know the book. With woman writers it was very interesting, because women would often write when they were single. Then they would get married and change their names and we would lose them. Say, you have a young woman writing at 25 or 30 years of age, gets married and moves, and stops writing to help her husband's career. The name completely disappears she becomes Mrs. So and So. The writing career is limited to the period of single womanhood now, and this is true for most woman writers in the 19th century, black or white. Some may have returned to writing but either wrote privately, as a hobby, or to supplement the family income especially if a husband died. However, these women did not return to their maiden names, so the searches can have many dead ends. Outside home was not acceptable but if you were a writer you could make a career but your husband was usually dead if you continued to be a writer or you never married. Building archives was the only way to recover a large body of missing, absent, or unknown books to save Black writing from permanent fugitive status.

MS: That's how you recovered the history of Black literature?

MG: I don't use the word literature and I prefer to call it black writing because sometimes there is a thin line between what people call literature and what is writing.

MS: And how would you describe that?

MG: Literature is a term that was invented to talk about books that had particular aesthetic value in a culture, in a specific dominant culture. This is often about cultivating taste that is itself value-laden. Writing is putting pen to paper. So you take away the judgment, the valuation of whether it's good or bad. This allows

you to look at writing as a whole; you can look at patterns, practices, and changes in the tradition over a period of time if you just want to consider literature that others have validated, you will have a much smaller pool of texts. Conceiving a writing project allowed us to get to the larger body of work that had been produced in the interest of black life and black experience. And then we started doing different genres, you couldn't just say fiction; you couldn't just say plays or journalism. If you say writing you cover all of them.

MS: You have confirmed that African American writers were dismissed by the dominant class and their language also suffered similar fate. So my next question to you is what's your take on African American Vernacular English? Is it still being considered non-standard English?

MG: That's right. That was a term used by linguists several decades ago: the notion of African American vernacular English was non standard and the assumption that everything had to be standardized. For instruction purposes, for teaching purposes you needed to know the structure of the language that everyone understood and people would only teach the dominant language. We didn't have linguistics or language studies as well developed. Those are fields that developed later on. So part of it is too the way knowledge is produced, organized, and disseminated, and it is always dominant culture that does that. If we go back even further, people didn't write at all, there were people who spoke but couldn't write. And always a small group of people like the monks in the monasteries were the ones writing and speaking the language of Latin. Other people spoke various varieties of Latin but only the monks knew how to write. So you go from only being able to write in Latin to being able to use a standard language. It is not a far step to think about English being the standard and anything else outside of English being non standard. Standard English is associated with the production of knowledge and it is the way we continue to generate that knowledge. We have to decide what the "standard" is because it's difficult to organize so many different pieces into teaching. But I think we are making a value judgment by calling it non-standard, and I don't use the term anymore. I have stopped using it but it's still very popular. It has a history and its politically charged in this country. Of course what is implied is anything considered non-standard has economic implications, social implications and cultural implications because the speakers of this non-standard English are people who are outside the main stream and dominant culture and have little access. So, non-standard means something bad, 'less than'. Rather than use the word, non standard and you say it's different but it's not less. It could be better or bad, but who decides? So the political, economic, and social aspect of non-standard is something that we got to pay attention to. It became just a household term without anybody thinking about it. I have to say I guess I was sensitive to the language issue since I was very young. My grandfather did

not talk like the people in my hometown, which was 92 miles away from the town where he lived. We went to my grandfather's place every Sunday to have dinner and as I listened to my grandfather, I remember his voice was different his speech was different so I started making comments. My mother said to me by the time I was 6 or 7 - listen to your grandpa, record his words but don't comment. On the drive back home- because it was 2 hours to get - she would explain to what me what grandfather was saying. So she was teaching me translation skills without knowing it. My grandfather, who spoke in Gullah dialect, did not use the plural form. Didn't use 's' Rather than 'Pass me the peas,' it was "Pass me the pea," it didn't have 's' on it. And that was the one thing I always know he never used. When for the first time I said "Grandpa, don't you mean peas?" my mother looked gave me a very ugly look, like shut up, don't you say that. So I knew I was not supposed to comment on my grandfather's speech that was different. Spoken language was the first thing I became very attuned to...spoken language differences. Since I was going back and forth between small towns and the city then went to the mountains of north Carolina to high school, I became even more sensitive to hill billy-Appalachian language-speech since I was not from that part of the country. I heard people who had different sounds, different emphasis, different words and couldn't always understand but I got used to it because I lived with them for years. When I go to school in New England, I hear another set of sounds. I am constantly moving around the country listening to these languages and these speech patterns that all started with my grandfather who wouldn't use the plural on nouns. He also had a very musical quality to his voice. At the end, he would go up so rather than "pass me the pea" he would say "pass me the pea" (repeats the sentence with a rising intonation). So everything ended with an up rhythm, changing the rhythm of the voice, change in the tone but I got used to it. Today if I am in a part of the country, where people are from that Gullah speaking background I recognise them.

(Talking about one of her encounters with a Nurse who was astonished by the fact that Prof. Graham could catch her origin from her accent. Prof. Graham continues with what the nurse had to say.)

So the nurse says "*If I slow down people hear more of the southern voice than when I speak faster.*" I realized that one of the adjustments we southerners make is to speak faster so others can't detect the southern speech as quickly. My children laugh at me a lot because when I slow down they say I am sounding just like their grandmother, who has lived in the South all of her life and has that recognizable southern sound. When I am not in public I may speak one way, but I know to speed up when I am in a certain setting. For me, language has a social function and we become aware of different needs. Our language adjusts accordingly. My understanding of social context is gonna be different from another person's. As

an academic, I am in and out of different contexts so I adjust my speaking voice depending on what I am doing. I think an average person doesn't necessarily recognize the range of the social settings and so when that person who is not used to different settings and enters one, you can hear the difference between the two voices they speak in. When my children were young my mother gave me a term, she said, you have taught your children to be open and to ask questions but sometimes they go into settings where they need to be quiet and she said the kids just ask any question they wanted to ask. And they did. "Mom what's this?" She told me to explain that there is a public voice and our family voice. The family voice allows you can ask any question, talk any way, but in your public voice you must recognize the social setting. That's why I am saying 'language is social', I mean it is linguistics we got all the science but it's a social thing when I adjust my language depending on my social settings. People who are sensitive to language difference probably do that more than other people and especially if we are told that our language is lacking in any way. That our given birth language is different or less than our non-standard, we automatically code switch. So code switching is the other term that I used for my children growing up, so much so that they thought every family understood the word. Coming home from college for the first time, they say- "mom, you know they don't code switch". I said, "Did you tell somebody that"? They said, "yes, but they didn't know what the word meant." I point out the difference between "our family word, "and the public word, or code switching". I would say code switching applies to the urban style of young people technically people of color, who look different from everybody else. Some say it's because they have a swag about them. They code switch if they go out of their settings or they sometimes need to code switch in order to be heard. Because people turn off to them quickly so the social becomes important and so I mean that linguistics of course is now sophisticated enough to recognize what's going on.

We have learned a lot from studying Sociolinguistics, language and morphology. The field has changed.

MS: Yes! The range of linguistics as the area of study has widened. Coming back to AAVE, Mufwene has tried to describe Black English which we generally referred to as African American English (AAE) or African American Vernacular English (AAVE). So initially he says that the name or term African American English should include all the varieties of this language, like Gullah, Geechee etc. while AAVE should be a specific term for one variety. But by the end of the chapter he refrains from coming up with any such conclusion and leaves it as an open ended question. What's your take on it?

MG: Well I think there is a continuum. (Pauses) So if he is saying that the African American Vernacular English is a continuum and... so... if you start with Gullah,

and I'd refer you know to an older book *Africanism in the Gullah Dialect* [Lorenzo Dow Turner], then you recognize that some people will use language patterns and words that are closer to what was, in fact, African languages than it is to American English or British English. You have to recognize this continuum, that some language varieties have more, some have less, affinity with the 'standard.' As long as you recognize that African American English is a moving target, depending upon how many instances, residual patterns and words you have or not. What's interesting is that if, in fact, after desegregation, especially in the South where there is a majority black population, white people growing up speaking alongside black people are going to adopt AAVE. And over time depending on your class you may still be close enough to a particular language variety, depending upon your economic status. If you are highly mobile and move out of one speech community into another that educates you into speaking other kinds of English. So, I understand that Black English is spoken as a short hand- Black English is spoken by the people. But the urbanization of African American vernacular takes another lead; it has become popular and highly marketable. Popular culture borrows from the language because that's the hip thing to do. That's more intentional. It's advertised, it's marketed, and certain words entered our vocabulary directly out of Black culture. They become borrowed by everybody. We see right now in all the cross over taking place in music. People have adopted the language that comes out of musical culture and it doesn't matter whether you are White, Japanese or Indian whatever. Everybody uses the language.

MS: Yes I agree. So what would you prefer to call AAVE? I actually call it variety of English not even calling it a dialect. I mean I am still trying just like Mufwene.

MG: Well yeah! There are some distinctions to be made between whether or not something you say is a different language or a dialect of a language. I think the agreement is that dialect still has that negative, 'less than', connotation and while you see different linguistic patterns, they don't necessarily demonstrate a different language structure because they still borrow the structure or conventions of English. But I think people have found the notion of vernacular useful. You know vernacular means that it is specific to a time, place, and condition. A vernacular language is specific to a geographical location; to a social group; to a historical period. So my mother's speech is probably different from mine because she has always lived in the south. She was educated in the South she has never lived outside of the south long enough to change her speech. So I can hear the difference and when I spend enough time with her I speak find myself speaking like her because I know how to adapt and code switch. When she is with me she is struggling to hear what people are saying and she will say- "do they talk this way all the time?" I have to tell her that they are used to talking like that and she will make comments about them. This is the same person who taught me how to translate, right?

Rather than get into the debate of whether something is a dialect or language, I would go with the word 'vernacular', varieties of vernacular English because it is still the English language structure. I don't want to call it a dialect, I think I will stay away from word 'dialect' because I know the history of the use of the word and it's not positive. For example, in the 19th century there is a whole body of literature that we call 'dialect poetry' and that was definitely negative. It was popular and everybody recited it, we are all aware that dialect poetry signified the black community which was uneducated, illiterate. Yet those writing 'dialect poetry' could also code switch, but they were forced to produce poetry for public consumption, since there was little interest in their Standard English poetry. The case in point is Paul Lawrence Dunbar, who wrote dialect and Standard English poetry. Not surprisingly, in his Standard English poetry, he expressed his feelings as a "caged" bird, who was recognized only for his "jingles in a broken tongue." Both are forms of art but it's it was also kind of patronizing.

MS: Interesting! So my next question to you is that how do you see this vernacular English being represented in literary texts?

MG: We have two issues here and again determined by some condition. At one point, the interest in regionalism and cultural specificity dictated that speakers be true to the language of origin. So if black or white writers are writing about Mississippi then they would use the speech of black characters, black people in Mississippi. Actually I think that ethnic literature i.e. enriched by the American English by ethnic writers who show the culture of their community, the communities of origin. We know that Mark Twain created characters that use varieties of English in his fiction, a dialect modeled after southern blacks that he knew. So black and ethnics writers have given English much more variety. Publishers, however, think of marketability so when it's popular to be ethnic then they will market texts that have a lot of ethnically specific language and various vernaculars. When that period of popularity wanes, then the books that are sold are books that are written in Standard English. The work that's been done in short stories suggest that by late 1950s or 60s most of the characters in black short stories spoke what we call Standard English. Before that they spoke vernacular but as people migrated north to urban areas even to larger cities in the South, the contact with you know as standard American English became so common that the spoken language changed. But the writers themselves reflected that change by using characters that spoke Standard English American English as opposed to African American vernacular English to ensure a crossover readership But the period is about 1950 or 1960 when they shift to suburbs. Even though the writers are writing from the south they still wrote more about their urban south as opposed to rural villages, the pre-modern south. So I think publishers often dictated whether or not they think they can market a book that has a very narrow audience. They

want to get more bang for their buck and so if it looks like the topic will be appealing with readers, the more AAVE the better.

MS: So you think these days it's more market driven?

MG: I think it is market driven and what the culture will tolerate. So in Morrison's *Beloved* her language differences are restricted to specific characters. In *Beloved* there are one or two characters who might speak differently but for the most part everybody speaks Standard English. There are few characters who speak with in the vernacular but not enough to be unreadable. So when trying to look into that book in terms of distinct vernacular linguistic patterns you won't see a whole lot. Writers who are working with large commercial publishers who are marketing to large audience won't focus on language differences. What they do is create more stylistic differences than linguistic differences. So emphasis and tonality are not so much a structural difference and therefore maintain the quality of the vernacular without really compromising the English structure. James Weldon Johnson, early 20th century writer, took from AAVE or dialect just enough to produce poems with a version of vernacular rhythm that was very readable. He took biblical passages, interpreted them through oral sequencing familiar to black life and culture. In the beginning of the book, he does a really good analysing of why he did it. So in the Introduction to *God's Trombones*, he speaks as a linguist, who is aware of cultural differences and aware of the audience and publishers and this is in 1920s and I don't think it has changed much. So he is putting words into the mouth of a black character-narrator comprehensible to any reader. His work is a series of poems where he deliberately uses the style, the rhythms of black speaking voice without changing any grammatical structures. His intent is to maintain the orality.

MS: This is interesting because till now what I have been reading always said that white authors would often not use grammatical features because they were not aware of them. So they try to catch excerpts and focus on the pronunciation or the vocabulary but here I see there is a reason behind which even James Weldon Johnson did too.

MG: Right! So you get a contrast between James Johnson, who was a black author, and white authors who were imitating black speech. Since white authors were imitating black speech and characters and deliberately made it appear as the language of people they talked this way because they lacked education. James Weldon Johnson took different tactics. He wanted to preserve richness in the language and its orality and speak in any way for people to understand. So there are political and ideological differences in the white authors imitating black speech and a Black author trying to preserve Black speech for historical reasons.

MS: I would like to ask again about African American authors and white authors, regarding today's writing today being more market driven. So do you agree that this is true for African American authors as well?

MG: Yes, I think African American authors exist along the continuum. Let's say that was the continuum from Africa where languages were being adapted and creolized as contact with new languages increased. Today the operative language most people use and write in is on a continuum closer to the Standard American English. When it is not, it's due to the remoteness of the location, like the Gullah Islands or some other form of insularity where there is much less contact. But in the US, a few of those people still exist, mostly older people, but not many. Right? Whenever I go to Georgia I am reminded that there are still people who speak with distinct patterns, and I have to struggle to hear because the language is so different from what I hear every day, and I am in GA less and less frequently. Most of the younger people are speaking closer to what everybody speaks, Standard English, because you go to school, you are educated in this language, and your friends are talking that way. So you don't have anybody else who speaks that way. A writer must limit the use of a rarely spoken variety of English because nobody will know what you are saying.

MS: So do you fear an endangerment for African American Vernacular English?

MG: Well, I think that you will always have some speakers but the languages are changing in part, due to globalization. I think English itself is borrowing and adopting all kinds of languages. It's being inclusive so lots of different words, styles and practices will be entering English which will change it. So it's not so much that there is one English that we are all running to catch up with. English is also shifting so it's a two-way street. We are taking things from English and English is borrowing from other areas that make it different so it's not one thing but rather both things converging, which means a different English today than we had some years ago. All you have to do is to look at old movies on television and what you hear people speaking may sound more British or some version of the English language that existed at that time or was the language that people expected English to be. It's not the English of 2015 or 1980 for that matter. Those movies are from 1930-1940 period and they had an idealized language that they were looking for in the characters. Now we have an English that has borrowed too much and that has changed the language.

MS: So, do you think the attitude of white authors has changed since the late 19th century or early 20th century?

MG: Well I think authors are period based. Contemporary writers, to answer your question, are trying to be true to the historical periods they are writing in, and that often requires transforming language.

MS: And that's true for both white and African American authors?

MG: I think that's true for white and African Americans.

MS: So, now what I assume is, white authors are more true to the dialect than the early authors because now at least they don't have that negative attitude that much.

MG: Yes, That's right! But I think they all write in eye-dialect, so I think that publishers today will want to be true to the language of the characters from the period they are writing about but they also will be subject to the preferences of publishers who want to use eye-dialect so that everybody reads the novel. I see this happening more and more. This can be seen in Morrison who has elements of Black English, mainly relying upon style of oral narration, the way of telling a story, but not AAVE as we know it. In fact, many readers have difficulty with Morrison's highly stylized narrations. She plays with other structures and features of language but not its grammatical structures.

MS: Okay. That's a very informative answer. Well, this brings to my final question. Talking about the plight of African Americans, Du Bois said that these people suffered from a double consciousness where they were caught in the push-pull factors with the White Americans. People have varied opinions on this so what's your understanding of Du Bois' double consciousness?

MG: Oh wow! Well, that's an interesting one. That does get such a wide and varied interpretations. I don't think the original meaning which Du Bois had is the one that we use. (Laughs) He has been misinterpreted and we have attributed so many meanings to Du Bois and it fits at so many different occasions and that's okay. It is going to be around for a long time because it works so well. My take on Double Consciousness, is that Du Bois sort of saying the weight of having to see through these two eyes, these two visions, the weight of is very heavy and not that 'it's a good thing'. I think he was saying – "this is a problem". The problem of the 20th century is the colour line and one is weighed down by this consciousness. We now see double consciousness as a positive thing because it means that while most people look through these small frames you have advantage of the multiple frames. So I think it's okay to turn a negative into positive but it's not what Du Bois meant. He was speaking about a burden that we bear. That you have to see through your own eyes but you also through the eyes of something that is imposed on you is not a good thing. And that he would have preferred to get rid of this Double consciousness. That we should have not double but shared consciousness. And if double consciousness is a negative rather than a positive thing now there is quadruple consciousness. People need to have more than double so that you can operate with multiple situations. Now there is a change in understanding of identity. Du Bois was operating with this binary notion of identity at that time. Today we no longer operate with this binary view. Because our notion of identity has changed so should the notion of double consciousness change? But there was no way for him to know that there would be shifts in our understanding of a Black- White

world. Even though he talks about the different ethnic groups that comprised his body ... but the meaning of identity has changed completely. And it's still a problem if you put a negative value judgment to blackness and a positive value judgment to whiteness. Du Bois says that there were two warring souls inside the same body and they are equally matched in your body and they contribute to your growth and understanding. Identity is not fixed any more but it was seen as fixed in Du Bois's time.

MS: Thanks a lot Prof. Graham for your valuable time and for answering all the questions with such detail.