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To the memory of
Patricia A. Anderson
(1930-2006)

PREFACE

In this centennial year of Paul Laurence Dunbar's death, the Society for the Study of Midwestern Literature presents nine essays on a variety of the Dayton laureate's achievements. Two essays reexamine controversies about Dunbar's use of dialect. Pam Bottoms explores Dunbar's use of African American Vernacular English, with special insights about Dunbar's struggles against not only racism, but also the movements toward standardization and "preservation" in his time. She finds Dunbar's dialect to be in a tradition of counterlanguages created by oppressed groups when a "hegemonic group denigrates the speech patterns and language of another" (17). Christopher Jones looks to the fascinating similarities between Dunbar and Robert Burns.

A century after Dunbar's death, this collection also underscores many of his other accomplishments. Katherine Capshaw Smith assesses Dunbar's influence on children's literature between the time of his own works and the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s. She emphasizes the "competing ideological tensions" as dialect conflicts with a desire for "racial uplift" in African American children's books (37). Sheena Denney examines Dunbar's drama–particularly *Herrick*, which he wrote while living in England in 1897. Stephen C. Holder and Linda Bearss focus on Dunbar's fiction in relation to the American traditions of realism and naturalism.

Several authors draw on their personal experience in documenting the cultural work performed by Dunbar's poems. Nancy D. Tolson surveys the impact of Dunbar's vernacular and Standard English works on several generations of families, students, and readers at every level. Finally, Sandra Seaton and Herbert Woodward Martin turn to Dunbar the performing artist–himself in his own performances and then in portrayals over the next century: Seaton in the readings of her grandmother and Martin along the roads of the "unintended journey" where he and Dunbar met each other on stage for over thirty years.

In all this, the Paul Laurence Dunbar special edition of *Midwestern Miscellany* is a tribute by members of the Society for the Study of Midwestern Literature to the Dunbar that Martin, in his essay, "An Unintended Journey," calls "an exquisite singer" who "loved watching words roll from his heart and tongue in such a unique and enlightened way" (96).

Ronald Primeau
Herbert Woodward Martin

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THE CONTROVERSIAL, SUBVERSIVE "BROKEN TONGUE" OF PAUL LAURENCE DUNBAR

PAM BOTTOMS

When, in the late nineteenth century, Paul Laurence Dunbar penned the sentimental lines, "Little brown baby wif spa'klin' eyes, / Come to yo' pappy an'set on his knee. / What you been doin',— suh makin' san' pies? / Look at dat bib — you's ez du'ty ez me," ("Little Brown Baby" 1-4), he excited a controversy that remains unresolved because determining the significance of language is never as elementary as a structural analysis of words and their varied denotations. Rather, it is a complex phenomenon that includes consideration of the economic, political, and social factors that suggest a speaker's status in a particular community or nation. In the United States there are a variety of English dialects reflecting the social milieu of the country's diverse population. Each vernacular can provide clues to a speaker's ethnic background, geographical origin, and, in many cases, status in a country proud of its foundation on principles of democracy. As is the case in most countries, certain standardized dialects connote prestige in the United States, while others, laden with political and historical innuendo, serve as reminders of language's power to marginalize particular segments of a population. In particular, speakers of African American Vernacular English (AAVE), such as Dunbar, have historically been excluded from mainstream positions of influence due to the inferior status accorded their dialect.

As recently as 1996, Patricia Williams commented in the *New York Times* that "there is no greater talisman of lower or underclass accent status than the black accent . . . black English is the perpetual symbolic code for ignorance, evil and jest" (qtd. in Morgan 134). The consequences of the vilification of AAVE are far-reaching and have

affected its users in all social arenas, from politics to the arts, and in all periods of United States history, from the 1600s to the present. A consideration of the dilemma of Paul Laurence Dunbar as a writer of dialect verse sheds light on the complex issues facing AAVE speakers. The linguistic controversy surrounding Dunbar's dialect poetry is significant because, according to sociolinguist Marcyliena Morgan, it "embodies nearly every issue that has emerged concerning African American language over the last thirty years" (17-18). Dunbar's difficulties as a writer of AAVE one hundred years ago reflect vividly current ideological, emotionally charged debates over the dialect's legitimacy.

To understand fully AAVE and why its usage was the source of life-long bitterness for Dunbar, who became the first nationally recognized black poet when he published the first of six volumes of verse in 1893, one has to understand the history, characteristics and politics of the dialect itself (Braxton ix). Contrary to social science theorists who claim that AAVE has no cultural roots because when Africans were transported across the Atlantic for purposes of slavery, their language was lost under the system's all-pervasive repressive conditions, Morgan posits instead that African languages survived the institution, as evidenced in the Gullah language's Africanisms (14-15). She sides with Melville Herskovits, who, in the early part of the twentieth century, introduced the idea of African continuity with regard to the transmission of language and culture. According to Herskovits, Africans retained key elements of their languages, which eventually merged and garnered new meaning when they were infused with the newly acquired tongue learned from American slaveholders (15). Joseph E. Holloway and Winifred K. Vass substantiate Herskovits's position, and in their examination of AAVE, they cite words such as "jive," "jazz," and "yam" that originated in West and Central Africa (Okafor-Newsum 220). The Atlantic crossing and its aftermath, Morgan insists, "laid the foundation for later beliefs that aligned blackness [and its expression in language] with pathology and whiteness with progress" (14). Sonja L. Lanehart, in even stronger terms, insists that AAVE is perceived by many to be "a bastardized form of English that is spoken because the speakers do not know any better" (213). What is it about AAVE that makes it seem illegitimate to many blacks and whites alike? Perhaps the answer can be found in its history and attributes.

One theory holds that because slaves were prohibited by law to read or write "Caucasian" English, they acquired the characteristics of AAVE by attempting to pronounce words for which they had no written or orthographical context. House slaves learned English aurally from those they served and then communicated words, often mispronounced, to field workers, who further altered the pronunciation. Hence, words like "dhis" took the place of "this," and "dhat" was substituted for "that." According to Morgan, the "phonological and syntactic features and lexical principles" associated with present-day AAVE were reported as early as 1865 (76-77). These original idiosyncrasies were passed down through generations and can be evidenced in the features of black dialect today (Lanehart 215). For example, one characteristic of AAVE is a contraction of final consonant clusters, such as "lis'" for "list." Another is "the loss of postvocalic *r*" as evidenced in "fo'" for "four" (Baugh and Cable 384). There also occurs a pronounced incidence of deletion preceding vowel sounds — "lif' up" for "lift up" (384). According to Baugh and Cable, "AAVE is also characterized by deletion of a word-final single consonant after a vowel as in "ma'" for "man," with a nasalized [ae], or "boo'" for "boot" (384). Other features include a shortening of the *–ing* suffix to *–in*, as in "runnin' " (384). In addition, the long *a* is often replaced by a short *e* ("tek" for "take"), and the short *a* substituted for the short *o*, as in "map" for "mop"; likewise, an *f* can replace a final *th*, "teef"for "teeth," and *er* replaces *ow* in the long *o* sound, as in "holler" for "hollow" (Turner 69). Darwin Turner explains that, historically, AAVE speakers like Dunbar also often "elided medial *r* except when it introduces a syllable ("co'n" but "farin'") [and they] also elided unpronounced medial vowels" (69).

Finally, grammatical features sometimes inaccurately described as "lazy," according to Lanehart, actually follow AAVE rules. For example, forms of "to be" can be deleted or altered in AAVE wherever they are contracted in standardized English. Additionally, the mode of deletion corresponds to different meanings. Therefore, the standardized sentence, "He is married," when converted to the AAVE "He married," means that the individual is currently married. Likewise the AAVE "He been married" bespeaks a situation in which the man was once married but is no longer. "He *be* married," on the other hand, demonstrates the use of an invariant "be," which indicates that the person has been wedded for an extensive time. This quality in AAVE, known as aspect, which indicates verb inflection, is documented as a feature in other languages and is not indicative of indolence by users of AAVE (Lanehart 217). John R. Rickford argues further that AAVE is a legitimate language because "it involves a vocabulary or lexicon, a phonology or sound system, and a grammar — a set of rules" (qtd. in Weiss 1). Nevertheless, Lanehart cautions that "intolerance for language variation as a product of racism is real" because "language diversity provides a means for justifying discrimination based on differences" (219). Morgan affirms that there are always identity and power issues when two or more languages come in contact with each other. One language becomes the *lingua franca*, and the ideology of the dominant group overwhelms the "conquered," who become marginalized. The result is a pidginlike AAVE, "a language that is nobody's mother tongue," but one that is a necessity for survival (12).

Lanehart is especially concerned with socio-economic restrictions imposed on minorities, who do not communicate in prescribed English, and her anxiety over societal intolerance of nonstandard language is well founded, for this issue was a key factor when Dunbar's controversial dialect poetry was first published. In the late nineteenth century, there were economic, social, and political, as well as linguistic, forces operating against the acceptance of Dunbar's attempts to express himself in black dialect verse (219). Marnie Holborow, in *The Politics of English: A Marxist View of Language*, establishes an authentic connection between politics and language, maintaining that language is "the nucleus of political life, steeped in power and defining people's role in the world" (1). She agrees with Marx's philosophy that a society's ruling class possesses the affluence and institutions necessary to propagate its ideology. Therefore, it follows that hegemonic ideas with regard to language will reflect that view (23). She also concurs with Morgan that AAVE is a politically charged language because its roots are in slavery, and its spread was "often intertwined with conflict and oppression" (89).

When Paul Laurence Dunbar began writing in the 1890s, he belonged to a generation of black writers who were the first to be free born. For the first time in America, these writers evidenced a significant African American artistic cognizance in literature. Unfortunately, this literary black consciousness coincided with an all-time low in racial relations. The South, internationally humiliated by a crushing defeat just twenty-five years earlier, was still smarting from the collapse of its socio-economic institutions. Freed slaves and

their descendants played integral roles in an often-forced Reconstruction, and the resulting racial disharmony ushered in the birth of the Ku Klux Klan and Jim Crow laws and assured the defeat of the Civil Rights Act of 1875 (Whitlow 53-54). By the end of the first decade of the twentieth century, 1,665 blacks had been savagely lynched, and Reconstruction was all but abandoned. Dunbar's America was one of racism, violence, and "the solidification of disenfranchisement and segregation," a time Gossie Hudson solemnly refers to as "the worst period [in history] for 'other Americans'" (227-29). The idea of educating blacks was deemed "a waste of money" because of their perceived intellectual deficits (Brawley 8), and even as V. F. Calverton praised African Americans for their contributions to American literature, he, in the same journal, labeled them "simple [and] unsophisticated" (114) and remarked that their "superior response to jazz" might be the result of a "difference in the calcium factor in bone structure or conjunction, accounting for an exceptional muscular resiliency" (116). So deep-rooted was racism in America at the turn of the twentieth century that when the gifted Dunbar graduated with honors from high school in 1891, the only job he could procure was that of an elevator operator, in spite of his longing for higher education (Davis 126).

Another force operating against Dunbar's categorical acceptance as a poet of black dialect in the late 1800s was an English standardization movement that had begun in the last half of the nineteenth century. The initial 1858 proposal for a dictionary to "deny the possibility of tense and tangled relationships within the language" included a provision for excluding dialect words that came into usage after the Reformation (North 12). With this in mind, the Oxford English Dictionary was conceived, and the quest to establish a standard version of the English language became more enticing as the century progressed. When the OED was initially published in the 1880s, the eradication of "flawed" linguistic usage became a "thriving industry" (12). Spelling reform took precedence; popular magazines like *Harper's* regularly published articles on proper English usage; and readers were encouraged to use standardized speech. The consequences of this English regularization movement for writers of dialect verse like Dunbar were devastating, especially when deviation from the now-codified language became "hierarchized," with some variants even considered morally dangerous to speakers of English (12). For example, Robert Bridges, who founded the Society

for Pure English (13) and echoed the concerns of others who, since the 1860s, had decried the "blundering corruptions" of American English, expressed his dismay over "other-speaking races," which he claimed brutalized the language (qtd. in North 16).

Although the crusade to "save" English originated in England, defensive American purists joined the movement with their own brand of preservation strategies, such as a grant from the American Academy of Arts and Letters issued to stay the language's decline. Americans such as William Fowler fretted in 1887 that as "our countrymen are . . . brought into contact with other races . . . there is some danger that, in the use of their liberty, they may break loose from the laws of the English language" (qtd. in North 16). By the early part of the twentieth century, the American campaign had blossomed into a full-blown educational crusade, and local color and dialect writers were castigated for imperiling the language (13). In particular, a writer like Dunbar suffered because, as Etienne Balibar incisively points out, the racism inherent in a standardization movement causes a country to distance itself from the "rejected," those who speak a form of nonstandard English (North 14). According to Michael North, the "real purpose [of the standardization movement] was to focus attention on the alien, both foreign and domestic, and to provide a means of discriminating where other methods were beginning to fail" (18). He believes that dialect words excluded from the OED became "routinely stigmatized," and the result was a discrediting of black artists who expressed themselves in their vernacular (18). According to North, AAVE had been considered an adulterated form of English as early as the 1700s, when a colonial who "regularly consorts with slaves" was said to be in danger of acquiring "their broken way of talking" (21). Ironically, even some black literati, anxious to prove their intellectual equality with whites, disparaged AAVE. According to Henry Louis Gates, Jr., Alexander Crummel, who founded the American Negro Academy in 1897, "never stopped believing that mastering the master's tongue was the sole path to civilization . . . and social equality for the black person" (*Loose Canons* 72-73). Crummel once called AAVE "a miserable caricature of their [whites'] noble tongue" and further stated that black dialect was "low, inferior and barbarous," greatly estranged from "civilized languages" (qtd. in Gates 74).

Ironically, at the height of the nineteenth-century standardization movement, white writers like Joel Chandler Harris published popu-

lar stories featuring speakers of black dialect. However, the characters featured in these often comic stories were slaves or freed slaves depicted as childish, helpless, and in need of supervision, so this literature served only to reinforce stereotypes and the idea of the "otherness" of those who spoke in dialect (North 22). In fact, according to Michele Birnbaum, in the plantation narrative, "white authorial representations of black speech . . . signify attempts to . . . restore ideas about status and social hierarchy based on race and class that had been turned upside down" by the Emancipation Proclamation (qtd. in Minnick 12).

North argues that the popularity of the works of white dialect writers like Harris coincided with what he terms the "disappearing Negro" movement, a "wish fulfillment" on the part of whites "revealing the barely submerged hope that the freed slaves would simply die off" (22). The turmoil incited by increased hate propaganda and criminal acts against blacks, the failure of Reconstruction, and the new Jim Crow laws caused uneasy whites to feel nostalgic for the period of the antebellum Southern plantation, a time when racial roles were clearly delineated and black-white relationships, for whites anyway, seemed less complex. According to North, in the dialect stories of white writers, black speech patterns were parodied as aberrant and simultaneously heralded as the singular authentic Southern voice (23).

Thus was born the plantation tradition in American literature, a mode of writing that romanticized pre-Civil War Southern life before the vicissitudes of industrialization and racial conflict interrupted an imagined agrarian serenity. Lisa Cohen Minnick insists that the plantation tradition in literature was politically motivated and that its goal was to mythologize the antebellum era, a time in which slavery was perceived as 'benign and familial rather than cruel and degrading" (82). Dialect in the plantation tradition, according to Minnick, who argues that literary dialect represents an important linguistic inquiry, was placed by white writers in the mouths of black characters to give voice to a longing for the days of bondage (xvi). Dialectical impersonations in plantation literature depicted freed African Americans as naïve, easily subdued, empty-headed, and desirous of a master to supervise and make decisions for them. This type of literature, Minnick says, served only to absolve white guilt over slavery and enhance conditions for discrimination to occur (82), and ultimately, according to Lorne Fienberg, return "the freed slave to a state of narrative bondage" (qtd. in Minnick 11). What caused incontrovertible problems for writers of black dialect like Dunbar was that plantation dialect became synonymous with the *genuine* dialect spoken by African Americans. Consequently, an AAVE dialect writer like Dunbar was often charged with both profiting from and sustaining racist stereotypes in his dialect verse (83).

Dunbar wrote dialect poetry in the plantation tradition for several reasons. He was enamored with plantation melodies, which he described in an 1899 *Chicago Record* article "Negro Music" as part of his heritage, emanating from "the matted jungles and sunburned deserts of Africa, from the reed huts of the Nile" and bequeathed to the Africans' enslaved descendants, where the melody became sorrow-laden and infused with "strong religious zeal" (184). He insisted that he felt compelled to write verse inspired by plantation hymns because the cadence is a natural fit for poetry, and he lamented that black Americans felt ashamed of their plantation heritage, because the beautiful melodies originated in Africa, not in slave territory. Therefore, he exhorted African American artists to take advantage of their abundant legacy, as he was determined to do, rather than let others profit from it (185). Dunbar was bent on self-interpretation, which he felt he could achieve through dialect poetry, as well as standardized verse, and he resisted explanations dictated by whites with regard to African American artistic expression (Minnick 23).

Unfortunately, according to Peter Revell, the literary plantation tradition, sentimental and nostalgic, included conventions that did reinforce stereotypes of happy-go-lucky slaves. Typical characters are the elderly planter, often a Southern general or colonel, a loyal black butler, often portrayed as comically accepting of his lowly position on the hierarchically organized manor, and a mammy who cooks and frets over the well-being of the planter's family. These servants mirror the Southern hospitality of their masters and readily accept their inferior positions, reinforcing white values, according to Revell. Plantation literature also highlights simple pleasures, like feasting, singing and merrymaking, that both delight the slaves and suggest a blissful bondage (31-33). Revell states that plantation literature implies that "slavery is good for the black man . . . [and since it came] from the slave's own mouth," it undermined the harsh reality of slavery and served to keep freed slaves "in their place" (34-35). In short, plantation dialect was considered "a language obscured by travesty and stereotype, so negatively charged that educated blacks

were afraid to use it" (North 176). Why, then, would the erudite Dunbar compose verse in a "broken tongue"?

Dunbar was born in 1872, only a few years after the Emancipation Proclamation went into effect, to former slaves who mesmerized their son with stories, both wistful and bitter in tone, about their days in bondage. While growing up, Dunbar absorbed these tales and often questioned his mother's friends, also former slaves, about their experiences because he was fascinated with the details of a life that might have been his had he been born a few years earlier. Charles T. Davis explains that Dunbar not only analyzed carefully the lifestyles of these onetime slaves, but also the manner in which they expressed themselves, their characteristic way of speaking (129). Revell concurs that the basis for Dunbar's dialect pieces was "the real language of the people" and that his interviews of elderly ex-slaves, of whom he was very fond, provided him with legitimate subject matter (75-76). He would, for hours at a time, listen attentively to their tales, paying particular attention to their idiolects, which he would later appropriate for use in his verse (Bruce 98). In addition, as a young man, Dunbar associated with black musicians and vocal artists, and, according to Davis, "all of these black associations point to the discovery of a poetic voice that was essentially black. The best evidence of its shaping is to be found in the dialect poems," into which Dunbar incorporated the rhythms and narratives of these rich folk sources (130) to create a "conversational ease" of narration (Revell 82). Another influence on Dunbar's plantation dialect poetry was a romantic sensibility, an idealistic response to industrial and scientific influences that many felt threatened a vanishing pastoral lifestyle (Hudson 230). But the young, somewhat naïve, poet was unprepared for the fierce controversy his dialect verse, like that in "The Old Cabin," would generate:

Talk abut yo' go'geous mansions
An' yo' big house great an' gran',
Des bring up de fines' palace
Dat you know in all de lan'.
But dey's somep'n' dearah to me,
Somep'n' faihah to my eyes
In dat cabin, less you bring me
To yo' mansion in de skies.

I kin see de light a-shinin'
Thoo de chinks atween de logs,
I kin hyeah de way-off bayin'
Of my mastah's huntin' dogs,
An de neighin' of de hosses
Stampin' on de ol' bahn flo',
But above dese soun's de laughin'
At my deah ol' cabin do'. (17-32)

For Dunbar, this poem would have been a reflection of heartfelt emotions expressed by former slaves, such as his mother and her friends, as they recalled fleeting moments of joy in plantation cabins, but for both his black and white audiences, the words connoted very different sentiments.

Many African Americans, working diligently to overcome the stereotype of jocular, ignorant slaves, were livid at Dunbar's portrayal of a jovial life in subjugation, while others embraced his dialectal interpretations of former times, regarding them as authentic representations of the myriad of emotions felt by all human beings who find themselves in intolerable circumstances. A pivotal moment in Dunbar's career came when noted literary critic William Dean Howells praised his dialect poems, comparing them to those of Robert Burns, in an 1896 issue of *Harper's Weekly*. Howells, hoping for "positive social ramifications," emphasized the humanity of Dunbar's dialect poems and saw them as proof that blacks could "think white" and "feel white" (Andrews 333). Howell intones: "These [dialect poems] are divinations and reports of what passes in the hearts and minds of a lowly people whose poetry had hitherto been inarticulately expressed in music, but now finds, for the first time in our tongue, literary interpretation of a very artistic completeness" (qtd. in Martin xii). Howells's racially charged endorsement was vitally important to Dunbar, for it legitimized his art and provided him with an opportunity to earn a living as a poet, since a white audience, crucial to his commercial success, would now purchase his books. However, an initially grateful Dunbar would grow to resent Howells's acclamation, because the ingenuous poet never anticipated that his dialect verse would incite charges of his portrayal of African Americans as "the perpetual happy dancers and singers of the stereotype while they suffered the yoke of slavery" (Martin, Herbert xii-xiii). Dunbar would never again feel at ease about his life's calling.

According to Devon Boan in *The Black "I,"* Dunbar's dilemma was one of "double consciousness," a term coined by W.E.B. Du Bois

in 1903 (2). By this DuBois meant that someone like Dunbar was forced to look at himself "through the eyes of others" (qtd. in Boan 2). DuBois knew that, as an African American, Dunbar had to wrestle with a double self — he was both an American and black, "two warring ideals in one dark body" (qtd. in Boan 2). To earn success as a writer, the young poet had simultaneously to write the dialect poetry that white Americans demanded and represent black Americans positively, tasks he was never able to reconcile, because he was writing *"for* the expectations of one audience and *against* those of the other audience" (3). Reaching a white audience, a "financial and political necessity," had far-reaching effects for Dunbar and his art (15).

Dunbar was accused of being an accommodationist by some middle-class blacks attempting to distance themselves from the constraints of slavery. They disavowed Dunbar's use of the slave vernacular that Roger Whitlow says he wrote with "pinpoint accuracy" (56). These critics found his dialect verse to be nothing more than advice for Dunbar's race to be patient and accepting of adversity and to continue to hope for better times—to persevere rather than demand immediate reform (57). Other blacks viewed the dialect poetry as an accurate reflection of their recent history, not as cause for ridicule, and publishers of black magazines and books willingly printed his works (Bruce 94). African American critic Edward H. Lawson, for example, praised Dunbar shortly after his untimely death for preserving "southern Negro speech" in his lyrics (qtd. in Bruce 97). A few years later, Harlem Renaissance poet Arna Bontemps confirmed Dunbar's acceptance by a black audience when he reminded readers that Frederick Douglass and Booker T. Washington had praised his literary efforts as admirable and productive in the quest for respect by African Americans. Bontemps offered further support for Dunbar's dialect verse by insisting it was "honest...Plantation Speech" grounded in oral tradition and that Dunbar was "as relevant as Robert Burns" (53).

But in spite of the support offered by African Americans for his vernacular poetry, Dunbar continued to suffer from heated criticism. According to Lisa Cohen Minnick, black writers like James Weldon Johnson feared that whites would manipulate black speech in order to "achieve racist political ends" and to re-establish an antebellum racial power structure because, Minnick insists, "language is perspectival and coded with assumptions of hierarchy and power" (95-

96). For writers like Dunbar, Minnick believes, AAVE came to represent a substandard mode of expression because it was associated with minstrelsy and a lack of education, and its use became equated with African American inferiority (97). This, according to David Holmes, is exactly *why* white audiences were so enamored of Dunbar's dialect poems, a mode of communication which he claims "underscored the so-called purity of edited American English"; in essence, AAVE served as a stark contrast to the "superiority of the standardized discourse" that, in the late 1800s and early 1900s, was of great significance to many Americans who equated excellence in verbal expression with racial supremacy (30). AAVE was, Holmes asserts, a physical characteristic, like dark skin, that functioned as a "fallacy of attaching complexion to disposition" (31).

The upshot of this tangled linguistic conundrum for Dunbar was that he could not establish an audience for his standardized verse. He once wrote, "I'm tired of dialect, . . . but the magazines aren't. Everytime [sic] I send them something else they write back asking for dialect. A Dunbar just has to be dialect, that's all" (qtd. in Hudson 233). In an effort to express his frustration at the limitations placed on his artistic aspirations, he composed "The Poet":

> He sang of love when earth was young,
> And Love, itself, was in his lays.
> But ah, the world, it turned to praise
> A jingle in a broken tongue. (qtd. in Hudson 133)

Dunbar was disappointed not only because the public wasn't interested in anything except his dialect verse, but also because he felt strongly that his motives in this mode of expression were greatly misunderstood. If one considers carefully Dunbar's dialect pieces, it is clear that they are much more than depictions of a romanticized plantation life. They are, in fact, examples of rhetorical subversion.

Marcyliena Morgan postulates that when a hegemonic group denigrates the speech patterns and language of another, which was especially true of the plantation dialect spoken by slaves and ex-slaves during the 1800s, "antisocieties" develop. These are groups that resist their enforced subjugation, but members must behave submissively in front of the dominant majority. Antisocieties, according to Morgan, are a response by the "disempowered" to those who would seek to control their behavior and expression, and they play a pivotal role in everyday speech (23). Antisocieties go unobserved by

those in power and are significant because they allow the marginalized group to communicate face-to-face in front of the dominant group in such a way that the members of the powerful group are ignorant of the true meaning of their interaction. So, while African Americans in Dunbar's time were forced to maintain an oppressed attitude in front of whites, their antisociety, in reality, "undermined the values, attitudes, and beliefs" of the dominant white society (24). In this antisociety, a system of indirectness aimed at whites, a counterlanguage originated, which provided AAVE speakers with a means of presenting a social face that challenged the practice of racial discrimination. In the practice of indirectness, according to Morgan, the speaker uses words that denote "contradictory or multiple meanings beyond traditional English interpretations" (24).

Historically, for AAVE users, the act of speaking has always been political and "highly symbolic," and their counterlanguage "included multiple audiences, layers of understanding and concomitant multiple subjectivities" that served as the basis of all discourse for African Americans (25). Likewise, "signifying," a playful linguistic form of indirection defined by Mitchell-Kernan as "the recognition and attribution of some implicit content or function which is obscured by the surface content or function" was a way for blacks to protest openly, yet furtively, the oppressive conditions they suffered (qtd. in Morgan 56). Through indirectness, blacks could resist white subjugation and build a sense of solidarity within their own speech community (48).

Dunbar identified intensely with the black community and strove diligently in numerous news articles to defend it against racial attacks (Martin, Jay 20). In both the *Tattler* and the *Herald,* an eighteen-year-old Dunbar published essays condemning the lack of African American political clout and contesting exaggerated notions of his race's superstitious nature (23). In 1898, he published an article in the *Chicago Record* entitled "Recession Never," in which he angrily indicts whites for their hypocritical abuse of blacks: "America strides through the ashes of burning homes, over the bodies of murdered men, women and children holding aloft the banner of progress" (qtd. in Martin, Jay 26). Dunbar's "unified consciousness of blackness" is not only evident in his protest prose in black publications, but also in his plantation tradition poetry that, on the surface, seemed to many of his critics to only reinforce negative racial stereotypes (28).

In much of Dunbar's plantation dialect poetry, there exists evidence of the rhetorical device of signifying, which Roger D.

Abrahams calls "the language of trickery, that set of words or gestures which arrives at "'direction through indirection'" (qtd. in Gates, *The Signifying Monkey* 74). Henry Louis Gates, Jr., refers to this strategy as "linguistic masking," a term that denotes a demarcation between "the white linguistic realm" and that of the black (75). According to Gates, signifying serves as a mode of expressing one's true feelings (44). In addition, it represents a "profound disruption" at the semantic level of speech. Gates asserts that African Americans, contrary to Saussure's claims, deliberately supplanted arbitrary signs "chosen by language" as an act of self-definition in response to oppressive conditions (47). He cites Bakhtin's theory of the double-voiced word as key to an understanding of signification because in the process of "semantic appropriation," language is "decolonized for the black's purposes 'by inserting a new semantic orientation' into speech" (qtd in Gates 50). For Bakhtin, the process of speaking or writing can never be "divorced from its social construction," nor can its reception by dual audiences, such as white and black, who bring their own life experiences to their interaction with a text (Boan 16-17). In short, Gates says, signifying is a form of deliberate "black double-voicedness," which includes the use of hyperbole and irony; it is rooted in African rhetoric, and it can be evidenced in poetry which uses signifiers "peculiar to the black vernacular" in order to obscure ostensible meaning through indirection (Gates 51-53). Finally, Gates argues that signifying entails an "intention to say one thing but to mean quite another" (82), and evidence of this practice can be found in the African American literary heritage (94). In particular, Gates credits Dunbar as contributing artistic merit to the black literary tradition because he signified, through his use of AAVE in plantation poetry, "upon the received white racist textual tradition and posited in its stead a black poetic diction" (176).

Evidence of Dunbar's signifying can be seen in his subversion of the plantation tradition in his dialect poems. John Keeling contends that these poems mask and subvert "stereotypical notions of African-American character and speech that existed in Dunbar's culture" and that they challenge the plantation tradition that, on the surface, they seem to mirror (26). Rather than suggesting a whimsical plantation fraternity of sanguine slaves, as many critics of Dunbar's dialect poems imply, Keeling views, as does Gates, Dunbar's "mask of dialect" as a forceful agency because of the inherent irony in his language (29). He asserts that Dunbar's text conceals a political agenda

and that his poems "wear a mask that 'grins and lies' in order to expose . . . realities" (31). He cites Dunbar's ironic, hyperbolic "The Party," a poem Braxton interprets as a satire of white cotillions (xxv), as an example because it includes an implied listener who questions the narrator's sincerity as he embellishes what seems to be, superficially, a jolly occasion (36). For example, "The Party's" enslaved speaker describes in lush detail the dress of the revelers, the riotous dancing that suggests flying and escape, and mouth-watering details of the food consumed. Most readers pay little attention to the disaffected listener who has no lines, but Keeling suggests that Dunbar's subversion of the exaggerated grand time the slaves seem to be having is evident in the speaker's various reprimands to this suspicious listener (33-34). When the speaker describes the finery worn by the enslaved women as "silks an' satins, [with] not a wrinkle ner a crease," (7) and "Sku'ts all tucked an' puffed an' ruffled, evah blessed seam an' stitch;" (9), he pauses to defend his yarn and sharply scold the implicit listener, who seems to demand corroborating evidence for such fantastic claims: "Who was dah? Now who you askin'? How you 'spect I gwine to know? / You mus' think I stood an' counted evahbody at de do.'" (13-14). The narrator cannot provide a witness to substantiate his fantastic descriptions, and his unlikely chronicle contrasts starkly with the shabby customary dress of actual slaves. White audiences would not detect the implied irony in these fanciful descriptions, but Dunbar's black readers would readily discern the discrepancy between the fantasy and the sober reality implied by the wary listener.

Keeling states that in "The Party" and other dialect poems, Dunbar adapts the "overwrought comedy and pathos of the Plantation Tradition as a way to undermine their stereotypical effectiveness," to turn the trope upside down, so to speak (34). Through the use of double-voiced dialect in "The Party," Dunbar signifies in such a way that his masking embodies political protest cloaked in sentiment and yearning (38). It is because he was an African American writer who possessed a double consciousness (that Dorothy J. Hale refers to as a "privileged kind of knowledge" that encompasses a dual perspective of both "Americanness" and "blackness") that he was able to incorporate an indirect counterlanguage in works like "The Party," in which different characters provide conflicting perspectives that only a black audience would perceive (qtd. in Boan 16).

When Audre Lorde suggested that Dunbar's literary intentions were to "dismantle the master's house using the master's tools," she had in mind this ability to use ironic dialect to subvert the plantation tradition (qtd. in Martin and Primeau xxi). Gates, in *Figures in Black: Words, Signs, and the "Racial" Self*, calls the "masking function of dialect . . . the self-conscious switch of linguistic codes from white to black or, more properly, from Standard English to the black vernacular" (171). This passage clearly describes the double-voicing technique Dunbar customarily used. His high level of literacy is apparent in poems like "We Wear the Mask" and "Douglass," but he chose, for a variety of reasons, in his dialect poems to mask, to take what George Steiner calls "a verbal descent underground to the Great Dis" to perform subtle, indirect acts of political protest (qtd. in Gates, *Figures in Black* 172). According to Braxton, in "When Malindy Sings," Dunbar, 'signifies' on the whites' assumption of biological and intellectual superiority" and even questions the white mistress Miss Lucy's ability to correctly interpret music books (xxvii):

> G'way an' quit dat noise, Miss Lucy ——
> Put dat music book away;
> What's de use to keep on tryin'?
> Ef you practise twell you're gray,
> You cain't sta't no notes a-flyin'
> Lak de ones dat rants and rings
> F'om de kitchen to de big woods
> When Malindy sings.
>
> You ain't got de nachel o'gans
> Fu' to make de soun' come right,
> You ain't got de tu'ns an' twistin's
> Fu' to make it sweet an' light. (1-12)

Through the double-voiced techniques of humorous dialect, "irony, caricature, and understatement," Dunbar criticizes subversively a white woman he cannot openly disparage (Braxton xxvii).

Dunbar's "An Ante-Bellum Sermon," modeled on Negro spirituals that were barely concealed pleas for deliverance from slavery, exemplifies a double-voiced poem, popular with whites, that contains encoded messages that only a black audience could truly appreciate. The poem's preacher intones, "We is gathahed hyeah, my brothahs, / In dis howlin' wildaness, / Fu' to speak some words of comfo't / To each othah in distress." (1-4). He announces that Moses

is the subject of his sermon and alludes to "Pher'oh," synonymous with a slaveholder to a black audience, with whom God is angry, and then proclaims that the cruel ruler is commanded by God to "let dem chillun go" (16). The rest of the poem describes what will happen to the pharaoh if he does not heed God's warning: "An' ef he refuse to do it, / I will make him rue de houah, / Fu' I'll empty down on Egypt / All de vials of my powah' (17-20). Dunbar's black audience would have taken pleasure in the rest of the poem's descriptions of punishments awaiting the pharaoh/slave master and the promise of help from God for his true children, the marginalized African Americans. Dunbar's preacher cautions his congregation, "Now don't run an' tell yo' mastahs / Dat I's preachin' discontent, / 'Cause I isn't" (47-49). Instead, he insists that he's referring to the enslaved Israelites of biblical times. According to Charles T. Davis, Dunbar's preacher "makes a clear case for a lack of justice in his own day," but in a plantation format acceptable to white audiences who would perceive the dialect narrative as nonthreatening (141). Herbert W. Martin refers to "An Antebellum Sermon" as "direct finger pointing" at white audiences, couched in the ironic humor of dialect (xvii).

Even in "The Old Cabin," which, on the surface, appears to celebrate living in captivity, Dunbar includes lines that bespeak the intrinsic cruelty in slavery:

> In de dead of night I sometimes,
> Git to t'inkin' of de pas'
> An' de days w'en slavery helt me
> In my mis'ry — ha'd an' fas'.
> Dough de time was mighty tryin',
> In dese houahs somehow hit seem
> Dat a brightah light come slippin'
> Thoo de kivahs of my dream.
> An' my min' fu'gits de whuppins
> Draps de feah o' block an' lash
> An flies straight to somep'n' joyful
> In a secon's lightnin' flash. (1-12)

Although the poem's narrator next describes happy times in his old slave cabin, clearly the message is one of human endurance under the severest of circumstances. Though white audiences, "outside the circle of black culture," might read this as a sentimental longing for blissful antebellum days, it signifies for a black audience the

resiliency of the human spirit (Braxton xxviii). Likewise, in "Little Brown Baby," Dunbar affirms the survival of the black family and the presence of a strong, supportive father: "Come to you' pallet now — go to yo' res; / Wisht you could allus know ease an' cleah skies; / Wisht you could stay jes' a chile on my breas' — / Little brown baby wif spa'klin' eyes!" (29-32). Here Dunbar is at his best, using an African-centered poetic voice that, according to Braxton, "transcended the racist heritage of the plantation tradition" in order to signify the attempts of enslaved parents to shield their children from certain racial persecution (xxviii-ix).

Gavin Jones has called Dunbar "a wily manipulator of literary conventions, a subtle overturner of racist stereotypes" (qtd. in Minnick 18). Nevertheless, Cornell West maintains that Dunbar's literary struggle is one that all African American authors face due to their dual consciousness as authors writing for black and white audiences. No matter for whom they write, Boan concurs, "even the most talented of such writers tend to remain marginalized" (28). This is because African American writers, even if they attempt to transmit mainstream ideology while retaining their racial identity, do not create in a sociopolitical vacuum (29). Dunbar's dialect verse, in which he expressed the joys and sorrows of African Americans as they searched for a voice in a country determined to suppress it, reflects an ongoing controversy with regard to AAVE and its linguistic legitimacy. Even though Derek Walcott argues that AAVE represents "the forging of a language that went beyond mimicry, a dialect which . . . invented names for things, one which began to create an oral culture," it is still mired in debate (qtd. in Gates, *Figures in Black* 173). Gates argues that African Americans need to emphasize their vernacular roots in a search for a literary canon of their own (*Loose Canons* 33), and Morgan calls AAVE the linguistic evidence of the black struggle for equality (7), even though some educated blacks currently believe the dialect is harmful to the black community and that its use should be discouraged (145). Because AAVE has historically been used as a weapon to disparage blacks, it remains a sensitive issue (Davis 137).

However, Minnick is heartened that today many linguists continue to strive diligently to eliminate the stigmatization of dialect features (xv). She is supported in her quest by other crusaders, such as columnist Ron Walters, who admonishes, in his *Washington Informer* column, those who denigrate AAVE:

> One route to the positive education of Black children is to dignify the culture they bring into the classroom. We can also perpetuate what is happening: degrade Black working culture and the speech that flows from it, alienate the children, then complain about their low self-esteem, rebellion, low test scores and the like. You can teach some children who don't feel good about themselves and their family circumstances, but probably not most of them — effectively. (11)

Finally, because writers like Toni Morrison and Alice Walker use AAVE in an attempt to make their characters sound authentic, Minnick forecasts the founding of a modern literary dialect tradition that promises to function as a social and linguistic representation of diverse peoples (27).

An influence on Langston Hughes, Zora Neale Hurston, and more recent writers, Dunbar, as a writer of dialect poems, encouraged artists to "capture the language of daily life" (Martin and Primeau xxii), so Dunbar scholar Herbert Martin bids his readers to "forgive" the poet "for practicing his craft and for making—in the process—superb art" (xxv). After all, Dunbar asked only "to be able to interpret my own people through song and story, and to prove to the many that after all we are more human than African" (qtd. in Braxton x). Dunbar's humble plea for acceptance of his self-expression in dialect echoes that of many contemporary speakers and writers of AAVE.

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PAUL LAURENCE DUNBAR AND ROBERT BURNS: VERNACULAR GATEWAYS

CHRISTOPHER JONES

Paul Laurence Dunbar and Robert Burns are widely recognized for capturing the flavor of their people in vernacular poetry. When the two poets were first becoming established, their work in vernacular was the main focus of literary reviews. The receptions of Burns and Dunbar show similarities and differences. Their use of dialect was often discussed, while pieces without dialect, in the case of Dunbar, and pieces with less dialect, in the case of Burns, were largely ignored and received less praise. Dunbar was often told to stay in his literary place and stop wasting his time with Standard English, while Burns's critics apologized for his dialect usage and suggested that he move towards English, which would be easier to enjoy. Dunbar's and Burns's views on their dialect poetry differed as well. Dunbar felt trapped, while Burns struggled to keep his language. Regardless of these differences both artists were given the opportunity to become established because of their dialect usage, and even though critics felt the dialect poems were not serious, the authors did use them to convey meaningful messages. By examining the critical reception of Dunbar and Burns, the large role their dialect usage played in establishing them becomes apparent, yet by examining specific poems, one can easily see the deeper meanings of the dialect pieces that were often ignored by those same critics that praised the simplicity of the vernacular pieces.

When Paul Laurence Dunbar first struck waves in American literary circles, he became known for his dialect poetry. This label as a dialect poet was largely due to W. D. Howells's review of *Majors and Minors* in *Harper's Weekly* in June of 1896. The review was highly complimentary and first directed the attention of the country towards

Dunbar, but it also set the tone of Dunbar's career because Howell especially praised Dunbar's dialect verse. In the review Howells states, Dunbar "has been able to bring us nearer to the heart of primitive human nature in his race than anyone else has done" (Metcalf 127). This backhanded compliment would haunt Dunbar because he strove to move beyond the confinements of primitive human nature.

Two more reviews of *Majors and Minors* in 1896 came with mixed blessings. In the September issue of *Bookman* the reviewer felt that because Dunbar was an African American the text was "a remarkably hopeful production," and that the piece was a "triumphant demonstration" of the African American's sense of rhyme and verbal melody (Metcalf 127). Again, the dialectal features were thought to be wonderful because they captured the essence of Dunbar's race, and Dunbar was given special praise for writing so well for an African American. Dunbar was still not receiving true praise but being pigeonholed.

The second review was published in the October *A.M.E. Church Review*. H. T. Keating wrote in regard to Dunbar's dialect poetry, "We prefer to let those things go for the titillation they will occasion among folk-lore fanciers and soda-fountain drinkers.... Editors with the commercial side well developed will besiege him for a copy in a 'minor' view, but we shall wait . . . the maturing of Mr. Dunbar's genius and the sustained trail of his power until he stands crowned by the serious of the world" (Metcalf 127). The review is somewhat prophetic. Dunbar's dialect poetry would become popular and prove to be very publishable, but it wouldn't accord Dunbar the literary merit he desired.

The critical favoritism of Dunbar's dialect poetry continued in 1897. In the January 2nd issue of *Outlook, Lyrics of Lowly Life* was reviewed as having excellent expression, but the dialect poems were considered to be the best. In the January 9th issue of *Critic* the reviewer "agreed with Howells as to the literary merits of the dialect pieces" (Metcalf 128). Yet with regard to the nondialect pieces the reviewer felt "Mr. Dunbar has not fully realized where his strength lies" (Metcalf 128). The reviewers are attempting to keep Dunbar in his literary place. By continually praising his dialect poetry and disregarding his nondialect poetry the critics are limiting his ability and expertise to the language of his own people.

This sentiment is further showed in two more reviews of *Lyrics of Lowly Life* from 1897. In the February issue of *Bookman* the

reviewer feels that the Dunbar's dialect is his strength. Furthermore, the reviewer feels that "The Negro can be really clever and original only when he is thoroughly spontaneous and natural" (Metcalf 128). The reviewer obviously feels that Dunbar should only write in the dialect associated with his race. The reviewer continues stating that when Dunbar "imitates the Caucasian race he is feeble and ineffectual" (Metcalf 128). The reviewer fails to realize that Dunbar isn't imitating anyone, he is simply writing in his actual language. This blatant disregard of Dunbar's nondialect poetry is seen again in the June 19th review in *Academy*. Only the dialect poetry is praised, and even though the book contains both types of poetry, when discussing the Standard English verse the reviewer states, "we will not concern ourselves" with that material (Metcalf 128).

This dichotomy between Dunbar's dialect poems and literary poems, which was established by Howells and strengthened by other critics, would plague Dunbar throughout his literary career. In fact, this division would continue on long after Dunbar had passed away, up through modern criticism, even though it was not based on the merit of the poems (Rauch 186). Rauch feels that "Howells and others had no qualms in their preference for the dialect poems on sociological rather artistic grounds. They accepted the dialect poems as outward and visible signs of an inward and child-like tenderness, sentimentality, humor and general optimism" (188). The social bias of the critics is evident: Dunbar should stick to his strengths and stop intimating Caucasians. Yet they could not completely deny his abilities as a writer and so praised his dialect poems, which captured the true nature of his people in the language in which Dunbar was allowed to be considered proficient.

Dunbar grew to resent his status as a dialect writer and strove to move beyond this label by writing in many different genres and media, including short stories, novels, and essays. His resentment can be seen clearly in his poem "The Poet," where he writes, "He sang of love when earth was young/And Love, itself, was in his lays. /But ah, the world, it turned to praise/ A jingle in broken tongue" (191). The poet, who is Dunbar, has grown to consider the dialect poetry to be simply a jingle in broken tongue. Yet regardless of this resentment, one cannot help but realize that if not for Dunbar's dialect poetry he may never have been discovered. The dialect poetry won him acclaim and gave him the foundation to publish his other material. Even though the Standard English poetry was not a critical

success, the material was still available for people to read; Dunbar was still getting his message across. The dialect poems opened the door for Dunbar, a door that would have been incredibly difficult for an African American to open.

Like Dunbar, Robert Burns was also catapulted into the limelight by a single review. Henry Mackenzie's unsigned essay, "The surprising effects of Original Genius," exemplified in the poetical productions of Robert Burns, an Ayrshire Ploughman," published in the December 9, 1786 issue of *Lounge*, would go on to be reprinted numerous times during and after Robert Burns's life and prove to be the "most influential contemporary account of his poetry" (Low 67). Mackenzie, as the title of the essay implies, sets out to create an image of Burns as the self-taught Ayrshire ploughman. He begins by suggesting that Burns's book, *Poems Chiefly in Scottish Dialect*, was published with no "other ambition, it would seem, than to circulate among the inhabitants of the county where he was born" (Mackenzie 68). This concept of the romantic rustic matched the language that Burns used as well as his location when writing. Mackenzie actually apologizes for Burns's dialect usage, pointing out the difficulty it causes to readers, especially the English, but this may be seen as an attempt to draw attention to the local color of Burns, as well as to attract the attention of Mackenzie's Scottish audience (69). He then strengthens the natural aspects of Burns, describing his "delicate coloring of beauty and taste" and referring to him as "our rustic bard" (69). Burns is also described as having "the honest pride and independence of soul" which belongs to the natural poet (70). Mackenzie then concludes his review saying, "I do my country no more than justice, when I suppose her ready to stretch her hand to cherish and retain this native poet, whose 'wood-notes wild' possess so much excellence" (71). Mackenzie is calling upon Scotland to welcome this natural man, this Ayshire ploughman into her arms, and she does. Mackenzie's conception of Burns would create his fame as the poet who spoke from the rustic heart of Scotland.

Similar to the effect of Howells's review of Dunbar, other critics of Burns followed Mackenzie's description of Burns as the naturally educated poet. James Anderson wrote a very positive review of Burns in the December 1786 issue of *Monthly Review*, stating that, "*Poeta nascitur, non fit*" (a poet is born, not made), an assertion that sets the tone for the rest of his piece (71). Anderson refers to Burns as "the Humble Bard," who is not a versifier like those who must labor at

their craft (71). He praises Burns's "simple strains, artless and unadorned, [that] seem to flow without effort, from the native feelings of the heart" (71-72). Anderson, too, apologizes for Burns's use of dialect, which the English might find unreadable, and because of the allusions to the natural, he feels that the text can "only be fully relished by the natives of that part of the country where it was produced" (72). Again one sees Burns as the ploughman who has captured the essence of rustic Scotland, one who gives his reader a glimpse into romantic country life. Anderson also feels that Burns's more serious poems contain less dialect, but that he is most in his own element when in a sportive, humorous strain" (73). Because Burns is the rustic, he excels at what comes naturally to him, writing in humorous dialect, much like Dunbar was believed to excel in writing the dialect of his people.

The sentiments in the prior reviews are continued in other reviews of Burns. In 1797, in an unsigned notice in the *New Annual Register*, the author describes the "rural bard" as having poems that are "elegant, simple and pleasing" (Low 75). The author also feels that the more serious verses "have much more poetical merit; but that the humorous and satirical pieces appear to have been most congenial to the author's feelings, and turn of mind" (Low 75). Again, the sentiment that the more standard poems have more merit but that the essence of the ploughman is seen in the dialect poems is felt. In an unsigned notice in the *Critical Review* published in May of 1787, Burns is again the visionary born from humble origins. He is described as having "uncultivated genius" and as a "common ploughman" (Low 80). Again a reviewer feels the "strain which seems most natural to the author is the sportive and humorous" (Low 80). And again Burns's reviewer regrets the dialect that obscures "the native beauties" within the poetry for the English reader (Low 80).

The dialect that was often apologized for or regretted, regardless of whether the sentiments were honest, did not negatively affect the popularity of Burns's work. In fact, his use of dialect strengthened his image as the self-taught rustic bard, the Ayrshire ploughman. Burns, like Dunbar, captured the romantic image of his people in their own language. Burns's humorous pieces, which contained more dialect, were consistently praised as being truer to the poet if not as poetic. Even though his reviewers longed for renditions in Standard English, they were already in love with the simple insights Burns was providing. Unlike Dunbar, who strove to be recognized beyond his

dialect pieces, Burns enjoyed his image as the rustic and kept adding at least a sprinkling of Scots in his pieces even though he could have written his work in English (Bentman 80).

Both Paul Dunbar and Robert Burns were poets who captured the essence of their people by writing poetry in spoken dialect. But while their vernacular poetry was acclaimed, it was also deemed to be less serious. When one closely examines their dialect pieces, one can see more substance than just "jingles in broken tongue," for in addition to using the voice of the commoner they also often use common subject matter to portray deeper meaning. For example, by comparing Dunbar's "Possum" and Burns's "To a Haggis," one can see a similarity in both subject matter and themes in their poems. In "Possum" and "To a Haggis" both authors use the everyday subject of cultural food to show strength in their people.

In "Possum," Dunbar presents the reader with the proper African American recipe for cooking possum. He also draws into contrast the improper techniques of "white folks" that attempt to cook the delicacy, in which Dunbar seems to place cultural significance.

In the first stanza the narrator develops his outrage toward the tendency of whites to cook possum improperly. He begins stating "Ef dey's anyt'ing riles me/An' jes' gits me out o' hitch/ Twell I want to tek my coat off/ So 's to r'ar an t'ar an' pitch/ hit's to see some ign'ant white /man/ mittin' dat owdacious" (Braxton 141). The first line establishes the speaker's attitude: If there is anything that riles me. What he is about to describe riles him up more than anything; it gets him out of sorts (hitch) to the point he wants to take off his coat, roar and tear and pitch, when he sees an ignorant white man committing that audacious sin. In some regard the tone is slightly comical because of the contrast between the strength of feeling and the subject of the poem, but people can and do feel very strongly about recipes. In the last two lines the speaker reveals the sin to be "W'en he want to cook a possum/ Tekin' off de possum's skin." These last two lines create the focus of the poem. The speaker preaches the benefits of cooking a possum properly with the skin and the foolishness of white folks for taking it off.

The speaker continues complaining and praising in the second stanza. He feels there "is no use in talkin'" because he is hurt "to de hea't" when he sees "dem foolish people/ th'owin' 'way de fines' pa't" (Braxton 141). He is strengthening the ignorance of white folks by calling them foolish as well. They have moved from simply not knowing any better to behaving as fools for removing the skin of a possum. He then praises the skin saying, "dat skin is jes'ez tendah/ an' ez juicy ez kin be" (Braxton 141). Again he is praising the skin as a delicacy. The skin, if it is not the best part of the possum, is at least as good as any other part. The narrator then speaks of his own expertise, showing why his words should be believed, stating, "I knows all erbout de critter" (Braxton 141). He then further shows his expertise in the third stanza by describing the proper preparation.

The speaker begins with preparations, then again praises the skin of the possum. He states that one should wet (swinge) the skin and then "scope it down" to remove the hair. Then with "a good sharp knife" one should score it and "bake it good an' brown." By following the speaker's directions, they will be rewarded with a wonderful treat because the possum's "cracklin' skin" is so good that it is "'mos' a sin" (Braxton 141).

In the last stanza the speaker again stresses his cultural superiority for preparing possum. The first line reads "white folks t'nk dey know about eatin'" (Braxton 141). Obviously if the white folks think they know about eating, then they really don't. The speaker allows that that sometimes they can "sometimes git a little idée," but their way of cooking possum still can't compare to that of the African American. The speaker solidifies this notion in the last lines of the poem stating, "dey ain't a t'ing dey knows of/ Dat I reckon cain't be beat/ W'en we set down at de table/ to a unskun possum's meat" (Braxton 142). Even in the very last line the speaker stresses that the possum must retain its skin, unlike the way the foolish, ignorant white folk cook it.

In "To a Haggis," Robert Burns gives similar poetic praise to a food held in high regard by the Scottish people but in low regard by nonScots. In the first stanza, Burns begins to praise the haggis, calling it "Great Chieftan o' the Puddin-race" (Low 75). "Chieftain" was the term for the leader of a Scottish clan, which, in addition to describing its place above other boiled food (puddin'), begins to connect the haggis to Scotland's cultural heritage. He continues his praise saying, "Weel are ye wordy o' a grace/ As lang's my arm" (Low 75). Here Burns calls upon the tradition of saying grace over a meal to suggest that a haggis deserves special attention. The haggis should receive a long grace befitting its chiefly manner.

In the third stanza Burns describes the joy that a commoner feels in serving a haggis. He begins the stanza stating, "His knife

see Rustic-labour dight/ An' cut you up wi' ready slight" (Low 76). Burns uses the romanticized figure of the rustic farmer to show that haggis is a food of the people. He also shows the respect given the haggis because the rustic wipes (dight) his knife before readily cutting it up. With the haggis cut, Burns describes the feast saying, "O what a glorious sight/ Warm-reekin, rich" (Low 76). One can easily see similarities between the adoration Burns shows the haggis, a food of his people, and the affection Dunbar shows for the possum.

Burns continues to show the national significance of the haggis when describing the benefits of eating it. In the seventh stanza Burns states, "the trembling earth resounds his [the haggis fed] tread" (Low 76). He continues saying, "clap in his wallie nieve a blade/ he'll mak it whissle/ an' legs, an' arms, an' heads will sned/ like taps o' thrissle" (Low 76). Because the rustic is haggis fed, his strong hands will lop off the appendages of the weaker French. Burns is showing the cultural superiority of the Scots, through the simple hardy food that symbolizes them. The Scots, like the haggis, are solid and resourceful, unlike the French and their food, which is dainty and complex. Burns is more directly political than Dunbar in this poem, but both he and Dunbar are showing cultural superiority through food.

Perhaps even more important than the specific traits of each poem is the ease with which one can obviously see that the two authors are discussing more than just food. This is the case with much of the authors' works. They were able to present serious messages in poems that were misrepresented as whimsical and simply vernacular. Dunbar and Burns both show that the stereotypical view of dialect poetry in their times did not do justice to their work because the critics often dismissed the literary merit of the vernacular poetry. Regardless of what each author strove to do later in their careers, they were given the chance to become established because of the interest sparked by their use of the vernacular, and their ability to capture the romanticized image of their people. And these are the same reasons that still draw many people to Paul Laurence Dunbar and Robert Burns today.

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THE LEGACY OF PAUL LAURENCE DUNBAR: DIALECT AND RACIAL CONFIGURATION IN THE WORKS OF SILAS X. FLOYD AND CHRISTINA MOODY

KATHERINE CAPSHAW SMITH

When Paul Laurence Dunbar died at age thirty-three of tuberculosis in February of 1906, he was African America's premier poet, his wide-ranging achievement in dialect and conventional verse establishing a precedent confronted by nearly every black poet before 1945. During the Harlem Renaissance, Dunbar was famously discounted and rejected by the literati. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. sums up this backlash: "Blacks stood in line to attack dialect poetry. William Stanley Brathwaite, Countee Cullen, and, especially, James Weldon Johnson argued fervently that dialect stood in the shadow of the plantation tradition" (225-26). But despite Dunbar's controversial status among the elites of the Renaissance, he maintained popularity as a writer for young people throughout the 1920s and 1930s. In *Children's Literature of the Harlem Renaissance*, I explore the place of Dunbar to children's biographies, poetry, popular culture, and school configurations. In order to understand better Dunbar's canonization as a children's writer in the 1920s and 1930s, I aim here to examine his influence on black children's literature before the Harlem Renaissance.

Although religious publishing houses had been issuing texts for children since the late nineteenth century, and a few writers had published novels for young people, like A.E. Johnson's *Clarence and Corinne* (1890), the body of children's literature for African Americans was quite scant until the 1920s. Therefore, it seems significant that the few texts issued for young black readers from 1900 to 1920 would bear the stamp of Dunbar so heavily. Of course, his own work was attached to black childhood. As I argue elsewhere,[1]

minstrelsy offered infantilized versions of black culture, and, while Dunbar's dialect poetry largely reacts against such degradations from white popular culture, white readers misunderstood his work as emerging from the minstrel tradition. White readers also emphasized Dunbar's supposedly unschooled, innocent poetic voice,[2] a quality that associated him further with childhood. Significantly, Dunbar also actually participated in the genre of black children's literature by offering poems like "Little Brown Baby" and various lullabies; such poems were immediately embraced by black child culture, both orally and in print, and remained especially popular in family reading settings and in public performance.

But his effect on the shape of black children's reading extended further than his participation in the genre. His influence on two pre-Renaissance African American writers, Silas Xavier Floyd and Christina Moody, is palpable, and, as a model, Dunbar brought controversial issues into relief, the most prominent of which was the role of dialect for educated and progressive child readers. For Floyd and Moody, as we will see, dialect stood in tension with their work's emphasis on racial "uplift"[3] through child moral, aesthetic, and economic development. By exploring the influence of Dunbar on two writers who demonstrate and enact the values of social and educational progress, we can begin to understand the competing ideological tensions at work in early black children's literature and apprehend the significance of Dunbar to the course of the genre.

In order to gauge Dunbar's influence on black children's writers in the first two decades of the twentieth century, it is useful to understand the extent to which white interpreters connected Dunbar to childhood. In addition to reviewers and readers who commented patronizingly on the childlike joy of Dunbar's poetry, a key biography published just after the poet's death drew on nineteenth-century sentimental literary traditions to pose Dunbar as an eternal child. When Lida Keck Wiggins, a white friend of Dunbar, edited his collected poems in 1907, she appended a 116-page biography which furthered the image of Dunbar as a child artist.

In a potent example of Wiggins's strategy, the biography depicts Dunbar's illness as a final regression into childhood, arguing implicitly that the poet's physical weakness aligned him with young people who, in her view, were disempowered as well. Most peculiar is Wiggins's depiction of Dunbar's relationship with a particular child admirer. While Dunbar corresponded with several children, Wiggins

represents the "child-heart" (98) of Dunbar as especially attached to Master Harry Barton Bogg, Jr., a five-year-old white boy who admired and visited the poet. (Wiggins even includes a full-page photograph of Bogg.) Wiggins calls Bogg "Mr. Dunbar's favorite boy friend, with whom he corresponded to the day of his death" (100), and quotes from a letter Dunbar wrote to the child: "it is awfully different writing to grown-ups, [. . .] they never see through the things that we see through—their vision has gone beyond the sight of our dearer youth [. . .] Lovingly, your boy friend" (101). Stressing Dunbar's relationships with white children, Wiggins makes no mention of the poems Dunbar addresses to black children, like his popular "Little Brown Baby." In these kinds of associations with white children, Wiggins aims to attach Dunbar to the image of the pure, fragile, otherworldly Victorian youth. Further, she characterizes Dunbar, nursed by his mother in his last days, as the embodiment of the doomed sentimental child: "But ah what a weak king he was, how like a little child!" (127). Remember that the Wiggins biography is *not* a piece of children's literature, but an insider's account of the author's life aimed at white adults. As such, it combines the energies of an infantilizing minstrel tradition with the desire to valorize Dunbar in a way that contains the radical implications of his accomplishment. Instead of celebrating a renowned black male artist, she transforms him into an enfeebled but angelic white child.

The extent to which Wiggins's characterization affected his reception among black child readers remains unclear. But Wiggins's account dovetails with white reviewers' strategy of crediting Dunbar's supposedly naïve poetic talents, bolstering a public image that insisted on a childlike character for the "elevator boy" poet. In addition to Wiggins's account and reviews of his work, anecdotes about his artistic attention to children of both races laid the groundwork for his popularity among black child readers in the early twentieth-century. Very early in his career, Dunbar imagined children, presumably white and black, as his audience; he wrote to author James Newton Matthews in November of 1892 that he saw his "first money for a poem, two dollars for a little piece to a child's publication in New York," which led him to assert of his career, "I am beginning to hope," (qtd. in Martin 19). In 1893 Dunbar tells Matthews of his work on a prose text for *Youth's Companion*, again underscoring his intended youthful audience, particularly a white child readership. I have been able to locate four published pieces in the magazine: three

poems — "Unnoticed Birds" (Dec. 7 1893), "On the Right Side" (Feb. 16 1899), and "Contrariety" (Aug. 10 1899) — and one prose piece — "Old Abe's Conversion" (Jan. 24 1901).[4] Apparently Dunbar promised another short story, "Gabe Still's Lapse: A Story of Negro Life" since it was advertised as forthcoming in the 1900 editions, but it does not appear in the magazine. "Old Abe's Conversion" speaks about generational tensions between a father and son who are both preachers. The father uses dialect and presses for religious emotionality; the son has been college educated, avoids dialect, and emphasizes the importance of good works within the black community. Ultimately, the father is "converted" to his son's point of view, as the text highlights the kind of inversion in generational power that would become so prominent in black children's literature of the Harlem Renaissance. The father seems childlike, "unlearned in the ways of the world" (41), in the face of his son's ability to help effect spiritual change. It is the kind of story that would be at home in W.E.B. Du Bois's *The Brownies' Book* twenty years later, and suggests the ascendance of the "uplift" ideology even within Dunbar's own children's publications.

The other suggestive children's text published by Dunbar is the short poem "On the Right Side":

> Minorities, since time began,
> Have shown the better side of man;
> And often in the lists of time
> One man has made a cause sublime! (l. 1-4)

Although the *Youth's Companion* published many abolitionist authors during the antebellum period and many progressive writers throughout the late nineteenth century, Dunbar might have felt himself the "One man" espousing a cause since his presence as a black writer in the *Youth's Companion* was, frankly, atypical. Another prominent black author, Charles Chesnutt, published a short story entitled "Aunt Mimy's Son" in 1900, but the magazine did not consistently offer space to black writers. Despite its abolitionist history, the *Youth's Companion* in the 1890s offered repeated advertisements for "Pickaninny" dolls; the advertising copy emphasized the national prejudice against African Americans: "What child in America does not at some time want a cloth 'Nigger' dollie — one that can be petted or thrown about without harm to the doll or anything that it comes in contact with?" ("The Happy Families" 550). The most affecting

quality in Dunbar's poem is its racial sensibility, its argument that "Minorities" are the best representatives for humanity. Again, his work anticipates children's literature during the Harlem Renaissance since racial pride and historical distinction take center stage during the 1920s and 1930s.

Unsurprisingly, in light of Dunbar's children's publications and the anecdotes about his friendships with children, he felt quite comfortable sharing his poems with child audiences. Dunbar biographer Addison Gayle, Jr., recounts Dunbar's work at the Library of Congress:

> In one of the library's many rooms, he gave daily readings for children. These were some of the most enjoyable hours of his working day. He liked to watch the children. They stamped their feet in time to the rhythm of the poem as he read, laughed at the humorous ditties, and sometimes repeated lines and verses after him in their childish voices (103).

In fact, he continued to publish the individual poems he had written for and read to children, like the popular "To Louise," which was written for a white friend's daughter, as well as his numerous lullabies. Dunbar's public image as a child poet, the anecdotal stories of his friendships with and literary attention to children, and the sheer number of Dunbar's poems which concern children's experience all contributed to the rise of Dunbar's status as a black children's poet in the early twentieth-century. What is less straightforward, however, is the way in which black children's writers employed Dunbar as a model during the 1900s and 1910s.

In 1905, Silas X. Floyd (1869-1923) issued *Floyd's Flowers, or Duty and Beauty for Colored Children*, a didactic conduct book predominantly in conventional English that includes several dialect pieces in the style of Dunbar, a move that seems incongruous at first glance. Floyd graduated from Atlanta University in 1891 and became a schoolteacher and Baptist preacher in Augusta, Georgia. A field worker for the International Sunday School convention, Floyd was appointed the "Sunday-School Missionary for Georgia and Alabama" by the American Baptist Publication Society. Floyd was an editor of the *Augusta Sentinel* newspaper, and edited the "Wayside Department" of the important periodical, *Voice of the Negro*, in the early part of the twentieth century; he also contributed dialect stories to the periodical, a few of which are reprinted in *Floyd's Flowers*. He

published the *Life of Charles T. Walker* (1902), and several revisions of *Floyd's Flowers*.[5] Floyd apparently gained a reputation as a dynamic live performer of Dunbar's poetry. An acquaintance of Dunbar, Floyd disconcerted the poet by his effusive enthusiasm. Dunbar wrote to his wife, Alice Dunbar Nelson: "The Rev. Silas X. Floyd is also reciting [my poetry], and they say he does fairly well except for the monkey-shines he cuts up. Never before have I fallen into such a nest of Dunbareans" (qtd. in Valenti). Although it has been difficult to locate archival material about Floyd, from what we do know of his life it appears as though he embraced both the age's spirit of racial "uplift" through education and relished performing Dunbar's nostalgic dialect pieces. Floyd becomes a particularly fascinating site for literary historians since frequently critics assume uplift writers saw dialect as the stamp of the ignorant and uneducated. For Floyd (and one suspects, for others in southern black communities), such a dividing line was not firmly drawn in lived experience. One could advocate for education in conventional English (as Floyd does in his conduct book), as well as offer dynamic, mutable oral renditions of folk life. As I argue elsewhere,[6] Dunbar performances enabled public celebration of the folk voice and allowed recitations that reinvented and experimented with Dunbar's versions of antebellum life. A sense of play infuses characterizations of Dunbar in performance in the 1900s and 1910s, and Floyd certainly seems to have joined in with exuberance.

Other evidence attests to Floyd's admiration for Dunbar. Like Dunbar, Floyd was published in the *Youth's Companion*; he issued one poem, "The Sower," in 1910. After Dunbar's death, Floyd published a celebratory poem on the poet in the popular *Lippincott's Magazine*. Floyd's was the only tribute to Dunbar published by the periodical. In "The Passing of Dunbar," Floyd adopts Dunbar's style of dialect in order to focus on the impact of his death. After noting Dunbar's loss, the final two stanzas read:

> De lowly black mammies an' daddies,
> De little black chillun, too,
> Whose lives he has sung of wid fondness
> Is a-axin', "Lawd, what shall we do?"
>
> De skies dey don't seem so happy
> De sun it don't shine so bright, —
> It's all jes' because Paul Dunbah

Done passed far beyon' de night. (l. 9-16)

In some sense, Dunbar himself might not have welcomed this kind of tribute, especially because he hoped for public admiration of his verse in conventional English and sometimes felt penned in by his reputation as a dialect writer. But by focusing on imagined black response to Dunbar's death, Floyd dislodges the dialect work from assumptions that it serves the interests of white apologists for the antebellum South, or even that it serves prevailing white literary fashions like regionalism. Instead, Floyd's tribute privileges the impact of Dunbar's loss on black families, and certainly this perspective is one that Floyd himself experienced and presumably witnessed as a community leader in the black South.

Since Floyd was an ardent and public admirer of Dunbar, the inclusion of dialect pieces in his conduct book appears less incongruous than at first notice. Admittedly, though, the short stories in dialect seem to chafe against the bulk of the book that includes pieces like "Keeping School," "The Road to Success," "Self-Help," and "Purity of Character." While the dialect stories do not advocate values that undermine the book's overall agenda, they do derive more from satirical and trickster traditions than from conventional uplift strategies. "The Biter Bit," for example, describes a white highwayman who robs a black man, Eli, at gunpoint. Eli pretends subservience, "trembling, as if in great fear" (122), and offering to give the robber a dollar each time the robber shoots into the air. The robber thus empties his gun, and Eli surprises him by pulling out a weapon of his own: "'Boss, I got one uv dem dawgs myse'f, an' I 'spec' I'll let you hyeah mine bark some. Drap yo' dawg, Boss, an' drap hit quick,' he commanded" (123). Eli then collects the money he had given the highwayman, and urges the robber to flee.

What a telling moment for Floyd's relationship to Dunbar, and for understanding the trajectory of black children's literature in the twentieth century! Clearly readers of Floyd were instructed in more than just keeping clean, healthy, and moral; dialect allows Floyd to incorporate a rich folk trickster tradition into the text, leading children to a complicated understanding of power relationships. Not only do children need conventional schooling, Floyd suggests, but they also require street sense and an awareness of the ability of intelligence to transform power dynamics. While Dunbar's short stories include tricksterism, typically they focus on courtship entanglements, local politics, and complex renderings of interracial relationships. Floyd's story seems to be more akin to a fable, but one with palpable political implications.

Nor would Dunbar's stories typically offer images of black men armed with guns confronting corrupt whites. In this radical move Floyd anticipates the new black militancy of the Harlem Renaissance. His text, though, is poised suggestively between the "nadir" of the 1890s and the reinvention of the 1920s, for Floyd is not explicitly or consistently militant on race relations. Near the end of the book, he argues for a more pragmatic approach:

> Lynchings are on the increase. Not only our men but our women are being burned at the stake. What shall we do? There are those who say we must strike back — use fire and torch and sword and shotgun ourselves. But I tell you plainly that we cannot afford to do that. The white people have all the courts, all the railroads, all the newspapers, all the telegraph wires, all the arms and ammunition and double the men that we have. In every race riot the negro [*sic*] would get the worst of it finally. (321-22)

Floyd goes on to advance "decency," "self-respect," and "character" (322) as moral solutions to race conflict. Unable or unwilling to support more aggressive responses to violence, Floyd instead encodes such possibilities in dialect stories like "The Biter Bit." A trickster himself, Floyd uses conventional English to announce patience, good will, and Christianity as responses to racial hatred, but employs dialect to encourage intellect, assertiveness, and weaponry in the face of white exploitation. In a sense, Floyd's text inverts Dunbar's famous paradigm described in "We Wear the Mask." Perhaps the "grins and lies" come in the Standard English sections of Floyd's book, while dialect stories uncover the truth of race relations and viable responses to prejudice. This approach makes particular sense when one reflects on the different audiences and contexts for Floyd's and Dunbar's work. Dunbar's palpably white readership pressured him to produce dialect poems. Floyd speaks within the community, to black children and parents, and the sections in conventional English advocate implicitly for integration, a stance that might, in 1905, necessarily enforce racial conciliation. In contrast, the sections in dialect address the black readership about issues and events within the community and might offer Floyd more freedom to be frank about racial power dynamics.

Although Floyd does not revise particular short stories of Dunbar's, and it is difficult to pinpoint a one-to-one correspondence between the dialect pieces in *Floyd's Flowers* and Dunbar's work, certain themes seem drawn from Dunbar. In particular, Floyd is deeply interested in religious satire. Of course, this attention might come from Floyd's prominence in the Baptist church, but Floyd's indebtedness to Dunbar's characterizations of black religious expression becomes apparent after reading the two authors alongside each other. In stories like "The Walls of Jericho," Dunbar gently satirizes exuberant religious emotion and comments on black faithfulness to antebellum religious leadership. Dunbar published four books of short stories, some of which focus on antebellum life and others on settlements of blacks during Reconstruction, including the recurring fictional "Little Africa." Floyd rarely touches on antebellum life; the only dialect story of this kind in the collection is "An Ante-Bellum Negro Preacher," which Floyd says was told to him by a white preacher, Bishop O. P. Fitzgerald of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South.

When Floyd describes contemporary religious practices, he turns expectations on their heads; not only does he make light of the excessive emotionality of services in the spirit of Dunbar, but, more pointedly, he uncovers the rigid and prescriptive elements of Baptist ritual. In "A Candidate for Baptism,"[7] Floyd's satire focuses on the conversion of a young girl named Queen Victoria who seeks membership in the New Mount Zion Colored Baptist Church. As the church elders question her about her conversion, it becomes apparent that the church's supposedly free-flowing emotionality masks inflexible expectations for faith and behavior. When the pastor asks her about the process of her conversion, he becomes increasingly dictatorial:

> "Well," asked the pastor, "how did you feel while you was seekin' de Lawd?" The girl hesitated a moment, evidently in doubt as to the exact purport of the question. Finally she said: "I felt like I wanted to be saved." This answer not exactly suiting the parson, he put the question in a different way. Said he: "Did you feel light er did you feel heavy while you was a-prayin'?" "I felt both," said the little girl in unaffected innocence. Funereal groans of pity swept through the congregation. The preacher tried again. This time he asked: "Did you feel light de mos' er did you feel havy de mos'?" When Queen Victoria responded, "I felt heavy de mos,'" a wave of approval met the remark. (68)

Eventually, the pastor's questions lean ridiculously towards the expected answers, revealing that any conversion must follow his script or be judged inauthentic. Part of the comedy comes from the congregation's responses to Queen Victoria: when she answers correctly, they are elated; when she answers incorrectly, they are crestfallen. In this comic story, Floyd again complicates any assumptions one might bring to a book by a prominent Baptist minister. Just as Floyd can advocate for tricksterism within a conduct book, he is able to laugh at himself as a preacher and at the structure of Baptist religious practices. In fact, the story deliberately counters the stereotype among whites that black religious services were largely unstructured and improvisational, an "insider" gesture that seems suited to Floyd's African American audience. As to the place of satire within a conduct book, this story indicates Floyd's respect for what he calls the "unaffected innocence" of the child character and therefore pushes the reader to question traditional authority. Additionally, the sheer variety of poses in Floyd's book speaks to Dunbar's influence, for neither writer allowed himself to be contained within one form or one artistic strategy. When reflecting on the impact of Dunbar for Floyd, and for the course of black children's literature, it becomes apparent that dialect afforded Floyd some freedom to explore subjects that were all but taboo within a conduct book: a trickster ethic and the pleasures of satire. These values were offered to an exclusively black audience, a dimension that obviously differentiates Floyd from Dunbar and enables Floyd to offer multiple levels of conduct instruction to young readers.

As prominent literary figures, Dunbar and Floyd were able to address black and white communities in aggregate, and both seemed aware of the importance of a young readership to crafting the black community's identity. Including the voice of Christina Moody in the conversation about Dunbar's influence allows us to recognize the actual impact of Dunbar on the creative lives of black children. A Dunbar devotee, sixteen-year-old Moody explores the complicated experience of black childhood in her book of poetry, *A Tiny Spark* (1910). Moody uses dialect to remake apparent closures and limitations of experience into openings and possibilities, invoking the playfulness of Dunbar's best child dialect poems. Her lively poetry does not establish a nostalgic black cultural domain, as does much of Dunbar's; rather, it affirms the contemporary vitality of the black folk voice, especially as it articulates the experience of female African

American youth. But while Moody describes the dynamism of black childhood in her funniest, most irreverent pieces, she also tackles the weighty history of enslavement. These serious pieces also explicitly address gender constructions and allow Moody to enter into dialogue with Dunbar about the features of antebellum life.

The audience for *A Tiny Spark* (1910)[8] is enigmatic from its outset, for by wishing her poetry to "prove a pleasure to friends" (3), Moody evades limning her audience more specifically. Whether fellow black adolescents or black adult sponsors of her work, Moody's friends remain ambiguous. Frequently, she focuses on female characters and proto-feminist sentiment, as in the dialect poem "Chillun and Men" which concludes, "When a 'oman gits married/ Then hur trobles begin" (l. 32-33); she also includes riotous parodies of nursery rhymes which concentrate on female figures, like "Mary's Little Goat," alongside poems of sophisticated sentiment, like "The Love of a Slave Mother," which renders a Margaret Garner story of a mother drowning her child to prevent his capture. While no record remains of these poems' reception, Moody, herself in the liminal state of adolescence, reflects a vast range of child interests and experiences.

Moody's biography and sense of regional identity remain elusive, for critics know very little about the young poet. Writing out of Washington, DC, Moody lived in a borderland, a space south of the Mason-Dixon Line and the destination for many rural southern blacks during the Great Migration, yet also the seat of the Union. By 1910, it was also the epicenter of the black middle class. Like Dunbar's work, many of Moody's poems employ conventions that seem drawn from minstrelsy, with characters named "Sambo" ("Mary Sue's Lover") and folks delighted with "Dat ol' Banjo" ("I Am Happy — Dat Is All" l. 11). However, Moody ultimately distances herself from stereotype, constructing her poetic persona in terms that recall Dunbar's desire to be known for his conventional verse.[9] Like Dunbar, Moody is not a southerner, and in opposition to her vernacular poetry, she imagines herself in genteel terms. Her preface states, "This little volume is composed of verses, written at different times, in my leisure hours, as an expression of the author's varying states of mind, or for the gratification of friends" (3). As Gayle Pemberton notes, "Moody makes herself part of the tradition of lady poets" (xxxvi) in this preface; like Dunbar, Moody sets herself against her material, establishing herself as an interpreter of the vernacular and of southern folk life.

But even as an interpreter, she refuses to stand outside the folk voice and instead assumes it, as did Dunbar, of course. She pointedly positions herself as an inheritor of Dunbar in the text's opening text, "To My Dear Reader," a dialect poem that recalls many facets of Dunbar's public image. Like Dunbar, sometimes characterized as a convalescent child, Moody claims, "I ain't well trained you know" (l. 3) and "I ain't had much training" (l. 15) because "I hab al-ways been so sickly" (l. 4). Moody's invalidism and supposed naiveté certainly evoke Dunbar, as does her choice to begin her volume with a dialect poem. Moody also establishes her poetry as a product of childhood and herself as a child poet: "Some of dese poems you'er reading/ Was written long ago,/ When I was jist a little kid/ Of thirteen years or so" (l. 9-12). The self-conscious humor of this line underscores her current status as a child, for three years is not so "long ago" and the difference is minimal between the "little kid" of thirteen and the poet at sixteen.

Moody might have felt a bit reluctant to pose as an inheritor of Dunbar. In the opening poem, Moody repeatedly asks her audience, "Don't criticize my writing" (l. 1), "Don't laff and ridicule me" (l. 5), and ends the poem with "And don't you laff at me" (l. 20), a direct request for mercy. While as a woman poet she is conventionally self-deprecating, Moody's profuse warnings and apologies could reflect an anxiety of influence regarding her self-construction as a female Dunbar. Despite this apprehension, Moody does specifically imitate Dunbar, as in poems such as "The Little Seed," which uses the metaphor of a seed's growth to represent childhood, as does Dunbar's "The Seedling." Such tributes in and of themselves argue powerfully for the prominence of Dunbar in black children's culture.

No mere impersonator of Dunbar, however, Moody distinguishes herself by using dialect to describe contemporary African American life, much as Floyd concentrated on present-day black southern communities. Instead of preserving the enslaved voice in verse, as Dunbar's dialect poetry sometimes purported to do, her poems affirm the contemporary vitality of the black southern folk voice for the early twentieth-century African American child. By the time of the Harlem Renaissance, such an embrace of the folk voice within a children's text would be a problematic move, especially for a young woman attempting to prove her literary merit. But perhaps in the immediate wake of Dunbar's death, dialect poetry became a test of an author's abilities and her capacity to stand alongside her famous

predecessor, while dialect itself became the best site for descriptions of the variety of contemporary black experience.

Moody's dialect reveals the transformations possible through experimentation with identity and investment in black cultural traditions. Her dialect poems work against the limitations of racial stereotypes and restrictions on childhood in order to reveal the complexities of life as a black southern child. One of the most powerful examples of Moody's response to social limitations appears in "I Am Happy — Dat Is All." The title alone conjures up constrictive meaning; calling on the stereotype of the blissfully ignorant "pickaninny," Moody begins with a title that should logically preclude the remainder of the poem or at least might close down our expectations for the character of black childhood. Instead, Moody deflates our expectations by exploring various reasons for the child's happiness and, instead of drawing on pickaninny conventions, positions the child at the center of a rich and sustaining cultural network. Just as the speaker in Dunbar's "My Sweet Brown Gal" endures rough weather, both physical and psychological, by turning to his banjo, Moody's child speaker "trys to pout and trys to frown" (l. 8) at rain, but "when I looks up on de she'f / Dar's something dar dat takes my bref, / — Dat ol' Banjo" (l. 9-11). While of course the love of banjo playing was a mainstay of racist minstrelsy, Moody revivifies the cultural tradition by avoiding mawkish imagery and instead revealing the child's pronounced respect for the banjo and its place in her or his culture. Importantly too, the child is the music maker for Moody. She is as involved in black southern musical tradition as are the adult male banjo players of Dunbar.

Similarly, when faced with a howling wind, the child lies before the fire, "And while the wind does weep and wail / Grandpa tell me old time tales" (l. 16-17). The pleasure of narrative, comfort at home, reverence for black oral tradition, and respect for elders all coalesce in this image of the black child at the fireside hearth. This child has much to be happy about, Moody suggests, for she participates in a cultural and social context that offers solace and fulfillment. Other sections of the poem concentrate on the child's affection for nature and for the seasons' changes, concluding by repeating the title, "I am happy — dat is all" (l. 23). By the end of the poem the reader recognizes that the speaker's happiness is far from simplistic. Pleasure is a feature of black childhood, as Moody argues, and is grounded in family and oral history.

In one of the few dialect poems concerning antebellum life, "A Tale Told by Grandma," Moody plays more with apparent closures of experience and the liberating transformations possible in a vital black folk voice. Here Moody draws directly from Dunbar. If Dunbar constructs himself as an ethnographer of a passing slave culture, Moody also creates herself as a chronicler of black southern history in this poem. The difference between Dunbar's re-creations of slave voices and Moody's recording of a grandmother's story, though, is in Moody's heightened sense of the function of a matriarchal oral tradition. Aware of the story as a narrative constructed for a contemporary child, the grandmother asserts her sense of control over the past and her recognition of its distance, an authority that becomes particularly important when exploring the grandmother's rationale for telling her tale.

Grandma speaks of a Yankee raid on her plantation during the Civil War and her feelings of violation and dismay at the damage. Central to the grandmother's description is her empathy with the "Mis'us" (l. 19), who was left "Dout a soal fer to pertect hur' (l. 42) when her husband went to war. Grandma describes their shared response to the night the soldiers spent at the house, "'Twernt nobody on de place, / Got a drap of sleep dat night / Ebery eye was so red nex' mornin' / Woulden a thought dey had a white" (l. 37-40). In this last phrase, Moody may be punning on the absence of white people from the scene. Color dominates the plantation, especially during wartime's absence of abusive white male force. In "hysterics" (l. 19) and "scared as little mice" (l. 48), the mistress reveals black women as the true source of emotional and physical strength on the plantation.

While the grandmother empathizes with the white woman, the poem focuses on the female servants' strength in the time of crisis. When the mistress runs for and falls through "Hanner's" door, the servant comforts her by saying, "You am fraid about dem soldiers / [. . .]But don't worry honey / You jest lay you down an' sleep" (l. 57, 59-60). There, "huddled up toget'er"(l. 63), the mistress, "Hanner," the grandmother, and other servants wait until the soldiers leave in the morning, and a neighbor brings food. Then the grandmother abruptly closes her narrative: "An' so my story's ended / An' I aint gwine tell no mo, / So taint no use for to ax me / Cause my answer will be no" (l. 73-76). By ending the story without commenting further on the conditions of slavery, the grandmother allows the child to witness only the power and authority black women had during plan-

tation life. Of course, Moody is spinning off of a thread in Dunbar's body of poetry and short stories, that of the faithful enslaved person during the Civil War. But while modern critics sometimes condemn the passivity of the male characters in Dunbar's work, the grandmother's control over the narrative in Moody's poem sets her apart from other renderings of faithful servants.

The grandmother's silence at the end of the poem and her refusal to respond to any further queries about slavery uncover the deliberateness of black oral tradition, the power of a female storyteller to craft black history, and the judiciousness of Moody's artistic strategy. Within this book which celebrates black soldiers and heroes and proclaims in "The Depth from Whence We Came" that "My fore-parents were slaves, / I'm not ashamed to say" (l. 1-2), Moody includes her grandmother's story of bravery on the plantation (and white women's timidity and frailty), and that is the only story of antebellum life she will convey. Narrative in dialect allows Moody, like Dunbar, to reimagine southern rural history, to offer alternative visions of the dynamics of plantation power. But for Moody, the abrupt closure of her grandmother's narrative also suggests an opening: the absence of speech implies realistically that there were other stories, perhaps more horrific or humiliating, which the grandmother refuses to pass down. Her silence speaks loudly of other wordless dimensions of slave experience. Moody acknowledges history as something created by narrative and, to some extent, controllable through selective storytelling. This is an important lesson for Moody's generation about the power of narrative, of southern female folk experience, and of the vernacular voice to control and transform history. Additionally, it anticipates the work of Harlem Renaissance play and pageant writers who self-consciously wield the power to speak and to silence history. And by placing her dialectal voice in the present tense, Moody makes such power current rather than antique and available both to the child and the adult reader. In fact, by commenting on stereotypes of the southern black child and crafting a version of slave history, Moody herself voices the transformative potential of the vernacular.

The place of dialect in writing for young people would only become more complicated as time progressed. Ten years after *A Tiny Spark*, black children's writers would almost universally resist print versions of Dunbar's dialect poetry and stories, privileging hero poems in conventional English like "Black Samson of Brandywine" and "Ode to Ethiopia." But Dunbar's dialect work remained a mainstay of plays, pageants, and oral recitations during the New Negro Renaissance, suggesting both the community's embrace of Dunbar's vision and its desire for linguistic play and reinvention in rendering the *language* of that vision. Language, especially in texts for African American children, is deeply politicized, as writers in the 1920s and 1930s knew. By bringing Floyd and Moody into the dialogue about the vernacular and children, it becomes apparent that the 1900s and 1910s were a period of transition in attitudes towards dialect within black children's literature. Most of Floyd's and Moody's work is in conventional English and advocates conservative values of racial uplift. But when Floyd and Moody respond to Dunbar, readers witness a liberating energy absent from other sections of their texts; with Dunbar as a model, Floyd and Moody are able to present rich and suggestive renditions of interracial relationships, black religious life, matriarchal oral tradition, and black childhood experiences. With their emphasis on the present-day vitality of the oral voice and their audience of African Americans, Floyd and Moody substantially diverge from Dunbar. But their indebtedness to this giant of black poetry allows Floyd and Moody the freedom to play with the possibilities of a distinctive African American voice.

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NOTES

1. See the sections on Dunbar in chapter three of *Children's Literature of the Harlem Renaissance*.
2. It was conventional, however, for regional writers of all backgrounds and ethnicities to be styled as unschooled and naïve. For example, James Whitcomb Riley, a white writer Dunbar admired, embraced this persona.
3. See Kevin K. Gaines on the politics of "uplift" movements.
4. "Old Abe's Conversion" also appears in *The Heart of Happy Hollow* (1904), a short story collection.
5. The "Publisher's Note" to *Floyd's Flowers* describes his literary accomplishments: "Mr. Floyd's work, as the record shows, has been conspicuously for and in behalf of the children, and he is known far and wide a competent writer and speaker on topics concerning young people. He has contributed to the *Sunday School Times*, the *International Evangel*, the *New York Independent, The World's Work, Lippincott's Magazine*, and many other journals and periodicals. He is the author of a volume of sermons published by the American Baptist Publication Society and listed in their catalogues among their standard works, and is also the author of the Life of the leading colored Baptist preacher in America, published by the National Baptist Publishing Board. From the beginning of the *Voice of the Negro,* Mr. Floyd has had charge of the Wayside Department as Editor, and his work as a humorist and writer of negro [sic] dialect is known to many through that medium" (6).
6. See *Children's Literature of the Harlem Renaissance*.
7. Several of Floyd's dialect pieces in *Floyd's Flowers* contain footnotes that indicate they were initially published in *Lippincott's Magazine*. "A Candidate for Baptism" contains such a note. I was not able to locate any of these pieces in *Lippincott's*; Floyd did publish seventeen works — short stories and poems — in the magazine from 1904 to 1909.
8. The title is a self-depreciating reference to Moody's literary talent.
9. Additionally, a subversive sensibility pervades Moody's text, for not only does she revise Dunbar, but she changes the terms of traditional children's literature in "Mary's Little Goat," which describes Mary's harried attempts to control her wild goat, and she alters the schoolhouse pledge to the American flag in "The Negro's Flag and Country."

"THE PROVINCE OF THE POET": BIOGRAPHICAL THEMES IN PAUL LAURENCE DUNBAR'S *HERRICK*

SHEENA DENNEY

Paul Laurence Dunbar spent the better part of 1897 in England, where he gave several public readings of his work. Dunbar also wrote furiously during this period, and it was probably at this time that he wrote a play titled *Herrick: An Imaginative Comedy in Three Acts*. Dunbar did try to see the play produced during his lifetime (Revell 98). Unfortunately, though, it remained unpublished until quite recently. Herbert W. Martin discovered the manuscript, which was once deemed lost, in 1993. The manuscript was published in a 2002 collection highlighting previously unpublished works. Thus *Herrick*, arguably Dunbar's greatest dramatic achievement, appeared in print nearly a century after his death.

Herrick is a comedy of manners in the British style. All of the characters are white, and the play is written entirely in literary English with no trace of the dialect that characterizes much of Dunbar's most famous poetry. *Herrick* conforms to the conventions of the genre, though it comes "closer to the more leisured humor of Sheridan than the high-flown, rapid wit of the Restoration comic dramatists" (Revell 98). It is a sharp-witted, literate, highly engaging comedy, and it has lost none of its freshness with the passage of time. As Martin and Primeau assert, "Dunbar's ear is accurate, his characters well developed and interesting, his insights into human nature unwavering" (5). *Herrick* is a dramatic work of enduring value.

The play chronicles the trials and tribulations of Bob Herrick, a witty poet determined to win the hand of the fair Cynthia. A comic cast of rival suitors and Cynthia's disapproving father place numerous obstacles in Herrick's path, but he manages to overcome them all. With courage, wit, and a little help from his friend Will Playfair,

Herrick is able to defeat his enemies, winning not only the heart of the fair Cynthia, but also the blessing of her fastidious father, Sir Peter Temple.

Herrick is based loosely on the life of the seventeenth-century poet Robert Herrick, whose lyric poetry influenced Dunbar's early work (Revell 57). Through the metaphor of courtship, the play explores Herrick's tempestuous relationship with literary critics, who alternately praised, dismissed, and censured his poetry. Dunbar's experiences echoed Herrick's, making Herrick a fit subject for the meditations of a man preoccupied with his own mixed critical successes.

Martin and Primeau assert that "Dunbar no doubt created Bob Herrick's challenges to match some of his own — and his hero's magnanimous triumphs project his hopes for his own art" (6-7). The problems that Herrick faces do indeed mimic Dunbar's own; these problems are not merely artistic, but personal as well. Dunbar used Herrick to tackle the demons that plagued him throughout his short life.

The first of these demons was alcoholism. In *Herrick,* this theme is dealt with in a seemingly innocuous manner. The play begins with Sir Peter Temple, Cynthia's father, hatching a plot to get Herrick drunk and humiliate him in front of Cynthia. Sir Peter exhorts Herrick's rivals thus,

> [I]n your hands tonight I leave that chance to break this fancy's chain, to make a boor of him; before she comes to make him drunk, and when she's here to make him so behave before her face that she will as soon hear of the devil and his hellish chants as Bob Herrick and his ladies' songs. (18)

The intrepid Cynthia overhears the plot and warns Herrick. Likewise, Will Playfair, a rival suitor, but one who behaves in accordance with his name, attempts to foil the plot. With their help, Herrick succeeds in beating the suitors at their own game, remaining sober as they become increasingly inebriated. Herrick affects drunkenness for a time, waiting for the perfect moment to turn the tables on his adversaries. He finds that moment when Sir Peter accuses him of being drunk. Herrick rises quite steadily to his feet and delivers a mighty harangue;

> Thou sayest I am drunk. Drunk with the wild winds and the breath of life. Drunk with the sweet wine of thy daughter's eyes. Drunk with the love of life and with mine own art. But with the poison that thou pourest in my cup, I tell thee, if thou sayest I am drunk, thou liest in thy throat, and these are Herrick's words. (34)

This is only the first of Herrick's many triumphs.

Dunbar himself, however, never managed to triumph over his alcoholism, at least not for any considerable length of time. He drank heavily, a fact that he at first attempted to hide from his future wife, Alice Ruth Moore. However, during their engagement, Dunbar confessed his troubles to her in letters from London. Alice took on the role of Dunbar's conscience and reformer, exhorting him in her letters to abstain, both for her sake and for the sake of the children they hoped to have someday. Dunbar wrote hopefully for a time — he seems to have been fighting the good fight (Alexander 124-125). Perhaps it was during this time that he wrote the exuberant first act of *Herrick.*

Unfortunately, Dunbar's good intentions failed him after he returned from England. In fact, when examined in the context of Dunbar's later life, the two extended passages quoted above take on an ominous significance. On two occasions, Dunbar made a "boor" of himself in front of Alice. On the first occasion, a mere month after his return from England, Dunbar raped Alice, causing severe internal injuries. By his own admission, he was drunk at the time. Thoroughly ashamed of his behavior, Dunbar swore never to drink again (Alexander 130-131). This promise was apparently forgotten, however. In January of 1902, Dunbar, again drunk, beat Alice almost to death. After that night, Alice would sooner have heard of "the devil and his hellish chants" than of Dunbar. The two never spoke again (Alexander 168-169).

Alcoholism destroyed not only Dunbar's relationship with his wife, but also his career as a reader of his own work. Dunbar was never able, as Herrick was, to stand before his detractors and proclaim himself drunk only on life and art. His experience was quite the opposite. In October of 1899, Dunbar gave a reading of his work before a university crowd in Evanston. "He mumbled over the first one or two numbers, and repeated one, so that at length the word was passed around that he was intoxicated. Many of the people rose and left" (Brawley 84). Following this disgraceful episode, a humiliated Dunbar gradually retreated from public life. In the first act of *Herrick,* Dunbar gave his stand-in a victory that he himself would never know.

The second act of *Herrick* is constructed along the same lines as the first. This time, the conspirators seek to make Cynthia believe that Herrick is paying court to another woman. Sir Peter convinces the gullible, simpering Aunt Lucinda that Herrick is secretly in love with her and urges her to encourage him and keep him to herself while the others press their suits with Cynthia. This plot is an utter failure. Cynthia, quite certain of Herrick's affection for her, laughs the whole thing off as a grand joke. Herrick, completely ignorant of the plot, nevertheless proves his undying devotion to his lady. The rival suitors are duly rejected, and the only person really hurt by the entire episode is poor Aunt Lucinda, whose cherished hopes of romance are remorselessly dashed by an unwitting Herrick.

Much to her grief, Alice could never be as sure of Dunbar's devotion as Cynthia was of Herrick's. Dunbar had a reputation for philandering even during his engagement. He made no attempt to hide his infidelity; he even joked about "acting badly" in letters to Alice from London (Alexander 124). Dunbar also used the threat of infidelity to hasten his marriage to her, and they eloped amidst rumors of his philandering (Alexander 144-145). Even after the two were separated, while Dunbar was writing apologetic letters proclaiming his undying devotion to Alice, he carried on affairs with at least two other women (Alexander 169).

Alexander asserts that Dunbar's "proclivity to womanize was rooted in his low opinion of women," and she cites his writings as evidence of his misogynistic outlook (125). Some such evidence is present in *Herrick*. For example, Sir Peter states that "a woman's mind is a light thing" (18). However, Sir Peter is not one of the more likeable characters in the play, and there is far more textual evidence that Dunbar held a positive view of women. The character of Cynthia, for example, certainly gives womanhood its due. She is, at all times, confident, assertive, and intelligent — everything that Alice is supposed to have been. Considering the play as a whole, then, it would be safe to say that, though perhaps tainted at times by a rather dismissive attitude toward women, *Herrick* generally presents the fairer sex in a positive light. This rosy portrait could perhaps be attributed to the optimism, noted earlier, that seems to have characterized Dunbar's outlook while he was writing *Herrick*.

Nowhere is this optimism more evident than in the conclusion of the play, when Sir Peter finally accepts Herrick as a man worthy of Cynthia's hand. Sir Peter certainly starts out with a low opinion of

Herrick, calling him a "damned presumptuous dog" and a "barking upstart of a poetaster" (17). Sir Peter faults Herrick, whose family is apparently less than illustrious, for having the audacity to court "the leading lady in the country" (17).

This ending must have been a sore spot for Dunbar, whose own engagement was fraught with complications. Patsy Moore, Alice's mother, disapproved of the engagement for a variety of reasons. First, "her family was among the social elite in New Orleans and may have looked down on the self-made Dunbar, who had worked as an elevator operator in a Dayton office building" (Martin and Primeau 5). Given the social pressure for Alice to marry well, this was certainly one of the chief reasons for her disapproval. But there were other reasons as well, including Dunbar's drinking (of which Patsy Moore was well aware) and perhaps even the color of his skin (Alexander 129). Whatever her reasoning, Patsy Moore refused to give the couple her blessing, and even attempted, in a manner reminiscent of Sir Peter's, to keep them apart (Alexander 141). The couple eloped, and the hope and optimism expressed in *Herrick* once again came to naught.

Perhaps the most obvious and important biographical theme in *Herrick* is the vindication of the poet. Dunbar's frustration with "the indifference and impertinence that greeted much of his work" is well documented (Martin and Primeau 8). The suitors and Sir Peter Temple treat Herrick's verses with contempt, implying constantly that he only writes poetry in order to seduce women. Sir Peter, to assuage Will Playfair's concerns about their plotting, argues, 'Who would be fair with poets who but sing and pour the insidious poison of their verse into a lady's ear and make her drunk then poison all her maiden life" (19). Obviously, had Herrick's motives been as impure as Sir Peter believed them to be, Herrick would have deserved such scorn. However, throughout the play, Herrick asserts his identity as a real poet. This assertion is especially forceful in the first act, when Herrick delivers his grand soliloquy.

> This is the province of the poet, to wake when others sleep, to sleep perchance when others wake, who knows? To be the jest of others and himself to jest. To love and be despised of his lessers. Ah, me, the world has fallen on evil days, when no one doth respect the poet's song and give him ear.' 'Tis strange, 'tis passing strange, with good Will Shakespeare yet so shortly dead, and rare Ben Jonson singing still. . . . And yet, I'd rather be a singer chasing the fleeting rhyme

> and prisoning thoughts in pearls to grace another's wine than all the Lucy's and the Temple's that burden England's soil. For they, with minds as heavy as their wallets are, eat, drink, breathe, die, while we with souls as light as Fancy's self live on and on and on. (29)

No doubt Dunbar was familiar with "the province of the poet." Never satisfied with his own work, especially the dialect poems that made him famous, Dunbar must at times have felt himself a "jest." His frustration at not being heard is apparent and probably relates specifically to the critics' dismissal of his works in literary English. Despite the general tone of discontent, the soliloquy ends on a hopeful note as the poet contemplates his immortality. This concept, though by no means original to Dunbar, seems to have been important to him. He returns to it once again as Herrick taunts his rivals at the end of Act I:

> You scorn me, aye, my verses and my art? You scorn me that I make my lines and love the sound of the absorbing lute, but let me tell thee, Robert Herrick's name shall live as good Chris Marlowe's doth when thou and all thou hast art mold. (34)

This return to the theme of immortality seems to suggest Dunbar's belief that his art, like his hero Bob Herrick, will have the last word.

The passages quoted above suggest that the speaker was certain he possessed true artistic talent and equally certain others would eventually recognize it. Within the context of the play at least, that certainty is justified. The play ends with Sir Peter Temple's acceptance of Herrick as a suitor for Cynthia — perhaps a metaphor for Herrick/Dunbar's admission to the literary canon.

Martin and Primeau assert that "The triumph of Herrick over his mockers enacts the vindication Dunbar looked for in his own career" (6). Doubtless that is the case. However, the play is more than a defense of Dunbar's art. It rights all of the wrongs of his life, private as well as public.

It is interesting that Dunbar would choose to write such a highly personal work in literary English when the critics so persistently associated Dunbar's identity with his dialect poetry. William Dean Howells, in his influential 1896 review of *Majors and Minors*, claimed that "Dunbar [wrote] literary English when he [was] least himself" (630). Dunbar seems to respond directly to that assessment in *Herrick*. When asked by a mocking suitor to give them a song, Herrick replies,

> My songs are as the crude and tumbling brook that ripples down to meet the stormy sea, coloured with earth and filled with leaves it finds beside the way; while thine is like the clear and trickling rill that purls o'er pebbles white, clear trained by the hand of man. (24)

The bitter sarcasm behind this statement belies the seeming modesty of Herrick's words. Clearly referring here to his dialect poems, Dunbar mourns his inability to compose works in literary English, but does so in the very language over which he professes to have no command. In this context, then, *Herrick* can be viewed as Dunbar's assertion that he was *most* himself when writing literary English. Of course, given that so many of the hopes expressed in *Herrick* were dashed later in Dunbar's life, it might be more accurate to say that the Dunbar of *Herrick* was most the man he *wanted* to be.

So what role does *Herrick* occupy in the Dunbar canon? Did he write the play merely to prove that "he could master the language and nuance of British comedy" (Martin and Primeau 4)? Or did it, as Revell suggested, "occup[y] his deeper sensibilities" (98)? Certainly the answer lies in some synthesis of the two.

The former motivation was undeniably at least partly responsible for the creation of *Herrick*. Dunbar wanted to prove to the world that he was a Poet, with no caveats or qualifications. By the time he wrote *Herrick*, Dunbar had already made so many concessions to popular and critical tastes that he felt in danger of losing his identity as a poet. Thus *Herrick* serves as an attempt to break the chains that Dunbar himself had helped to forge. *Herrick* failed as an attempt to branch out, though, not because it lacked merit. Dunbar did what he set out to do, creating a piece that proved "he could handle theme, venue, and place without being singled out as an African American author with one idea and one theme" (Martin and Primeau 8). The prevailing sensibilities of the time simply would not allow Dunbar to publish such a work.

While *Herrick* failed to demonstrate Dunbar's artistic talents to the world during his lifetime, it has succeeded in providing insight into the poet's sensibilities to those reading his works many years after his death. Dunbar faces his demons in *Herrick*, engaging them in battle much as his hero engages the robbers. Moreover, at least figuratively, Dunbar emerges triumphant. *Herrick* also reveals and clarifies Dunbar's ideas about poetry and the role of the poet. Herrick's meditations on his own immortality, along with his

thoughts about the alienation that a poet experiences, create for the reader a portrait of Dunbar as he saw himself —noble and alone. Once again, Dunbar, using Herrick as a mouthpiece, gets the last word.

Perhaps this is *Herrick's* legacy. It offers the world an image of a young, brilliant poet who held onto his optimism despite the obstacles in his path. It reveals the true genius of Dunbar — trapped in a prison of his own making, perched on the brink of disaster, yet still dreaming of soaring to lofty heights. It is the caged bird's song.

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A MAN OF HIS TIMES: THE FICTION OF PAUL LAURENCE DUNBAR

STEPHEN C. HOLDER

Placing Paul Laurence Dunbar's fiction into a specific literary movement is probably an arbitrary exercise at best. As all of us do, he marched into the present armed with the knowledge of the past. His early influences were clearly the British romantics: Keats, Wordsworth, Coleridge, Burns, and the American romantics: Whittier, Longfellow, and Riley. During his high school years in Dayton, Ohio, he gave repeated readings of their works. However, Dunbar's life (1872-1906) made him a contemporary of American realists/naturalists: Mark Twain, Hamlin Garland, William Dean Howells, Joseph Kirkland, Theodore Dreiser, Stephen Crane, Frank Norris and Henry James. There can be little question that he felt the need to wrestle with the same issues that they did, as they moved steadily away from the romantic throughout the last quarter of the nineteenth century.

Chief among the influences that led to literary realism in America was the scientific view of man advocated by Darwin. This approach to understanding the human experience promoted a physical rather than a spiritual understanding of the nature of mankind. The scientists' methodology — observe, analyze, classify — challenged the previously held dualistic beliefs about humans and their relationship to a divine maker. It saw man as an animal among other animals, not as the final creation of an omnipotent god. For writers, then, the move away from dualism toward evolutionary monism meant an obligation to describe rather than to interpret life as they found it. The earlier obligations of writers to be morally didactic, to inspire, to produce only beauty, and to write only about "acceptable" people in "polite" language gave way to a more egalitarian and

amoral choice of themes and topics. The ideal characters of the romanic period began to yield to the real people represented in the literature of the new period. Throughout his fiction, Dunbar contrasts real characters with the idealized expectations that others (especially whites) have for them. On occasion, the transition was softened by sentimentalism, but the real predominated.

Philosophically, however, realism tended to be photographic, at best; the objective correlative it provided did not offer much explanation of the "whys" of human experience. Through the addition of determinism in its various forms — biological, environmental, social, economic, political — literary raturalism did provide what was lacking in pure realism. Man, then, is controlled by forces beyond his control, forces that have nothing to do with the spiritual concerns of the romantics' dualistic ideas. The naturalists' ideas, taken as a whole, tended toward pessimistic outcomes for mankind at the mercy of these various forces. Naturalists were quick to recognize the ironies present in the human struggle against the inexorably hostile social and natural environment.

Dunbar, the son of former slaves, had the additional onus of prejudice, both overt and covert, against his race. During Dunbar's formative years, many of the gains made during early Reconstruction were undone, as many southern states passed "Black Codes" that created de facto segregation. In the years between 1890 and 1896, the events leading to the Supreme Court decision in the matter of Plessy v. Ferguson were unfolding. The Ku Klux Klan and other racist groups were rampant in the South. Dunbar's fiction has much to do with the injustice of prejudice against his race, of course, but it goes beyond that. Dunbar recognized one of the more insidious effects of prejudice: *people who have been stereotyped tend to accept those stereotypes about themselves as truth.* The self-deprecating manners and low self-expectations of many of his characters are clear manifestations of this phenomenon.

As in the works of regional realists Hamlin Garland, Bret Harte, Joseph Kirkland and others, Dunbar's realism showed itself on the page in his reflection of the speech of his subjects. What earned praise for the others actually worked to Dunbar's detriment. William Dean Howells, the supportive "Dean of American Literature," in attempting to praise Dunbar's work actually did him a disservice. Howells writes, "There is a precious difference of temperament between the races which it would be a great pity ever to lose, and ... this is best preserved and most

charmingly suggested by Mr. Dunbar in those pieces of his where he studies the moods and traits of his race in their own accents of English," (13-14). Over time, the debate about the appropriateness of Dunbar's use of folk dialect has not lessened. "Debates about Dunbar's goals and achievements are sometimes as much a reflection of the values and concerns of reviewers as they are a measure of his own accomplishments. . . . Capturing the authentic speech of plantation life would be laudable to those who want to reconstruct the daily lives of a people but embarrassing or annoying to anyone who might deem such output to be inappropriately accommodationist," (Martin and Primeau xxi).

Dunbar's use of plantation idiom, however, allowed him to do much more than offer an accurate reflection of the people he chose as subjects. It also gave him the means for reflecting the nuances of the aspects of the human experience that make up his stories. The contrast between the apparently guileless speech of his characters and the seriousness of their situations brings a sharp poignancy to his stories. In the matter of the transition from slavery to freedom, for example, Dunbar's stories do a fine job of conveying the possible inherent ironies of such a situation. Joe Haskins, "Ole Conju'in Joe," isolates himself from his community, much to the consternation of his neighbors and friends who begin to imagine the worst about him. After some years of this, the locals form a committee to drive Joe out of town. It is then that we learn the real reason for Joe's strange behavior and the irony of the situation becomes apparent. He has been harboring a slave. His isolation has kept from him the knowledge of the Civil War and the emancipation of slaves:

> The "c'mittee" stalked in, solemn, silent, and scared. The importance of their mission shone in their faces. The Parson was spokesman, and they waited for him to begin. But in vain. With his finger pointing straight before him, he was standing transfixed. They followed his gaze and their tongues froze in their mouths. For upon the unkempt bed lay a corpse, seemingly but just dead. As their eyes fell upon it and they stood rooted to the spot with terror, Joe gave a half triumphant, half simple laugh and spoke.
>
> "He's done past yo' reckenin' now, po' runaway niggah, he come to me a huntin' fo' freedom, an' I couldn't tu'n him away, you kin had me whupped and bu'ned, but Sam, po' Sam has enjoyed him freedom and he's past bein' tuk back into slabery. He wanted freedom, dat's why I shet up my cabin, dat's why I quit fiddlin' ha, ha, ha, I've cheated his master out ob one good niggah.... (Dunbar 222).

In his naïve attempt to do the right thing, Joe has unwittingly done exactly the wrong thing. He has kept a freed slave under virtual house arrest by hiding him for years.

In "Viney's Free Papers," Viney has her freedom, paid for by her husband Ben, but Ben does not. Ben, an extremely proud man, becomes resentful when Viney wishes to go North to make a new start. Viney says to him, "You ought to go North when you gits yo' papahs." He says, "No, I won't go Nawth! I was bo'n an' raised in de Souf, an' in de Souf I stay ontwell I die. Ef I have to go Nawth to injoy my freedom I won't have it. I'll quit wo'kin fu' it," (Dunbar 66). The tension between them mounts. Finally, Viney says to him, "I's got money enough an' I's a-goin' Nawth next week. You kin stay down hyeah an' be a slave ef you want to, but I's a goin' Nawth," (Dunbar 67). Ben's master, Mr. Raymond, learns of this state of affairs, and offers Ben his free papers so that Ben can go north with Viney and earn the money that he will send back to pay for his freedom. Ben is too proud for this, however. Their relationship appears to be doomed, until the weeping Viney dramatically flings her free papers into the fire, "And that night singing was heard from Ben's cabin and the sound of the banjo" (Dunbar 71).

On first reading, *The Sport of the Gods*, Dunbar's best-known novel, delivers one shock after another, driving the reader on to see what else bad can happen to the Hamilton family. Berry Hamilton, the father of the family, is not served by the virtues we typically associate with success in America. The virtues he personifies are his downfall. He is trust*worthy*, but too trust*ing*. He is loyal, but lacks the capacity for skepticism. He is simple and hardworking, but is naïve and lacking in self-direction. He is happy to have been emancipated, but remains in the same situation as when a slave. He believes in the American system, but fails to understand that, in the South at least, it is the White Man's system. On first reading, it appears that Dunbar has sentimentalized Berry Hamilton; readers understand immediately that Dunbar wants us to like Hamilton. We sympathize with his tragedy.

On a closer reading, however, we can hear the ironic and cynical tone of Dunbar's voice. His purpose becomes much more apparent after we understand the plot of the novel. Consider, for example, the tone of the opening paragraph of the work:

> Fiction has said so much in regret of the old days when there were plantations and overseers and masters and slaves, that it was good to come upon such a household as Berry Hamilton's, if for no other reason than that it afforded a relief from the monotony of tiresome iteration (471).

Dunbar's hyperbole is deliberate, and bitter.

Determinism, as a feature of naturalism, is grinding and inexorable. When Francis, the weak and treacherous brother of Berry Hamilton's employer, falsely claims to have had his money stolen, Hamilton is inevitably convicted of the crime. In the eyes of the community, only a black man could have done such a despicable thing. Worse yet, Hamilton is believed guilty of betraying the trust of his current employer and former owner. Hamilton goes to prison, and the systematic destruction of his family commences. Following the loss of their reputation, the family is unable to support themselves, and move to New York. The sophisticated city quickly proves too much for them, and one by one they come to grief. Fannie, Berry's wife, enters into a common law marriage to an abusive man. Joe, Berry's son, ends up in prison for the murder of a woman. And Kit, the daughter who is the apple of Berry's eye, has become a dancer in a sleazy stage troupe. What might have been a happy ending, after Berry Hamilton's vindication and the death of Fannie's vicious husband, is not. Instead, the novel ends with a final deterministic statement: "It was not a happy life, but it was all that was left to them, and they took it up without complaint, for they knew they were powerless against some Will infinitely stronger than their own" (586).

The determinism found in the works of many naturalists, however, is more closely aligned with Darwin's biological approach than is Dunbar's. Stephen Crane, Frank Norris, and Theodore Dreiser, for example, systematically strip away the acculturation of their characters to reveal their animalistic, instinctual behaviors; their characters are driven by the fundamental urges of hunger, fear, and sex. In Norris's novel, *McTeague* (1899), the dentist, described in the opening pages as immensely strong and incredibly stupid, a "draft horse," is allowed to rise briefly in the world following his marriage to the miserly Trina. The passage of laws regulating the licensure of dentists in California forces McTeague to give up his practice, as his limited knowledge of the profession was gained only by his apprenticeship to an itinerant practitioner, and he has had no formal schooling in the subject. As McTeague sinks lower and his marriage deterio-

rates into his vicious extortion of Trina's hoarded money, all of his animal instincts resurface, and any human traits he may have acquired while he was living comfortably now evaporate.

Dunbar's determinism has little to do with the biological. Instead, socio-economic determinism is responsible for the fate of characters such as Berry Hamilton. The forces they face are equally inescapable; their predisposition for tragedy is equally inexorable. In "One Man's Fortunes," Bertram Halliday is realistic about his prospects after graduating from college, but optimistic nonetheless:

> Looking at his own position, he saw himself the member of a race dragged from complacent savagery into the very heat and turmoil of a civilization for which it was in nowise prepared; bowed beneath a yoke to which its shoulders were not fitted, and then, without warning, thrust forth in to a freedom as absurd as it was startling and overwhelming. (131)

He knows that "white mediocrity demands black genius to cope with it" (145). Yet, after failing to achieve stature in his chosen profession, he cannot return to the simpler farming life of his upbringing, since the university law degree has made him unequipped for it. He returns to the South at the end of the story to look for a job as a schoolteacher, which is about the only thing he seems to be fitted to do. He says, philosophically, "Thank heaven that I have no ideals to be knocked into a cocked hat. A colored man has no business with ideals — not in *this* nineteenth century!" (161)

Dunbar's first novel, *The Uncalled* (1898), shows clearly that he was working with the same naturalistic impulses as his contemporaries. Like the opening chapters of Stephen Crane's *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets* (1893), the first scenes of Dunbar's novel depict a squalid and violent place, a place where no good can come to the characters found there. *The Uncalled* is the story of Fred Brent, left orphaned after the disappearance of his divorced alcoholic father and the death of his alcoholic mother. Much like Crane's cold description of the end of Maggie's little brother, "The babe, Tommie, died," (13) Dunbar's description of Margaret Brent's burial is clinical and objective:

> For haste, for unadulterated dispatch, commend me to the county burying. The body politic is busy and has no time to waste on an inert human body. (11)

Like Maggie, the pre-kindergarten Fred is at the mercy of the social forces that surround him.

Dunbar's point of view in *The Uncalled* is not purely objective in its omniscience, however. Like another of his contemporaries, Theodore Dreiser, Dunbar takes advantage of authorial intrusions to make statements of environmental determinism. In the matter of Fred's early years, Dunbar writes,

> The life of one boy is much like that of another. They all have their joys and their griefs . . . . It would be rather an uninteresting task, and an entirely thankless one, to follow in detail the career of Frederick Brent as he grew from childhood to youth. But in order to understand certain traits that developed in his character, it will be necessary to note some, at least, of the circumstances that influenced his early life. (55)

For comparison, note that each chapter of Dreiser's novel, *Sister Carrie*, published just two years later in 1900 begins with just such a deterministic statement. In the first chapter, subtitled "A Waif Amid Forces," in only the third paragraph of the novel, Dreiser writes, "When a girl leaves her home at eighteen, she does one of two things. Either she falls into saving hands and becomes better, or she rapidly assumes the cosmopolitan standard of virtue and becomes worse. Of an intermediate balance, under the circumstances, there is no possibility" (3-4).

Frederick Brent falls into "saving hands" when he is taken in by a prim lady of the community and brought up in the church. That happenstance does not, however, provide Fred with a completely satisfactory life.

Instead, Dunbar illustrates the warring forces of nature and nurture in Fred's character. Although "called" to the ministry, Fred has a more physical side, which he has inherited from his debauched parents. As a boy, Fred displays temper and a predisposition to fighting with other boys. As a young minister, Fred is nearly seduced by the "cosmopolitan standard of virtue," although he is quite miraculously saved from this by a chance meeting with his dissolute father, who has become a temperance advocate. At about the same time Dunbar was working on *The Uncalled*, another naturalistic writer, Frank Norris, was writing *Vandover and the Brute* (Norris wrote this in 1894-95, although it was published posthumously in unfinished manuscript in 1914). In both *Vandover* and *McTeague* (1899), however,

Norris illustrates the conflict between the outward (civilized) man and the inward (animalistic) man much more graphically than does Dunbar in any of his works, although the tension is clearly visible in Dunbar's writing.

In his fiction, then, Dunbar was clearly a man of his time. Like his Midwestern contemporaries Garland, Kirkland, and Howells, Dunbar moved away from the romantic and toward the realistic in his development of characters and situations. Like Dreiser, another Midwesterner, Dunbar embraced social and environmental determinism. Dunbar's fiction is well worth reading. Although issues of race are important and necessary in his work, it is clear that Dunbar's fiction transcends those concerns and addresses the yet larger issues facing all writers, of whatever race, during his times.

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DUNBAR'S FICTION: TRANSGRESSING THE LIMITS OF REALISM TO BREACH THE HORIZON OF MODERNISM

LINDA BEARSS

> "The final measure of the greatness of all peoples is the amount and standard of the literature and art they have produced . . . nothing will do more to change that mental attitude and raise his status than a demonstration of intellectual parity by the Negro through the production of literature and art"—J. W. Johnson

Paul Laurence Dunbar wrote during a time when the boundaries of realism were confining and sometimes suffocating to an American writer of African descent. White conventions allowed and accepted dialect as the voice of the black race or any minority race. According to Holger Kersten, "From an artistic point of view, the phenomenon [the use of the vernacular in fiction] reached a climax in 1885" (93). Dunbar understood the limits within the matrix of a society dominated by the white Northern-European culture. Did Dunbar sell out his literary goals and his own heritage by writing in the expected vernacular of the times? Did he give in to the façade of the comic minstrel or the noble savage? A knowledge of the range of genres in which Dunbar experimented and succeeded and a careful study of the intricacies and depth of his craft may lead one to suspect that not only was Dunbar not acquiescing to the demands and expectations of the more dominant culture, his acceptance into the greater publishing realm became the vehicle with which he not only challenged the status quo of acceptable forms but actually wove innovative and revolutionary techniques beneath the mask of acceptability. Dunbar wrote within a matrix of realism and naturalism, but he created threads of exile, artistic play with language, myth and modern urban

experience in his fiction—all of which served as seeds of the coming modernism and the literary freedom of those African American authors who would come after him.

In Dunbar's time, only a few decades after the Civil War, the broader Anglo readership labored under fixed expectations or stereotypes of Negro character and experience. The general population did not see, or did not wish to see, behind the mask of the comic minstrel or the noble savage. The plantation myth of the happy subservient African and the painted smile of the minstrel were images the dominant culture could more easily accept in the brief decades after the war. Joel Chandler Harris, a white man who wrote the stories that he heard from plantation slaves, helped to create the myth of the happy, subservient Negro. Whether Irish, German, or African American, written dialect was the applauded means of relating the lives and thoughts of the minorities in the United States to the dominant Anglo reading culture. Gavin Jones writes that, "Dunbar was a wily manipulator of literary conventions, a subtle over turner of racist stereotypes, and a sensitive recorder of the multiple facets of black consciousness at the turn of the twentieth century" (184). Dunbar may have seen the call for dialect writing as restrictive, but his skill at his craft paved the way for Langston Hughes and the other stars of the Harlem Renaissance to "resist the deforming conventions of 'plantation dialect' and bridge the chasm that had separated literary and black English" (Jones 185).

On the basis of the evidence in his novel, *The Sport of the Gods*, I argue that Dunbar wrote in the acceptable vernacular of the time beyond the goal of being published, and so garnered a hearing for his written works, and that Dunbar used the black dialect for the artistic purposes of developing and challenging the conventions of racial realism and its literary conventions. This application of the vernacular was used in conjunction with the development of other literary devices in which Dunbar endeavored to move beyond the bounds of contemporary realism and naturalism. Dunbar's later fiction exhibits definite elements of the coming modernist movement in literature.

Realism required Dunbar to write about what he knew. Being raised in a northern middle-class family, Dunbar's personal experiences with plantation life were limited to the stories of his parents and relatives who had been slaves themselves. Yet he wrote with a sense of time and place that spoke to the parameters and relationships of the black experience in the Reconstructionist South.

We could leave him there, in the pastoral South, but if we look further into his writing, we will see the burgeoning qualities of a progressive literary style, including some of the elements of modernism— urbanization, the mythic exile, and the beginning manipulations of language as an art form. In his novel *The Sport of the Gods*, Dunbar's Odysseus, Berry Hamilton, is a faithful, utilitarian servant who has become the noble savage in his southern environment. But, the nobility of the savage is dependent upon the favor of the one who dominates. When Berry Hamilton falls from grace in the eyes of his white employer, Maurice Oakley, he is exiled from his life of comfort and sent to a prison of torment. Berry's exiled family members are also part of the epic myth; they are driven into isolation and travel to New York, the city of all cities, hoping to discover "the center of all the glory, all the wealth, and all the freedom of the world" (*Sport* 44). Yet, they find the great city offers its own form of isolation, and it will leave them even more broken and desolate than they could have imagined possible.

The city becomes an unfeeling and uncaring entity that consumes the Hamilton family. Herbert Penzl, discussing the movement of people from rural agrarian communities to the growing urban metropolises, proposes that "[a]s mass immigration and urbanization brought together different peoples and thus created an enormous amount of linguistic variation, language was increasingly regarded as a cornerstone of national identity and an index of cultural health" (93). Thomas Morgan asserts that "*The Sport of the Gods* . . . [was] part of the first sustained attempt to construct an alternative narrative strategy for African Americans, one that abandoned the confines of pastoralism in order to embrace the space of the city," (Morgan 21). However, Dunbar demonstrates that there is no established and accepted role, as yet, for the Negro in an urban center like New York: "[H]e destroys the idealism that underwrites the space of both the pastoral and the urban, demonstrating . . . that the space that black characters were allowed to represent was reciprocally limited to stereotypical caricatures" (Morgan 13). In *The Sport of the Gods*, Dunbar explores the city as a place of exile and moral degeneration. In Dunbar's time the urban metropolis was still in the process of growing into a more prominent role in the writing of fiction; Dunbar's characters do not find a refuge or a home in the city (Morgan 7). It was not until Langston Hughes's time that the Negro would find himself at home in the matrix of urbanization. Debased

and outcast, the Hamiltons left their rural hometown with hopes of creating an autonomous new life in the big city. The Hamiltons' New York is "at once an' exotic' entertainment, gaming paradise, and an urban prison fraught with privation," says Lee (172). Dunbar explores the possibility of the city as an alternative space for African Americans but, in keeping with his time, it is a fruitless endeavor, and Berry and Fannie Hamilton find themselves back in the pastoral South (Morgan 1).

Just as Dunbar uses dialect to portray the members of the southern rural community, he also uses dialect to identify the characters that are included in the matrix of the large city. Desmond Harding asserts that establishing space and belonging in the major cities of a culture serve to raise the credibility of not only the writer, but also the subculture. Harding discusses the growth of the major cities of the world and how writers have responded to them through history. He points out that ". . . Alexandria, Rome, Vienna, Paris, London, New York, and Los Angeles have long been looked to as symbols through which writers legitimate their struggles for cultural authority" (x). While the Hamiltons' migration to New York would have been very early on in the migration Penzel is discussing, the exodus of Black Americans from the segregated South to the northern cities was enormous. None of the characters in Dunbar's Tenderloin District speak in Standard English. The dialect of the rural South is used to show the greater moral character of Fannie as she is juxtaposed against the urban assimilation of her son, Joe, and is used to show the limited rural background of Minty as she tries to assimilate into the city. In the scene where Fannie has just refused to give an audience to Minty, Joe confronts his mother's action:

> As soon as the woman's back was turned, Joe burst out, 'There, there! See what you've done with your damned foolishness.'
>
> Fannie turned on him like a tigress. 'Don't you cus hyeah befo'me; I ain't nevah brung you up to it, an' I won't stan'it. Go to dem whaih you larned it, and whaih de wo'ds soun' sweet . . . . Oh go on,' she said, 'go on. It's been a long time sence you been my son. You on yo' way to hell, an' you is been fu' lo dese many days' (*Sport* 79).

Fannie maintains her morality throughout the journey to the city and back, but it is also the stage for her realization of her naïveté. She succumbs to the supposed intellectual superiority of a man when Gibson, an acquaintance within the city, convinces her that Berry's imprisonment automatically frees her to marry him. Gibson becomes a controlling and abusive second husband. Fannie has unwittingly joined her children as a pawn of the entity of the great city. Berry is spared from the ultimate sin of killing Gibson by his premature death. With Fannie now free to reunite with Berry, they return to their home in the South only to realize their imprisonment was reestablished by the mad master in the main house.

If Berry is indeed the epic hero of this story, his fatal flaw is his naïveté. However, each member of his family could claim their place as the epic hero with differing outcomes. Fannie survives the interference of the gods by outliving her abusive husband, her wayward son, and leaving the city to return home. Kit succumbs to the enticement of a new life and identity offered by the gods and the city; she may yet survive and triumph as her journey is still to be completed. However, if a hero must survive, Joe is not to be counted with the others; he is the first one to embrace the Sirens' songs and quickly finds himself dashed against the rocks. Joe's flaw is his pride, which is engaged and destroyed by the music and creatures of the city. In his chapter called "Frankenstein," Dunbar writes, "He (Joe) was so ready to go down that it needed but a gentle push to start him . . . his will was as flabby as his conscience, and his pride . . . had no definite aim or direction" (113). Joe welcomes the atmosphere of the city and is willing to desert his family that he may immerse himself in the web work of New York's Tenderloin District.

Harding describes the varied impact of urbanization on the creation of art and literature of the modern period, "[A]s an art form in search of its own perfectibility, the city also stands for the central foundation upon which the broad range of human experience draws its energy and charts its course" (ix). A character's importance is often subordinate to the life of the city and his experience within it. The industry, variety of life, prominence of suffering, and sense of urgency provide not the backdrop, but the matrix of the story. The fate of Dunbar's character, Joe, is sealed. He does not even see the need to escape or return to the pastoral South. Harding describes how modernist authors find that the new realizations and experiences of urbanization have a dark lining: "Artists discovered the creation of this super-sensual urban consciousness was bought at a terrible price: alienation" (115-116). The apathetic urban monster devours Joe, and it drags him to the depths of murder and its consequences.

Dunbar's New York is a silent beast, waiting to devour the innocent and the gullible or let them fall unmercifully; he writes, "[T]he stream of young Negro life would continue to flow up from the South, dashing itself against the hard necessities of the city and breaking like waves against a rock,—that, until the gods grew tired of their cruel sport, there must still be sacrifices to false gods and unreal ambitions" (*Sport* 123). The city is not a place of refuge for these southern outcasts. There is no place to call home for the displaced family. Isolation and exile follow them even in the midst of the multitude. Dunbar describes Joe's dilemma: "A new emotion will take his heart as the people hasten by him—a feeling of loneliness, almost of grief, that with all of these souls about him he knows not one and not one of them cares for him" (*Sport* 46). The narrator describes the mythic power of the city:

> Whom the Gods wish to destroy they first make mad. The first sign of the demoralization of the provincial who comes to New York is his pride at his insensibility to certain impressions, which used to influence him at home. First, he begins to scoff, and there is no truth in his views nor depth in his laugh. But by and by, from mere pretending, it becomes real. He grows callous. After that he goes to the devil very cheerfully (*Sport* 50).

The gods have more than one soul in mind to make mad in this novel. The sins of Maurice Oakley find him out, and he is cursed with madness. It is a madness which not only feasts on the fallen-godlike pinnacle of southern honor—this creature's insanity becomes a shadow of despair on the dismal threads of a future for the vindicated Berry and Fannie. Dunbar creates a definite parallel between the lives of the Hamiltons and the Oakleys. The intervention and interference of deities are elements of modernism, man playing the role of a puppet to an omnipotent universe. Maurice Oakley is in effect a demigod, enforcing his own version of justice. Yet, he succumbs to deities more powerful than himself; man cannot escape his fate, as suggested by Andre Malraux in his modernist novel *Man's Fate.*

Fate has determined that the Hamiltons become exiles in urban New York as well as in their own rural South. In his article "Eliot, Joyce, and Exile," John Cawelti attributes a sense of exile to the creation of modernism when he says that "[e]xile is both a central theme and a characteristic biographical pattern of artistic modernism" (1).

Even when Berry is released from prison and the truth of his innocence is revealed; even when Berry and Fannie are reunited and return to their home in the South, they are still isolated from their own people and the white family to which they had once felt so connected. Their future is bleak and the shadow of their insane master envelops their adjacent home. Whether or not Berry and Fannie will be able to move beyond the shadow and make a new life in their old community is left for the reader to decide.

There is an additional condition of exile for Berry Hamilton. He is not only exiled from most of his family, the city, and his rural home, he and his family are also exiled from their church and any chance of spiritual intervention on their behalf. Dunbar writes, "The A.M.E. church, of which he had been an honest and active member, hastened to disavow sympathy with him, and to purge itself of the contamination by turning him out," (*Sport* 27-28). This spiritual exile is typical of modernism. According to Cawelti, "Leading twentieth-century artists . . . treated physical exile, whether actual or metaphorical, as a symbol of the pervasive spiritual exile of modern experience" (2). If the Hamiltons' home church allowed them back into the fold, there may be hope for a return from exile and a development of a new self-actualization for Berry and Fannie. However, the persistent pressure to appease the dominant white culture of the rural South may well be the overriding influence.

Dunbar does offer one bit of hope, however; Kitty's life is not decided completely. Not yet lost, she may still succumb to the vices of her new urban career or emerge as the only triumphant survivor of the family's epic journey. The more prolific use of the shortened version of her name ("Kitty" to "Kit") as she makes her own decisions about the new direction of her life may imply that she has either grown and matured or accepted a new identity within the urban matrix. The black Hamiltons have flown too close to the white sun, and their wings have melted (*Sport* 28). They are at the mercy of fate, and all of Berry's goodness and trust cannot release him from his destiny. Naturalistic writers often saw man as a puppet in the face of the omnipotence of nature and the apathy of the universe. Modernistic writers saw man as lost and subordinate to the mystical entity of urbanization at a time when people were leaving their rural roots and adding to the masses of the large cities.

Modernists also played with elements of internal dialogue, stream of consciousness, and the manipulation of language as an art

form. While Dunbar does not write in stream of consciousness or attempt internal dialogue, his use of dialect may serve as an artistic manipulation of conventional language. Kersten looks positively at dialect writing as a means to experiment with language conventions. He explains that "writing in dialect provided opportunities for creative deviations from standard speech, generating opportunities for language experiments and linguistic innovation" (98). One may make a case for the early artistic manipulation of language in Dunbar's use of dialect to define the level of absorption of a character into the matrix of the city and in some lyrical rhythms. The following passage shows Dunbar's dialectic manipulation of the language to differentiate between the origins and assimilation of Kitty (Fannie's daughter who wants to make a new life in the city), Mrs. Jones (the family's landlady who is ingrained in the Tenderloin District), and Fannie (who is an eternal member of the pastoral South and is now out of her element):

> "Tell huh," said Mrs. Hamilton, 'dat dey ain't no one hyea wants to see huh."
> "No, no," Kitty broke in.
> "Heish," said her mother; "I'm goin' to boss you a little while yit."
> "Why, I don't understan' you, Mis' Hamilton," puffed Mrs. Jones.
> "She's a nice-lookin' lady, an' she said she knowed you at home."
> "All you got to do is to tell dat ooman jes' what I say." (78)

The rhythms of the city are written to life through Dunbar's use of music, woven into the dialogue and setting, in *The Sport of the Gods*. Dunbar refers to genres of music born of the African American. Blues and ragtime are waiting for Joe as he enters the bar, which will soon become a second home to him. The character of Sadness is the blues personified in his monologue on pages 83 to 84, and the Banner Club is the heart of the blues. Dunbar's Sadness lights the path for Langston Hughes's Simple in *The Best of Simple*; Hughes will later take the rhythms of blues, jazz, and bebop, and integrate them thoroughly throughout his work.

The works of Hughes and other writers of the early twentieth century, particularly in the Harlem Renaissance, are advanced compared to those of Dunbar. However, in the context of Dunbar's time, his fiction shows a definite intention to stretch the boundaries of popular conventions. Dunbar does not use all of the elements of modernism in his writing. The parallelism of time and space is inherent in mod-

ernism, and this is not one of the elements that Dunbar develops completely; however, there is a definite parallel between the two couples in *The Sport of the Gods*. Berry and Fannie's relationship mirrors and is shaped by that of Maurice and Leslie Oakley. Dunbar's development of the city as a powerful entity and place of isolation advances his portrayal of multiple forms of exile, and his mythical play with the characters of Maurice Oakley and Berry is evident throughout the novel. His manipulation of language through dialect serves to develop a new understanding of the nuances and capabilities of his race, and effect comparisons between characters and origins that Standard English could not have accomplished. In a time of great change for African Americans, of exodus and assimilation, Dunbar knew how to play the smiling minstrel while weaving new truths and techniques behind the mask, abilities that enabled him to become a positive uplifter of his race through his skilled manipulation and development of American language.

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BESIDES NURSERY RHYMES, I LEARNED PAUL

NANCY D. TOLSON

I do not recall nursery rhymes told in my home but more so in the classroom. I knew poetry that was written by black poets at a very early age. I owned Barbie and Skipper dolls, but the one that I played with most was my Julia doll, created after Diahann Carroll's role on the 1960s television show with the same name. Along with playing Monopoly with my older siblings, I also played the Black History Game with my friends along with a deck of Black History flashcards to pass the time away. As a child, I assumed that poetry was recited in everyone's kitchen or on the porch as the sun declined for the evening, because in my life, poetry and music saturated the inside and outside walls of the house of my family. And it was the songs, stories, music and poetry of my people that covered me with love. For a childhood filled with so much blackness, it sure was colorful.

I knew Paul Laurence Dunbar's "In the Morning" by heart before I knew any other poem because my aunt would recite it to me on various occasions. I can recall her folding her hands as she leaned against the sink saying,

> Fol' yo' han's an' bow yo' haid—
> Wait ontwell de blessin' 's said;
> "Lawd, have mussy on ouah souls—"
> (Don' you daih to tech dem rolls—)
> "Bless de food we gwine to eat—"
> (You set still —I see yo' feet;
> You jes' try dat trick agin!)
> "Gin us peace an' joy. Amen!" (Dunbar 275)

She would not stop there but proceeded to recite "Dawn" or another Dunbar poem that she favored and remembered from her grade school years in the colored schools in West Virginia. In the

early 1900s, Paul Laurence Dunbar was quite popular and many colored children learned his poetry in their classrooms. These children were acquainted with Dunbar along with Shakespeare, and for them there really was no difference in importance. If there was, Dunbar was the winner.

Paul Laurence Dunbar was not raised in Harlem even though his words became part of the foundation and aspiration of many a Harlem Renaissance writer. He led a Midwest life, yet through his poetry he became the center of attention at the beginning of a poetic era that inspired the Negro youth of Harlem. In the essay, "Negro Art and America," Albert C. Barnes writes that "Dunbar revealed the virgin field which the Negro's own talents and conditions of life offered for creating new forms of beauty" (22).

The virgin field that Dunbar plowed through was a new poetic crop cultivated during the Harlem Renaissance. From Dayton, Ohio trails were made reaching various parts of the United States where small colored schoolhouses were filling up with children who learned to recite his words. Perhaps someone had been fortunate enough to own a copy of *Lyrics of Lowly Life* or *Oak and Ivy*, or perhaps someone possessed sheets of paper that contained poems and stories that Dunbar had sold to magazines. Imagine a re-enactment of the delightful poetic tale of "The Spellin' — Bee" done inside a classroom. Or perhaps the delightful recitation of a child's interpretation of "Dawn" or "Dreams" in front of the class or on parents' night: small delicate poems that celebrated life and possibilities heard through the small delicate voices of little brown babies.

> What dreams we have and how they fly
> Like rosy clouds across the sky;
>   Of wealth, of fame, of sure success,
>   Of love that comes to cheer and bless;
> And how they wither, how they fade,
> The waning wealth, the jilting jade —
>   The fame that for a moment gleams,
>   Then flies forever, —dreams, ah —dreams! (Dunbar 252)

Dunbar's work was a treasure that entered an era of mixed emotion on how and where to place it. After Dunbar's death in 1906, a new era gave rise to Negroes who had new ideas about what was appropriate literature for their children. "The New Negro" during the Harlem Renaissance wanted little to do with literature that was filled

with dialect. Alain Locke described Dunbar's place in Negro prosperity:

> The two chief qualities in Dunbar's work are, however, pathos and humor, and in these he expresses that dilemma of soul that characterized the race between the Civil War and the end of the nineteenth century. The poetry of Dunbar is true to the life of the Negro and expresses characteristically what he felt and knew to be the temper and condition of his people. (37)

Even though many of the writers did write a poem or two or three in light dialect, most were done in Standard English in order for "New Negro" children to step out on equal educational footing with white children. They were led to learn from literature that was without the "slave tongue." The dialect in Dunbar's work was a painful reminder of slavery, and the New Negro did not want to be reminded. Langston Hughes states in Dunbar's biography,

> Many of Dunbar's most beautiful poems were written in straight English. But his most popular and charming ones are in the old-time Negro dialect of a sort no longer spoken and rather hard for people to read today. Yet the charm and the humor are still there behind the broken English of that difficult period following the Civil War when a whole race of people was still trying to learn to read and write. (74)

The description Hughes gave reflected the attitudes of many northern Blacks that had brushed off the southern dust from their feet. Hughes was part of the New Negro generation that was split between two very different worlds. Katherine Capshaw Smith explains,

> These artists were attracted to Dunbar as a chronicler of southern past and as evidence of black artistic uniqueness, though they were uncomfortable with the pejorative dimensions of his poetry. Early black children's literature thus treats Dunbar ambivalently; the appeal of his success is tempered by distaste for dialect poetry (of any stamp, for some writers, but Dunbar's type especially) but bolstered by an attraction to the idea of southern folk identity. (113)

But before the "New Negro" era, this Midwest-raised poet literally connected with both North and South through his words. Dunbar's work wore a mask that seemed to gaze into the future to witness a split within his people in which many mask wearers would not accept the irony of their double consciousness, knowing all the while they all were "bilingual." So publicly they would not recognize the

dialect poems that reminded them of the past or present struggles of the black southerner. Instead, these mask wearers would only approve of the poems that reminded them of Shakespeare and Walt Whitman.

This was a difficult era for the children of the "New Negro." Books that reflected derogatory black images accompanied text in dialect written by white writers that included thick unreadable words, words that represented what they believed to be the voice of the Negro. Pickaninny images filled the pages of books that were eventually rejected by northern Negroes who wanted their children to have positive reading material. So while Dunbar was recognized as being one of the first black American poets to be published in mainstream magazines and his books were published by white publishing companies, most of his poetry was not accepted because it was not in Standard English. Eventually biographies were written that allowed black children the opportunity to learn about him. Dunbar was then recognized as the child poet, beginning his writing at the age of seven. This was a positive spin for Dunbar's image and quite acceptable to many. To project the life of Paul Laurence Dunbar in a children's version was now user friendly.

In 1940, Bertha Rodgers selected some of Dunbar's poems to be placed in a collection titled *Little Brown Baby*. Dunbar did not specifically write these poems for children, but children seemed to adore his work because of the rhythmic and humorous tales. Rodgers believed the dialect poems were the most fitting to be read by children. In her introduction Rodgers writes,

> It appears to me that there is a precious difference of temperament between the races which it would be a great pity ever to lose, and that this is best preserved and most charmingly suggested by Mr. Dunbar in those pieces of his where he studies the moods and traits of his race in its own accent of our English. We call such pieces dialect pieces for want of some closer phrase, but they are really not dialect so much as delightful personal attempts and failures for the written and spoken language. In nothing is his essentially refined and delicate art so well shown as in these pieces, which, as I ventured to say, described the range between appetite and emotion, with certain lifts far beyond and above it, which is the range of the race. He reveals in these a finely ironical perception of the negro's limitations, with a tenderness for them which I think so very rare as to be almost quite new. (xii)

Rodgers's introduction seemed innocent enough for white readers, but for blacks there was a disguising deep cutting edge of belittle-

ment. And it was no surprise that in 1941, Arna Bontemps compiled a book of poetry, *Golden Slippers; An Anthology of Negro Poetry for Young Readers*. Bontemps did not write an introduction, but the copy on the inside jacket states,

> Oddly enough, no attempt has previously been made to gather into a single volume a collection of the Negro poetry suited to young as well as adult readers. The poems here are selected for their entertainment value. They deal with stealing kisses, washing dishes, the creation of the world, rainy days, and an incident in Baltimore — in short, all the things of which the Negro loves to sing.

Golden Slippers introduces the reader to the book with one of the most appropriate of Dunbar's poems, "Dawn":

> An angel, robed in spotless white,
> Bent down and kissed the sleeping Night.
> Night woke to blush; the sprite was gone.
> Men saw the blush and called it Dawn. (177)

Dunbar's poems could not be silenced or dismissed. He could not be placed in children's books only to be admired by the young but innocently silent once these children grew up. His poems were too loved and too accurate a description of black life in the United States to be ignored, perhaps because the Negro youth of the Harlem Renaissance grew up, only to realize that they could no longer deny that Paul Laurence Dunbar was part of their inspiration for writing.

Langston Hughes always claimed Paul Laurence Dunbar was one of his greatest inspirations. Dunbar's poems on dreams must have inspired Hughes because of the number of poems that Hughes also wrote about dreams. It almost seems that Hughes wanted to talk with Dunbar about it. I have used the dream poems of both Dunbar and Hughes in my classes to demonstrate a poetic conversation. Dunbar's second stanza in "Dreams"

> O burning doubt and long regret
> O tears with which our eyes are wet,
> Heart-throbs, heart-aches, the glut of pain,
> The somber cloud, the bitter rain,
> You were not of those dreams — ah! well,
> Your full fruition who can tell?
> Wealth, fame, and love, ah! love that beams

> Upon our souls, all dreams — ah! dreams. (252)

is answered by Hughes with "Harlem":
What happens to a dream deferred?

> Does it dry up
> like a raisin in the sun?
> Or fester like a sore—
> And then run?
> Does it stink like rotten meat?
> Or crust and sugar over—
> like a syrupy sweet?
>
> Maybe it just sags
> like a heavy load.
>
> *Or does it explode?* (426)

The poetry of Dunbar is timeless; it has continuously endured the many tests of time and has the ability to still send out messages for both our mature people as well as our youth. Many books have been written about Dunbar, and several children's poetry collections include his work. In 1978, Ashley Bryan selected and illustrated a collection, *I Greet the Dawn, Poems by Paul Laurence Dunbar*. His poems still have strong meanings that can even hold true in today's society. At a recent Open Mike at Illinois State University, a student began his poetry recitation with the first stanza of "In the Morning." He said there was nothing new under the sun, since "back in the day" they called what Dunbar wrote dialect, and now we call it hip hop. I was warmed by that young man's recitation and knew that what he said was true.

I believe Dunbar somehow knew his poems would one day cause complications and wrote a poetic disclaimer titled, "The Poet":

> He sang of life, serenely sweet,
> With, now and then, a deeper note.
> From some high peak, nigh yet remote,
> He voiced the world's absorbing beat.
>
> He sang of love when earth was young,
> And Love, itself, was in his lays.
> But, ah, the world, it turned to praise
> A jingle in a broken tongue. (275)

Back in my home, poetry is still recited in the kitchen and other rooms in the house. A Black History game CD for the computer has now replaced the Black History board game, and my daughters' dolls (now packed away) were all black or Latina. The music in my house ranges from the blues to hip hop (and that is just from my son's collection). My aunt, now ninety, doesn't recall the words to any of Paul Laurence Dunbar's poems completely, but that's okay because now when she comes to visit my house, I can lean on my kitchen sink and recite several of them to her.

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"THE GREAT BIG PAHTY": MY GRANDMOTHER AND PAUL LAURENCE DUNBAR

SANDRA SEATON

Where and when did the "Pahty" begin? For me, it began with my grandmother. My earliest memories are of my Grandmother Emma teaching me songs and short poems. Emma Louish Evans, my mother's mother, was born in 1883 in Columbia, Tennessee, a little town forty miles south of Nashville. Women like my grandmother found a place for Paul Laurence Dunbar at "The Great Big Pahty," the party for literature, culture, and song African American women made for themselves in clubs, literary societies, and, especially, church groups in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. My grandmother taught school after graduating from high school, as many other young women did in that period. She was a great reader; I still remember hearing her recite Kipling and Browning from memory. By the time the New York publishing firm Dodd, Mead and Company published *Lyrics of Lowly Life* in 1896, Dunbar was already a part of my grandmother's world and the literary life of the folks in our community.

How do we account for Dunbar's popularity? I can only pass on what was passed on to me. Whether this is characteristic of other communities I have no way of knowing, nor can I be sure of the extent to which the opinions about Paul Laurence Dunbar held by my grandmother and other relatives of mine were like those of other African Americans.

My grandmother was in love with vaudeville; she delighted in walking for the cake, dancing the Charleston, and putting on the cork. At some church fundraisers, she created minstrel skits where she and her friend Olivia played the role of "end men." At the time no artis-

tic expression, except what was considered high culture, was respectable unless it served a religious purpose. Women weren't supposed to sing and dance, at least not professionally. My grandmother's sister, Aunt Leona, made the mistake of running off to St. Louis to become a "songstress." That unfortunate career move caused her to be banished from the family by my great-grandmother. Aunt Leona was never again accepted into the family. Outside of church, only the fine arts were respectable.

My grandmother's world existed behind a veil. Most whites assumed that most African Americans were illiterate; they knew African American culture only through its white imitators. In the early 1900s African American newspapers like *The Nashville Globe* always contained reports of literary societies and concerts by traveling musicians. Not only Madame Sissieretta Jones (a.k.a. The Black Patti), but other divas of color, many whose names have been forgotten, gave concerts at churches in small communities like Columbia. In those segregated times, every effort was made to have as full a life as possible, given the limitations imposed by racism and the boundaries of respectability. Reciting the poetry of Paul Laurence Dunbar was a way for a woman like my grandmother to express herself dramatically but appropriately. As Dunbar himself says in "The Party":

> An' de Christuns an' de sinnahs got so
> mixed up on dat flo',
> Dat I don't see how dey'd pahted ef de
> trump had chanced to blow.
> Well, we danced dat way an' capahed in
> de mos' redic'lous way,
> 'Twell de roostahs in de bahnyard cleahed
> deir th'oats an' crowed fu' day.
> Y' ought to been dah, fu' I tell you evah
> thing was rich an' prime,
> An' dey ain't no use in talkin', we jes had
> one scrumptious time. (195)

African American life in the early twentieth century revolved around the church. Weeks, months, and years were coordinated with the church calendar. My grandmother's mother, Emma Jane Webster, was an African Methodist Episcopal lady, a standard bearer, founder and supporter of church organizations, most notably women's soci-

eties: The Celia Wingfield Circle, King Daughters, The Missionary Society and The Willing Workers, among others. African American women were expected to raise families and devote their energies to supporting their churches. The primary goals of women's groups were to raise money for the church for building and staff costs and to serve as a community aid society. Entertainment had to have a rationale.

From the turn of the century well into the 1930s, my grandmother recited Dunbar's poetry at fundraisers called Silver Teas, "silver" because people gave coins instead of paper money. With the exception of the Columbia Art and Social Club (devoted to the fine arts, music and literature), the money was raised for the church and its affiliated groups. These Silver Teas, held in people's homes, were gala events; you brought out your prettiest tablecloths and the best china. The finest musicians in the community were called on to play piano solos or to sing. The music was often from *The Gospel Pearls*, the official National Baptist Hymnal (National Baptist—that's the National Organization of Black Baptists, home base—Nashville, Tennessee. *The Pearl* was filled with all the old familiar tunes.) The menus included beaten biscuits (a challenge for all but the finest cooks), cold sliced ham, congealed salad, tea or coffee, cake with caramel sauce and homemade ice cream. After the food was served and before the collection plate was passed, my grandmother would recite Paul Laurence Dunbar. She would tell a little bit about Dunbar's life, then take center stage and deliver his poems in just the style Dunbar would have wanted, or so it seemed. An emotional person, she knew how to dramatize the poems, using a full range of gestures; one minute she feigned surprise, the next pain or disgust, followed perhaps by indignation or a state of bewilderment the other women knew was reserved only for her performances. Yet even though she came at each poem with full force, there was always a gentle and refined quality to her reading, no matter how thick the dialect, as if she were cherishing each line. Everything was memorized. (That was an expectation back then.) When she was in her eighties, my aunts would put the poems in large print on lightweight poster board, just in case she forgot a word or two. She rarely did.

The other evening I carefully went through her fragile, well-used copy of *The Complete Poems of Paul Laurence Dunbar*. My grandmother's book is nearly one hundred years old. The yellowed pages reminded me of an old cookbook stained with cake batter and oil,

notes scribbled next to favorite recipes. Although the spine of the book was gone, the front and back boards were miraculously still in place. As I touched each page, I saw her sitting there with her Dunbar. Some of her favorites were marked: "An Ante-Bellum Sermon," "Dat Ol' Mare O'Mine," "A Confidence," "Deacon Jones' Grievance," "Fishing," "How Lucy Backslid," "A Letter," "A Negro Love Song," "The Party," "Possum Trot," "The Rivals," "Speakin' In De' Cou't House." She often wrote out short introductions for the poems; in the margin to "How Lucy Backslid" she wrote "Hi Folks. Everybody happy?" Then she quickly became the narrator, letting her audience know how "tiahed" it made her to tell the story of Lucy's troubles:

> Well, de times is mighty stirrin' 'mong de people up ouah way,
> Dey 'sputin an' dey argyin' an' fussin' night and day
> An' all dis monst'ous trouble dat hit meks me tiahed to tell
> Is 'bout dat Lucy Jackson dat was sich a mighty belle. (245)

As I thumbed through her old Dunbar, I saw lines crossed out here and there, an extra word or two penciled in. An artist in her own right, she felt perfectly justified in doing a little editing along the way. I like her version of "How Lucy Backslid." She eliminated what she considered unnecessary lines, then, even though the poem wasn't finished, ended with "the good part":

> "Now, I don' say she was justified in follerin' huh plan;
> But aldough she los' huh 'ligion, yit she sholy got her man." (247)

I can't always follow her steps. Many of the penciled-in additions and notes are now faint. Her version of "The Party" starts out with her own introduction: "Hi folks. I want to tell you about a party we had down to Tom's house de othah night. Was I dah? What you asking me dat for?" She then began reciting her version of the poem itself. Her revisions are in italics:

> I nevah in my life see sich a sight;
> All de folks f'om fou' plantations was invited, an' dey come,
> *(line omitted)*
> Evahbody dressed deir fines' ———Heish yo' mouf an' git away,
> Ain't seen no sich fancy dressin' sence las' quah'tly meetin' day;
> Gals all dressed in silks an' satins, not a wrinkle ner a crease,
> Eyes a-battin', teeth a-shinin', haih breshed back ez slick ez grease;
> Skuts all tucked an' puffed an' ruffled, evah blessed seam an' stitch

> *(line omitted)*
> *Dey is* dressed up in Prince Alberts, swaller-tails 'u'd tek yo' bref!
> I cain't tell you nothin' bout it, *ouh dar* see it fu' yo'se'f , (193)

Later that same evening I called my Aunt Camille, my grandmother's daughter and a retired schoolteacher down in Columbia, to ask the same questions I've asked my grandmother and her over the years. How was Dunbar viewed? At these Silver Teas only the most worthy were presented. Of course, she said to me, Dunbar's work was humorous (he "showed out"), but he was also thought of as educational. Paul Laurence Dunbar was mentioned in the same breath with Booker T. Washington, she added, in that category that came to be known as social and racial uplift. For her and the rest of the listeners or readers, there was the Dunbar of the dialect poems and also the Dunbar of the love poems, the poems that sought to capture the moment, the lyric.

There were two major influences on the way my grandmother felt about Paul Laurence Dunbar besides the poetry itself. One was the pride African Americans took in Dunbar as an example of high achievement in literature. The other was her close friendship with another turn-of-the-century writer. Flournoy E. Miller, my grandmother's childhood friend and classmate, was born in 1887 in Columbia. Grandmother Emma would later marry F. E. Miller's cousin, my Grandpa Will. My grandmother went on to raise ten children. F. E. Miller went on to Fisk and then to New York where, in 1921, he co-produced and wrote the book for the Broadway musical *Shuffle Along*. The importance of *Shuffle Along* for African American culture is suggested by Langston Hughes's comments in his autobiography *The Big Sea*: "The 1920s were the years of Manhattan's black Renaissance . . . certainly it was the musical review, *Shuffle Along*, that gave a scintillating send-off to that Negro vogue in Manhattan, which reached its peak just before the crash of 1929" (223). Hughes adds that "To see *Shuffle Along* was the main reason I wanted to go to Columbia. When I saw it I was thrilled and delighted . . . . It gave just the proper push—a pre-Charleston kick—to that Negro vogue of the '20s that spread to books, African sculpture, music, and dancing" (224). According to Robert Kimball and William Bolcom, *Shuffle Along* was "an epoch-making stage work without which much that has been individual, original and viable in American musical theater would probably never have happened"

(13). It was Miller's vision and concept that brought *Shuffle Along* to the stage.

I imagine my grandmother and F. E. Miller sitting around and writing little skits and songs. We'll never know all the details about their collaborations, but I have to feel that, in her way, my grandmother went to Broadway, although she never set foot in New York. What she did instead was to sing and to dance to raise money for the church, a respectable mission for a woman of her time.

A few years ago, when I was sitting with Flournoy Miller's daughter, Olivette, a jazz harpist, then retired and living in a nursing home in Las Vegas, we chatted about the reaction to her father Flournoy Miller's musical *Shuffle Along* and to the scripts he wrote for *Amos and Andy*, still the subject of much controversy. Cousin Olivette explained quite matter of factly that her father's pose was that of a black man making fun of the way a white man makes fun of black men. Moreover, Flournoy Miller was caught up all his life in the high-flying world of the Harlem Renaissance, not only the theatrical world but the literary salons as well. He believed that things were just getting started for African Americans and that they would go on to even greater success. He believed in his own excellence and took pride in all the great accomplishments of his fellow Harlemites. F. E. Miller didn't consider his comedy demeaning in any way; rather, he believed that other groups would be able to see the humor and not take the jokes as serious characterizations and stereotyping of all African Americans. Flournoy Miller, his daughter Olivette, and my grandmother, like most other African Americans, were ready to have fun and make fun of the stereotypes about African Americans, just as other cultures have fun with their own versions of ethnic humor.

A comparison with the self-deprecating character of much Jewish humor may be relevant. In "Why Jews Laugh at Themselves," Hillel Halkin notes Sigmund Freud's description of "a classical Jewish joke" as one in which "the primary thrust of the humor is directed not, as in most jokes, aggressively or mockingly against the Other but rather against one's own group, that is, against the Jews themselves." Importantly, Freud emphasizes that "such a joke is truly Jewish only when its Jewish teller identifies with this group. If mechanically repeated by a Gentile or an assimilated Jew, it would no longer be the same joke." Furthermore "there is in the self-denigration of this humor a dialectical element of self-praise, which works in the opposite direction" (48). The ethnic humor of *Shuffle Along* and Miller and Lyles had one sort of impact and meaning when it was presented by African Americans themselves, and another when it was taken up by people like Charles Correll and Freeman Gosden, the white stars of the Amos 'n Andy radio show. Likewise, in the poetry of Paul Laurence Dunbar and in the music and humor of *Shuffle Along* there is a strong element of celebration and affirmation of African American culture along with the self-deprecating humor.

In the dialect poetry of Paul Laurence Dunbar, in the music and dialogue of *Shuffle Along*, and even in the Amos and Andy television program, the humor was counterpointed against a variety of other emotions. In Dunbar's poetry, we hear different voices, not only the humor, but the literary voice, the voice of the community, and the affirmation of the individual who maintains dignity in the face of adversity. In the Broadway show *Shuffle Along*, we hear not only the humor of comic situations and ridiculous arguments, we also hear romantic love songs and observe black characters from all walks of life. There were also a variety of character types and emotions present in *Amos and Andy*, even though the focus was certainly on comedy. Perhaps for my grandmother, who knew "Grey's Elegy" by heart, there were at least two Dunbars: one of them was the Dunbar who brought her kind of humor to the table and the other was the Dunbar of poems like "Sympathy" and "We Wear the Mask" who used the standard English she herself used. She was at home with both.

I don't think it ever occurred to my grandmother or to Flournoy Miller that people would think that she and the people she knew actually talked like the characters in Paul Laurence Dunbar's dialect poems or like the characters on *Amos and Andy.* My grandmother had an enormously high opinion of herself and her capabilities. As a member of a homogeneous southern black community, she took being black for granted; it was cause for neither celebration nor apology. To her, Paul Laurence Dunbar was a member of the club, another aristocrat, a king of old Africa, who understood the situation. When my Aunt Camille was in high school, they were still having the Silver Teas. By the time she started teaching herself, they had instituted a new tradition: afternoon teas to collect money for the Sunday school and the missionary society. In the summertime, in my grandmother's front yard, they would set up tables outside with food and tea. The ladies would wear long dresses and wide brim hats. My grandmother would recite Paul Laurence Dunbar. On those summer afternoons she

performed in a dialect very different from her everyday speech—that was part of the performance. According to my Aunt Camille, now in her eighties, who remembers her own childhood and her classroom experience in the 1940s with Dunbar, "When I was a girl I never heard anyone speaking that way [the way Dunbar's characters spoke in his poems] . . . . My school children would recite Dunbar poems with humorous effect. They got a kick out saying things that way. It wasn't the way they normally talked." This brings up the point about how African Americans at the turn of the century actually talked. I'm not sure we really know. The WPA recordings of former slaves made in the 1930s reveal voices in a very clear Standard English. People now assume the dialect of Dunbar's poetry reflected the way people talked back then. It didn't, my aunt told me. My Aunt Camille thought of the language as Paul Laurence Dunbar's creation. Art is artifice. Is any art really the way people actually are? Like all art, then, the creation was different from life.

My grandmother was a superb reader of Dunbar. Just before she died I tried to record her reciting "The Party." The tape recorder wouldn't work. Memories, once material records are lost, take on even more meaning, become even more valued.

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AN UNINTENDED JOURNEY

HERBERT WOODWARD MARTIN

My association with Paul Laurence Dunbar has been inevitably like Robert Frost's road, which is "less traveled by" but it has in the end "made all the difference." I think I came to Dunbar and his work, his poems especially, via a circuitous path. First, I was advised by John Crowe Ransom, or was it Allen Tate, to find an old guy that I could give some allegiance to, but I gave the advice very little thought. It wasn't until I heard Margaret Walker read Dunbar with such care and ease I knew in a blinding moment that he should be my "old guy." The poems Walker read that evening in 1972 were four of his longest poems: "An Ante-Bellum Sermon," "Ere Sleep Comes Down to Soothe the Weary Eyes," "Ode to Ethiopia," and "When They 'Listed Colored Soldiers." When she was finished reading, she was leagues ahead of all of the other poets in the auditorium in terms of understanding, not to mention pronunciation. It would take us months and maybe years to come to terms with the pronunciation of those words written in dialect.

Dialect was a form of speaking that had haunted the black community since its arrival on these shores. Never mind the masters had instituted laws that forbade teaching the slaves how to read and write. For the well-educated, dialect was a throwback to ignorance, and no one wanted to be associated with that emotion. But I digress. What Margaret Walker demonstrated, to our everlasting shame, was that we had not the ability to hear Dunbar's music. We had lost the effectiveness of his rhythmic sensibility. It was all there, and he had perceptively tapped into the natural sensibility and honesty of the community. He understood the humor and irony of the black community's use of this newly acquired language. Not only had they

acquired this new language, they had begun to add newer and more relevant sublimities to this new tongue.

Howells was correct in asserting that Dunbar has raised the African American community to an artistic and undeniable level. The literature had to be considered seriously, because with Dunbar, for the first time we have genuine characters that run the entire gamut of human emotions. They were not stereotypical cardboard figures. And so the black community's literary aspirations reached a new level of achievement. The ceiling could no longer contain us. But, I think, I digress again. Over the past three decades I have discovered in Dunbar's language a remarkable ability to speak with his tongue in his cheek:

> I'm talkin' 'bout ouah freedom
> In a Bibleistic way. (145)

One has to remember that to preach about freedom in any way was considered sedition. But notice how Dunbar allows the preacher to phrase his words in Biblical terms. Who is willing to argue with the Bible? And so Dunbar's narrator continues his humorous vein by simply stating:

> But fu' feah some one mistakes me,
> I will pause right hyeah to say,
> Dat I'm still preachin' ancient,
> I ain't talkin' 'bout to-day. (144)

Dunbar shows us a humanity never before revealed when the fiancé in "When Dey 'Listed Colored Soldiers" goes in to express her sorrow over this civil conflict, and perhaps to show her solidarity with her slave mistresses, but she tells us "An' I did n't know dey feelin' is de ve'y wo'ds dey said/ W'en I tol' 'em I was so'y. Dey/ had done gin up dey all;/ But they only seemed mo' proudah/ dat dey men had hyeahed de call," (265). The slave's identification with this family is not lost on the reader despite the mistress' dismissal of her. Dunbar exhibits a lyrical sensibility in "Ere Sleep Comes Down" when he writes:

> Ere sleep comes down to soothe the weary eyes,
> How questioneth the soul that other soul,—
> The inner sense which neither cheats nor lies,
> But self exposes unto self, a scroll
> Full writ with all life's acts unwise or wise

> In characters indelible and known; (137)

Dunbar takes up both tone and theme in "Ode to Ethiopia" when he invokes a sense of heritage and pride when he writes:

> Be proud, my Race, in mind and soul;
> Thy name is writ on Glory's scroll
> In characters of fire.
> High 'mid the clouds of Fame's bright sky
> Thy banner's blazoned folds now fly,
> And truth shall lift them higher. (145)

I never intended to be associated with Paul Laurence Dunbar, although I am willing to admit at this late date he may have intended to be associated with me. I know at an early age he began to haunt me during grade school, and after I seemingly fended him off, he gave up until well after high school and college. He resurfaced during my second year of teaching at Aquinas College with a vengeance, and he hasn't let up. He was one of the significant early poets being examined in those early black literature texts. He was tenacious; he was formidable. He would not go away; he would not disappear, and to my great surprise four years later, the poet, novelist and teacher Margaret Walker demonstrated why he was a seminal figure in the canon of African American letters. Margaret Walker reminded us of how importantly Dunbar figured in the fabric of African American and even American letters. Dunbar's poems were so infectious they became part and parcel of the community and never required identification. He was read at social gatherings, at churches during the services, and on Sunday afternoons when special programs of recitations were the order of the day, in schools and especially assemblies, in fraternal halls, and other venues. When Dunbar died, his standard or rather his separated wife Alice, under the name of Mrs. Paul Laurence Dunbar, took up his poetry. She gave breath and voice to his poems around the country by giving readings. Matilda Dunbar, on the other hand, gave voice to her son's work by having readings and teas in their home. This was her way of keeping her son alive.

Margaret Walker so enlightened and renewed in me a suppressed view of Dunbar's talent and worth. He was not only perceptive, but he had a gift for turning a phrase and he was ironic beyond belief. He was rhythmically agile and the tone and music of his lines are astounding. He associated himself with some of the most important artists of his day. Among them were Samuel Coleridge Taylor, the

African British composer, Will Marion Cook, with whom he wrote musicals, and Clarence Cameron White, the violinist.

In presenting these programs I have had to choose poems for a variety of venues and audiences. For grade school students:

"The Seedling"
"The Sand-Man"
"A Frolic"
"Accountability"
"Opportunity"
"Discovered"
"A Negro Love Song"

For high schools and colleges:

"An Ante-Bellum Sermon"
"When Dey 'Listed Colored Soldiers"
"He Had His Dream"
"In the Morning"

For senior citizens

"Ode to Ethiopia"
"We Wear the Mask"
"When Malindy Sings"
"Life"
"The Haunted Oak"

My sense is that my association with Dunbar has led me to discover that he is at once joyous and dedicated, humorous and sad, and that he was in some sense the social conscience of the community and the nation. He had his eye on the entire community. He gave us young and old, mature and irreverent, male and female, exhibiting attitude and gustiness, vernacular English and Standard English. Mostly, I have learned that Dunbar was an exquisite singer, who must have loved watching the words roll from his heart and tongue in such a unique and enlightened perfection.

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