A salient and widely studied feature of African American English (AAE) is the absence of copula and auxiliary forms of *be*, shown in (1) and (2).

1) He ugly
2) You tellin’ me right.

Copula absence has been documented consistently in AAE, as in the urban North (Wolfram 1969, Labov 1972), the Deep South by Wolfram (1974) and Dunlap (1974), and Southern Appalachia by Mallinson and Wolfram (2002) and Childs and Mallinson (2004). Research comparing patterning to counterpart local white speech has been much less extensive, with studies such as Wolfram (1974) in southwest Mississippi and Wolfram and Thomas (2002) in eastern North Carolina finding copula absence to be severely restricted there and both quantitatively and qualitatively different from counterpart African American speech, especially for younger speakers. For African Americans it extends to more environments and usually to both *are* and *is*.

While more than forty years of research has established a knowledge base about copula absence, its constraints, and its patterning, to date studies have relied on impressionistic transcription to determine whether or not copula forms are present. Interestingly, perception has been shown to be potentially influenced by the expectations about the communities and the speakers, objects in the environment, and previous experience with the studied community (Drager 2010). Such influences raise the prospect of sociophonetic measurement illuminating the workings of numerous morphological features having a phonetic component, not only the presence or absence of the copula. Traditional research has been binomial, but the reality is not that neat. Phonetic investigation can help to untangle exactly how deletion is manifested and the character of intermediate stages.

The present study will investigate a small, socioeconomically marginal community in south-central Kentucky, on the edge of Appalachia, comprised primarily of descendants of freed slaves (with a small Cherokee component) and also whites. The different groups lived in close proximity for over a century following the Civil War, interacted constantly, and indeed were co-mingled in a sparsely populated yet relatively insular rural setting. Preliminary work has found that the African Americans maintained linguistic patterns distinct from their white neighbors for /ai/ monophthongization and post-vocalic /r/, and preliminary observation indicates that both groups demonstrate varying rates of copula absence. A more detailed examination study of twelve speakers in the community will reveal the extent of variation more clearly and explore dynamics of dialect contact in a type of community that not uncommonly arose and persisted following the Civil War. However promising phonetic analysis may appear for studying copula absence, this has yet to be determined with any precision, meaning that for this presentation equally important with substantive concerns is a methodological one: the reliability and utility of impressionistic transcription vis-à-vis instrumental measurement. To examine this issue, data will first be transcribed impressionistically for subsequent comparison of coding.