

“I Made My Moves With Shackled Feet”:
Understanding the Subversive in the Poetry of
Paul Laurence Dunbar and Kendrick Lamar

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Thank God, we made it.

Introduction

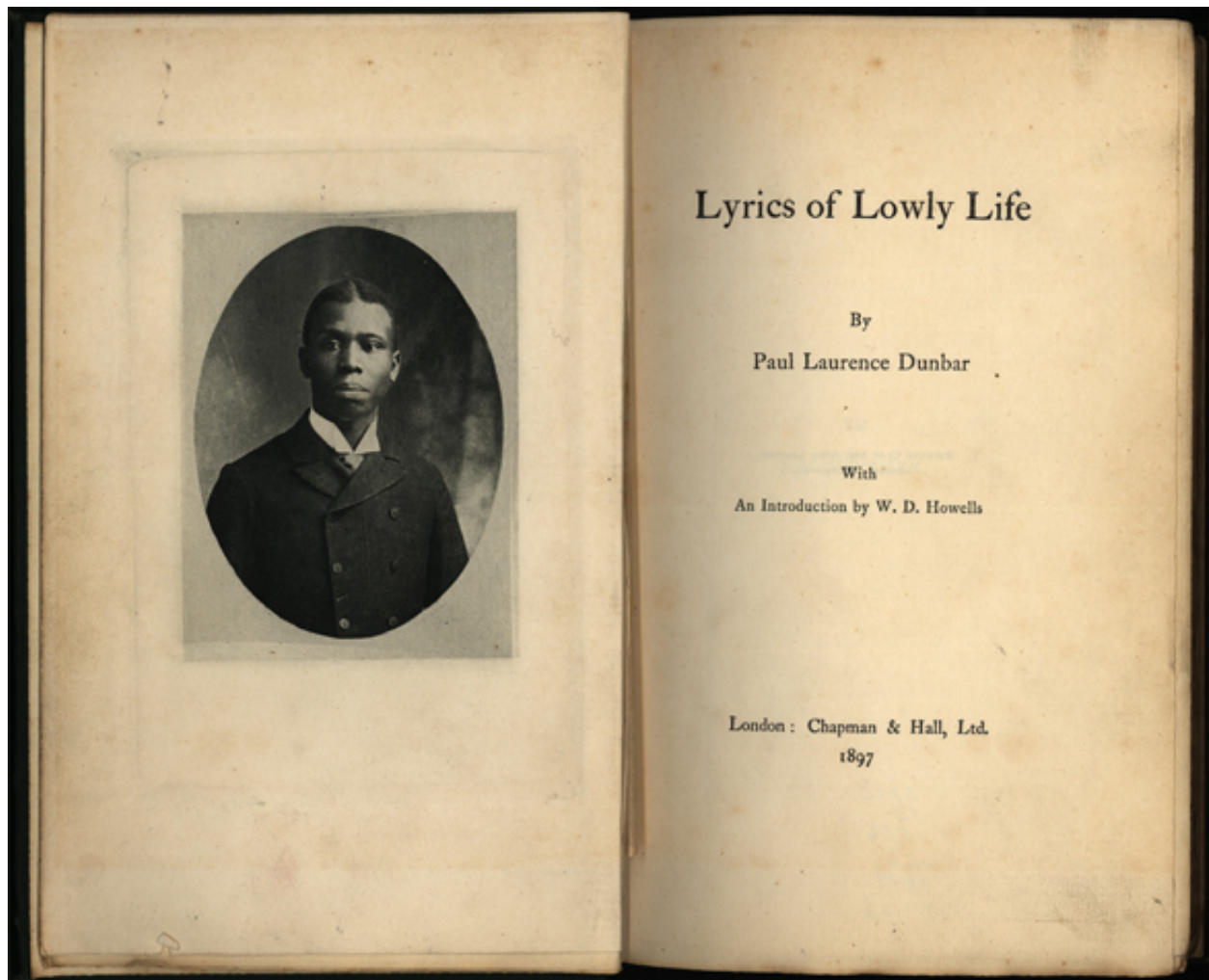
Ever since the emergence of dialect speech into popular culture following the conclusion of the Civil War, black writers of vernacular in America have had to manage complicated relationships with both their white editors and their predominantly white reading public. On the one hand, writing dialect stories and poems that seem to render portraits of African-American communities as docile and unsophisticated entertained white readers and editors. This rather homogenous audience often found the literature enjoyable either for some perceived affirmation of their own racial prejudices or for its othering of the language spoken in these communities through exotic romanticization. On the other, this platform offered to dialect writers opened up a potential avenue of socio-political expression unavailable to black artists prior to Reconstruction. Likewise for the black rappers of today, who themselves function within a linguistic sphere separate from what many consider “standard English,” racially prejudicial stereotypes about the genre and its influence on black life in America pervade much of the social discourse generated by the music, but the genre itself dominates popular culture; they too must operate artistically and expressively while speaking to an audience that includes a large segment of people who actively look to find fault and vice within rap lyrics to confirm their prejudicial understanding of the black American identity. The challenge then becomes, how does a black writer, or black rapper, navigate the space between meeting audience expectations and challenging their validity?

I first knew I wanted to discuss African American literature back in the winter term of my sophomore year. I had the pleasure of taking a class on the subject with Professor Sydney Bufkin, who allowed me to write my final paper on how Kendrick Lamar carries on some of the key political elements of the Harlem Renaissance within his art today. Considering rap as literature in that assignment, as small-scale as it was, inspired me to consider how I could

potentially interact with what I felt to be a academically under-appreciated art form over the course of a longer project. After being exposed to the vernacular verse of Paul Laurence Dunbar in the following year, I found myself fascinated by the similarity with which I felt that Dunbar and Lamar worked subversively within their respective literary modes. I came into the project with one main question: how do these black artists do what some would consider pandering for tainted profit while also writing with the deeper purpose of exposing bigoted and discriminatory social structures? As the poetic works of Paul Laurence Dunbar and Kendrick Lamar demonstrate, subversion can and does often thrive in even the most racially caricatured of art forms.

Chapter One

Discriminatory Delusions: Examining the Popular but Criticized Literary Mode of Black
American Dialect



The scope of this paper is too finite to allow for any competently thorough examination of the whole history of dialect literature in the United States, but first chapter will provide both literary contextualization and genre-specific background material necessary to serve as a foundation for the more artist-driven chapters to follow. While information pertaining to dialect literature as a whole, including black dialect prose, will be incorporated into the ensuing exploration, black dialect poetry by black writers remains the primary focus. The elements of black dialect writing that this chapter will investigate are as follows: the emergence of black dialect literature from a longstanding African American oral tradition; its capacity for subversive socio-political messaging; the substantial public backlash against dialect writing in general around the turn of the twentieth century, whose features bear striking similarities to how rap music is received in many modern circles; and lastly, the specific criticisms and condescension levied at black dialect writers by their predominantly white audience of critics, editors, and casual readers.

Simply put, dialect literature is the classification assigned to written works whose narration employs vernacular speech. The *Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms* defines “dialect” as “A distinctive variety of a language, spoken by members of an identifiable regional group, nation, or social class.” Examples of dialect sub-types occur within the framework of many languages all over the world, and the United States is no exception. Nadia Nurhussein¹, a professor of English and African studies at Johns Hopkins University, writes of a late-nineteenth-

¹ Nurhussein’s book, *Rhetorics of Literacy: The Cultivation of American Dialect Poetry*, published in 2013, stands as one of the most thorough and contemporary investigations into the history of vernacular verse in the United States, and the societal effects of its popularity. The genre of dialect literature as whole seems rather under-explored, from my own research experience, so while Nurhussein’s text features prominently in this paper mostly for the quality and breadth of her treatment of the form, the lack of recent, related discussion of dialect works heightened her influence on this project.

century piece of American short-fiction wherein “a newspaper writer ... shops at a store selling ‘[a]ll kinds of dialects’ ... Browsing, he inspects their stock of Scotch, black American, Western, German, French-Canadian, Yiddish, Yankee, Irish, and English ‘dialects’” (1). This period example highlights a number of dialects that have no geographical designation or borders, but rather stem from a wide selection of backgrounds and ethnicities despite all being American English at their core.

Alongside this clear cultural awareness around the turn of the nineteenth century of the extent to which sub-categories of American English thrived in many parts of the nation, a corresponding rise in dialect fiction and poetry writing ensued. As one scholar notes, “Late-nineteenth-century America was crazy about dialect literature ... every region was mined for its vernacular gold, and every predominant ethnic group was linguistically lampooned in popular poetry and prose” (*Strange Talk* 1). Prominent writers of this “vernacular gold” from the mid-nineteenth century to the early stages of the twentieth include: Mark Twain, the acclaimed Mississippian author of *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* known for “the regional accuracy of [his] dialect writing” (Frazer 8); George Washington Cable, a Louisiana native whose “depiction of dialect gets to the heart of the cultural hybridity that characterizes his view of New Orleans society” (“Signifying Songs” 248); and the aforementioned Paul Laurence Dunbar, a black writer of dialect “who was certainly not the first Afro-American writer, but who was the first to achieve national prominence and a large measure of acceptance by both black and white communities” (Revell 18).

Though clearly dialect literature as a whole remains impossible to categorize wholesale in terms of a particular structure or style, given the variety and mutability of language that dialects inherently embody, a few broadly applicable characteristics can be highlighted through the

analysis of a somewhat archetypal excerpt. Take, for instance, this selection from “The Goophered Grapevine,” a short story by Charles Chesnutt, himself a mixed-race dialect author claiming both black and white heritage:

But ‘long ‘bout time fer de grapes ter come on de scuppernon’ vimes, dey ‘peared ter come a change ober dem; de leaves wivered en swivel’ up, en de young grapes turn’ yaller, en bimeby eve’ybody on de plantation could see dat de whole vimya’d wuz dyin’. Mars Dugal’ tuck ‘n water de vimes en done all he could, but ‘t wan’ no use: dat Yankee done bus’ de watermillyum. One time de vimes picked up a bit, en Mars Dugal’ thought dey wuz gwine ter come out ag’in; but dat Yankee done dug too close unde’ de roots, en prune de branches too close ter de vime, en all dat lime en ashes done burn’ de life outen de vimes, en dey des kep’ a with’in’ en a swivelin’. All dis time de goopher wuz a-wukkin’.

As this passage illustrates, dialect literature stands out for its choice to forego formal philological patterns and proper spelling in an effort to convey the linguistic essence of the vernacular variety being depicted. Chesnutt takes pains here to use phonetically-based spellings so that the language of this character, “a venerable-looking colored man” named Julius speaking to a rich white couple from Ohio who are considering buying an old plantation in the American South, stands as a realistic portrayal of Southern black dialect (Chesnutt). Nurhussein states that, “Most serious dialect writers in late-nineteenth-century America conceived of their writing as sincere efforts to represent ‘nonstandard’ speech, and demanded that literary dialect look like it would sound convincing if read aloud, without obstructing the reading process” (2). Not simply rudimentary reproductions of specific vernaculars, dialect literature works from this period prioritize maintaining the genuine character of their language.

As both Chesnutt excerpt demonstrates, dialect literature also places distinct focus on oral tradition and narrative as both central themes and plot devices. Chesnutt's piece exists as storytelling within storytelling, as it centers around the chance meeting between Julius and a Northern white couple, and the former's intelligent use of an invented tale in an attempt to persuade his enterprising audience that the land they wish to purchase is in fact "bewitched" (Chesnutt). This trend extended to vernacular poetry as well, with writers penning poetic narratives such as Dunbar's "The Rivals," an amusing story in black dialect verse about an unnamed narrator and his antagonist, Zekel Johnson, coming to blows over the right to woo Liza Jones, only to find out afterwards that "she'd gone home with Hiram Turner" (Dunbar 27-29). Also, vernacular authors' inclination towards oral storytelling naturally transitioned well to the stage, as "Dialect poetry performances in general were extremely popular entertainment in this late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries" (Nurhussein 40). Arguably more so than any other category of American literature from this period, dialect works are noteworthy for their combination of storytelling as a narrative mechanism and live performance.

In addition to these distinguishing features of dialect literature, works of Southern, black vernacular poetry and prose bear a unique lineage of protest and socio-political expression tracing back to the field songs and spirituals of enslaved Africans in the American South. Granted virtually no access to formal education, and with no freedom of speech rights, black slaves utilized their work songs as both a coping mechanism and outlet for criticism of white supremacy.² Though undoubtedly dating back even further, the sophistication within field songs was notably observed a century prior to the advent of dialect literature, when, as Lawrence W. Levine describes, "In 1774 an English visitor to the United States, after his first encounter with

² "Even if master's listenin', I got the world's attention / So I'ma say somethin' that's vital and critical for survival" – Kendrick Lamar, "Complexion (A Zulu Love). *To Pimp a Butterfly*."

slave music, wrote in his journal: ‘In their songs they generally relate the usage they have received from their Masters or Mistresses in a very satirical stile and manner’” (12). Levine expands on the observations of this English gentleman in his book *Black Culture and Black Consciousness: Afro-American Folk Thought From Slavery to Freedom*, stating that “the form and structure of slave music presented the slave with a potential outlet for his individual feelings even while it continually drew him back into the communal presence and permitted him the comfort of basking in the warmth of the shared assumptions of those around him” (33). In addition to serving practical utility while they labored, the field songs of black slaves in the Southern United States clearly also served both an inward and outward purpose, allowing for personal expression while also inspiring the group as a whole.

Like its artistic ancestor, black dialect literature from around the turn of the century also regularly commented on issues of race and racial injustice in the United States while actively working within and undermining prejudicial caricatures of blacks in the years following the Civil War. Gavin Jones states that, “The authorship of dialect was often a claim to authority, not just over the quality of another’s speech but over the nature of a dominant reality” (10). Likewise, in his quintessential book *The Signifying Monkey*, Henry Louis Gates Jr. remarks that “Signifyin(g) epitomizes all of the rhetorical play in the black vernacular” (59). Chesnut’s “The Goophered Grapevine” is illustrative in this sense, as beneath Julius’s seemingly genuine, bucolic simplicity lies a veiled “claim to authority” like that Jones speaks of. Theodore Hovet contends convincingly that “The indirect, persuasive method of ‘The Goophered Grapevine’ consists of the interreaction of the two narrative view-points ... [which] subtly reveals the racist views of the Northerner,” in addition to stating that, “Embedded in Julius’ folk tale are allusions to all the horrors of the slave hunts and the tragedies of men converted into a commodity” (86, 87).

Chesnutt's subtle inclusion of these dissident messages within an entertaining folk narrative exemplifies the inherent capabilities of black dialect literature to function as vehicle for socio-political expression while also entertaining audiences both on paper and on stage.

Even though dialect literature became a pop culture phenomenon following the conclusion of the American Civil War, the meteoric rise of works in vernacular did not engender wholly positive reception amongst either critics or readers. Dialect writers of all ethnic and regional associations writing in this form were met with stern rebuke by skeptics who felt passionately about its inferiorities and liabilities. One key theoretical source shapes my understanding of what fuels the evident racial insecurity within critics of dialect literature who rely on the kinds of overt generalization and sensationalism seen in the conversation surrounding the vernacular work of black artists. It is a selection from Nobel-prize-winning writer Toni Morrison's short work of literary criticism, *Playing In the Dark*, wherein she remarks that "Africanism³ is the vehicle by which the American⁴ self knows itself as not enslaved, but free; not repulsive, but desirable; not helpless, but licensed and powerful; not history-less, but historical; not damned, but innocent; not a blind accident of evolution, but a progressive fulfillment of destiny" (52). Essentially, white Americans have for centuries taken advantage of and prolonged the subjugated presence of blackness in American society in order to feel secure in their own identity and ideals. The validation of white hegemony depends upon a continued contrast against the projected inferiority of black humanity and black culture. This insightful

³ Morrison states, "I am using the term 'Africanism' ... for the denotative and connotative blackness that African peoples have come to signify, as well as the entire range of views, assumptions, readings, and misreadings that accompany Eurocentric learning about these people" (6-7). Thus, when she addresses how whiteness is constructed and defined against blackness, she speaks of an artificial blackness articulated and perpetuated by the white Eurocentrists.

⁴ Lest the term "American" be too loosely applied, Morrison remarks a few pages earlier that "American means white, and Africanist people struggle to make the term applicable to themselves with ethnicity and hyphen after hyphen after hyphen" (47).

analysis of how the white American identity exists only through a state of racial comparativity, one that must perpetually seek to disparage blackness in order to elevate whiteness, speaks directly to the nature of why white critics choose to misrepresent the art of black dialect writers without participating in the conversation these works intend to stimulate.

Viewing audience reception of vernacular works within this framework, the fact that the increasingly immense popularity of dialect as a whole (black and otherwise) at this time elicited an alarmist stance from self-fashioned literary puritans should come as no surprise. Nurhussein remarks that, “The force of the dialect writing trend was so overwhelming that contemporary reviews frequently complained of it. Some complained simply of poor execution . . . Others had more serious concerns about the impact of the genre itself on its readers.” This first complaint, directed at the “poor execution” of dialect writers, seems largely unfounded, and at the very least simplistic. Many felt that dialect works, being written primarily on folksy topics in non-standard vernacular, were both easily produced and lacking in the sophistication necessary to be thought respectable pieces of literature. Though, as in all forms of artistic expression, instances certainly exist where the effort and skill of the artisan can fairly be questioned, those who dismissed the genre as a whole for these perceived shortcomings missed the point altogether, and perhaps deliberately so. As Nurhussein points out, “what critics of the genre attacked as a formulaic quality is alternatively evidence of its constructedness, as opposed to the ethereal and mysterious inspiration attached to other forms of lyric poetry” (12). To value sonnets or novels for their adherence to conventions and alternately belittle dialect literature, a form which, though certainly more regionally and ethnically diverse in its specific manifestations, still bases itself around core principles of style and content, feels hypocritical. Competent practitioners of dialect writing relied on the same dedication to structural and philological cohesion as their colleagues who

chose to pen works in other literary modes, yet their work suffered in the critical eye for no other offense than seeming at first glance somewhat pedestrian.

In addition to concerns over artlessness, dialect literature as a genre was also maligned by many who feared that promulgating works representing vernacular speech would popularize what they saw as examples of the English language being cheapened and distorted by this non-standard, phonetically representative form. Jones shares a telling example of this critical concern:

Richard Watson Gilder, editor of the *Century* and ‘high priest’ of the cult of the vernacular (as Hamlin Garland called him), had profound fears about the literary form he was helping to create. In a letter to Garland, Gilder confessed that a dialect story containing vulgarisms ‘should very strongly recommend itself before being sent out into almost every household in the United States! ... People who are trying to bring up their children with refinement, and to keep their own and their children’s language pure and clean, very naturally are jealous of the influence of a magazine’. (*Strange Talk* 51)

This fear of language contamination warrants further scrutiny. The fact that Gilder, an acknowledged supporter of the genre, expressed these concerns so strongly should serve as an indication of the significant levels of worry surrounding the linguistic influence of dialect literature as it emerged into the mainstream. For one thing, it assumes a bizarre sort of sacrosanctity of standardized English, elevating it to a status of a national treasure worth preserving from all that may taint it, namely the “vulgarisms” within dialect writing. Also interesting is the fact that the fear of vernacular work having a dumbing or perverting effect on American speech extended to every age group; remember, Gilder sympathizes with those who desire “to keep their own and their children’s language pure and clean,” suggesting uneasiness

over dialect literature's potential to corrupt all of society, not only the presumably more impressionable youth.

If concerns of language violation were exclusive to those of a critical or editorial persuasion, then they could be more easily dismissed as snobbish. It should be noted, though, that the views expressed by Gilder in this letter were representative of many not only in critical circles, but also amongst everyday readers. Nurhussein highlights another piece of period correspondence wherein "a frustrated reader from Texas ... complains about what he calls 'newspaper poems of good quality, marred only by the fault of bad spelling, intentionally bad spelling,' used to indicate 'vulgar pronunciation' ... [he] ends his letter with the pronouncement that dialect poets should respect the English language, not degrade and deface it" (20-21). This excerpt, condemning vernacular work for the same vulgarizing effect that Gilder perceived, demonstrates the pervasiveness of these beliefs within both the professional and the private literary spheres. That the yeoman reader's concerns should so nearly match those of the trained editor illustrates how dearly many white Americans of all socio-economic and educational backgrounds cherished what they saw as the wholesome identity of their language.

However innocent or logical anxieties about English linguistic purity may seem, underneath them lies another, more sinister desire to maintain a corresponding cultural and racial purity. Viewing the Gilder and disgruntled reader quotes, one an editorial complaint and the other a casual consumer's worry, it becomes clear that dialect literature was seen by many as posing a threat not only to the upright English diction of the presumably white, mid-to-upper class American family, but also to the cultural fabric of that family itself. The "vulgarisms" of dialect literature are positioned by those with reservations about the form as being incapable of cohabitation with both "pure and clean" speech *and* cultural identity. Jones states that,

“American dialect writing was, in part, a confirmation of cultural hegemony. The focus on ‘incorrect’ dialects sanctioned belief in the pure, standard speech of a dominant elite” (*Strange Talk* 9). This pattern of behavior matches up all too well with Morrison’s theory about the construction of racial identity, for by taking advantage of the low-art perception surrounding dialect works, white linguistic and cultural purists attempted to strengthen their own position by construing dialect literature to be as much of a danger to the proper values of a family as to the rectitude of their speech. Only through demeaning dialect works by maligning their corrupting otherness could the validity of a purely white literary and social superiority be sustained.

Unfortunately, these intolerant sentiments were not merely theoretical machinations. It has been noted that during the advent of vernacular works, “Boston parents became anxious when their children broke out with deep southernisms at the breakfast table—evidence of a secret consumption of dialect stories late at night” (*Strange Talk* 1).⁵ The xenophobia within this domestic scenario almost feels palpable. These mothers and fathers seem afraid for the character of their children when exposed to dialect much as they would if their progeny had suddenly taken up an interest in practicing voodoo. Lest this particular example be viewed in isolation, Jones also notes that, “fears over dialect as a source of moral disease were widespread” (*Strange Talk* 51). Coming on the heels of a war fought precisely because much of the United States did not even consider the institution of slavery to be a “moral disease,” the vilification of dialect literature around the turn of the nineteenth century only makes sense if viewed in light of how it did not fit into the idealized picture of society that the white cultural elites, Northern and Southern, painted for themselves.

⁵ “Your son will play me if the radio won’t” – Kendrick Lamar, “Ab-Soul’s Outro,” *Section.80*.

For African American writers of dialect literature, who already faced all of the previously examined criticisms of their genre as a whole, further difficulty came from the different, more prejudicial ways in which their personal work was viewed. Two primary examples of this are the intentional reading of African American dialect pieces as indicative of some inherent racial inadequacy, and the patronizing exoticization of these works, even by those who claim to support the authors. Looking first at the more blatantly bigoted approach, it was not uncommon for African American vernacular stories and poems, which like most dialect styles of the day tended to focus on more bucolic, folksy themes and characters, to be taken as validation by those inclined towards white supremacy, or at the very least white preeminence. As Jones puts it, “the misrepresentation of African-American dialect ... was a popular means of encoding racist beliefs in black intellectual inferiority” (*Strange Talk* 10). Given how dialect literature as a whole appeared threatening to the established white household’s moral fiber and speech habits, the fact that many of these concerned parties would indulge in their paranoia so far as to consider the stereotypical people and storylines depicted in African American dialect work as confirmation of their already-held preconceptions stands as further evidence of how closely this history aligns to Morrison’s understanding of how whiteness manipulates blackness to support its own unsullied self-perception.

The depth and breadth of this social movement on the part of whites to construe blacks as by nature less human and worthy of derision can clearly be seen through examining the “coon song” fad of this era. With harsh racial stereotypes serving as their foundation, these derogatory and humiliating entertainments derived from the black minstrel trope prevalent both in English and American theater before the Civil War, and became a “national fascination between circa 1890 and 1910” (Dormon 450-451). Though not literature by strict definition, the coon song as

artistic form is closely related to African American dialect works, namely in their rustic content, their proclivity towards vernacular speech, and their innately performative elements. For instance, Nurhussein states that Paul Laurence Dunbar's poetic works "were often conflated" with coon songs (55). Exploring the key characteristics of coon songs, and the national response they elicited, provides illuminating details regarding the racial mindset of white America at this time, the same white America that read and reacted to works of black dialect fiction and poetry.

Similarly to African American dialect literature, coon songs became major successes by playing into the racist and debasing preconceptions held as truth by white audiences. It is worth noting, though, that the socio-political reception of coon songs in America around the turn of the century cannot be seen as identically corresponding to that of dialect literature; the former seem meant purely to gratify and pander to the tastes of white society, while the latter served as a vehicle for subversion while simultaneously entertaining. As James Dormon notes, "Almost without exception coon songs were calculated to be hilariously funny. Overwhelmingly they were based in caricature" (453). Such caricature manifested itself in depictions of black people "as not only ignorant and indolent, but also devoid of honesty or personal honor, given to drunkenness and gambling, utterly without ambition, sensuous, libidinous, even lascivious. 'Coons' were, in addition to all of these things, razor-wielding savages, routinely attacking one another at the slightest provocation" (Dormon 455). This appalling and farcical assignment of practically every known vice and moral flaw to black characters in these musical numbers is what made them wildly popular.

That the writers and performers of these songs, though not exclusively white, intended to promote such stereotypes in order to sell tickets and sheet music is clear. The opinions of period

critics bear this theory out. Consider this example of journalistic racism from the early part of the twentieth century:

[I]n December of 1907, in a rather apologetic article entitled ‘The Stage Negro,’ *Variety* magazine noted that successful entertainers and producers must offer the public what the public wants—in this instance comic stage caricatures of black Americans and black American life. To do so, the account continued, they must also ‘give the public what the public will recognize’ ... That is to say, the features of the stage character, or those suggested by the song lyrics, must be features recognizable by the audiences. In the language of semiotics, they must be the features that had come to be accepted collectively as constituting the signified black; the features that had to be suggested, even by black performers playing black caricatures, or by the song lyrics evoking black types ... In this manner the caricature became the stereotype; the stereotype the caricature. (454)

Basically, the desire amongst white audiences to have their bigotry enabled and endorsed by the entertainment they watched prompted mainstream critics to recommend that the creators and performers of such ludicrously pejorative content continue to continue fueling these stereotypes in order to stay relevant and successful. True, “give the people what they want” remains a common axiom in our entertainment lexicon to this day, but seeing this motto tied intimately here to the strengthening of racially prejudicial associations feels uncanny in retrospect.

Knowing that the interpretive perversion of these coon songs by white audiences initiated a vicious cycle with the art form itself, where social pressure to normalize racial prejudice drove artists to sustain such misrepresentations, is something of a tough pill to swallow. The only way that such grossly exaggerated representations could be embraced by a society is if that society wanted to believe that these stereotypes held true in real life and not simply on stage.

Undoubtedly, much of white America around the turn of the nineteenth century sought validation for their racist misconceptions of their black neighbors within coon songs, and black dialect literature by extension. White audiences embraced both types of artistic expression because of how neatly the latter's tendency toward belittling presentation of African American life (in the case of coon songs, intentional; in that of dialect literature, less so) fit in with white supremacist ideology. Dormon unhesitatingly describes the situation as such: "the coon song craze in its full frenzy was a manifestation of a peculiar form of the will to believe—to believe in the signified 'coon' as represented in the songs—as a necessary sociopsychological mechanism for justifying segregation and subordination" (466). That this observation applies as well to a substantial portion of white public opinion regarding African American dialect literature seems logical. Even though the purposeful depiction of black characters as unintelligent, uncivilized and morally bankrupt occurs more prominently in coon songs than in the dialect works of African American writers, the fact that white society's predominant racial prejudice served as the driving force behind the extremeness of coon songs' caricatures is telling. The same turn-of-the-century white Americans who listened eagerly to songs such as "I'm the Toughest, Toughest Coon" and "All Coons Look Alike to Me" in order to justify their intolerance likewise read African American dialect fiction and poetry, and almost certainly did so for similar reasons.

It is a sadly ironic reality that, even when African American dialect authors of the period had their work accepted and praised within white editorial and critical circles, this positivity sprang from these literary elites' fascination with what they viewed as the charming otherness of African American vernacular narrative. John K. Young claims that "the basic dynamic through which most twentieth-century African American literature has been produced derives from an expectation that the individual text will represent the black experience (necessarily understood as

exotic) for the white, and therefore implicitly universal, audience,” a statement borne out by contemporaneous commentary on African American dialect works from the turn of the century (12). Reviewers who lauded authors of black vernacular tended to do so by framing the writer’s work as glorifying some base and uncivilized culture with eloquence. James Whitcomb Riley, himself a white writer of Midwestern dialect literature, had this to say about Joel Chandler Harris [emphasis mine]:

In no less excellence should the work of Joel Chandler Harris be regarded: His touch alike is ever reverential. He has gathered up the bruised and broken voices and the legends of the slave, and from his child-heart he has affectionately yielded them to us in all *their eerie beauty and wild loveliness*. Through them we are made to glorify the helpless and the weak and to revel in their victories. But, better, we are taught that *even in barbaric breasts* there dwells inherently the sense of right above wrong—equity above law—and the One Unerring Righteousness Eternal.⁶ (470-471)

The language of Riley, though on the surface highly complimentary, betrays an ignorance and delusion fueled consciously or unconsciously by racial prejudice. He highlights the “eerie beauty and wild loveliness” of Harris’s work, phrasing that reeks of condescension, while infantilizing the author by assigning him a “child-heart.” Riley values stories about African American life and culture for what he understands as their otherness, their “beauty” and “elegance” intrinsically different from those found in literature written about white society. For those white Americans in this period who feared that racial integration would undermine or violate the linguistic, moral and ethnic purity of their social sphere, construing black dialect

⁶ A white writer of African American dialect, Harris has been condemned by modern commentators as “a paternalist and genteel racist” (Cochran 22). This comment by Riley on Harris’s black dialect pieces was included solely to illustrate the exoticization of black characters and stories by white readers at the time.

poetry and stories to suit their own preconceptions served as a convenient coping mechanism. They could appreciate and commend the African American experience by categorizing it as capable of producing quality literature, yet still consider African American people as naturally both uncivilized and inferior.

Though Riley's praise of Harris's works does speak to the exoticizing critical opinion of literature in black dialect around the turn of the century, the reception given to dialect literature by black writers specifically reached another level of superciliousness altogether. *Poetry's* brief 1934 review of Sterling Brown's 1932 book of dialect poems, *Southern Road*, illustrates this well:

A negro student who has progressed in his poetical technique to the point indicated by the youthful stanzas in Part Four of this volume, can no longer consider himself a primitive, and must achieve, in attempting to go back to his racial beginnings, more than a mongrel effect. He has followed Housman, Shakespeare, and other masters of English lyricism too far. His salvation lies in following them farther. (115)

The layers of condescension within these few sentences speak to the problematic lens through which white critics viewed black dialect writers. Firstly, by referring to Brown as an ex-“primitive,” whose vernacular work has a “mongrel effect,” the unnamed author of this review demeans Brown by describing him in animalistic terms, as something less than human. The reviewer also expresses an understanding of white writers as fundamentally superior to black writers: those individuals mentioned as the paragons of poetic ability are exclusively white males, and the writer of this piece concludes that Brown must “[follow] them farther” if he hopes to find literary “salvation.” Even the reviewer's term “salvation” hints at the prejudicial perception of a savage aspect within Brown's nature that, since he is a black man, can only be

redeemed through adherence to the example of white men. Patronizingly racist, this short piece represents a commonly held view among whites of turn-of-the-century black dialect writers and their work as being innately base and unsophisticated.

Alongside this tendency to have their work perceived by white readers as being valuable for the exotic glorification of black life in America, or as subpar simply because of their black heritage, African American writers of dialect also dealt with critics singling them out for praise as exceptions to the demeaning stereotypes of their race. For instance, when a woman named Elizabeth F. Parker wrote a piece for *The Journal of Education* in 1901 entitled “This Year’s Fiction,” she mentions both Dunbar and Charles Chesnutt in a brief remark, lauding the pair for “always representing the negro cause from the standpoint of the educated negro, who appreciates the difficulties which education and ambition bring to their race” (182). Not only does Parker highlight the “educated” status of these men as if she considers them exceptions to the norm in this respect, she also espouses the prejudicial belief that “education and ambition” are unsuitable aspirations for black Americans, and will only lead to “difficulties.” This statement rings of the same xenophobia that led white audiences to scold their children for reading dialect literature, to laugh at farcically racist coon songs, and to construe the portrayals of black life in dialect works as exotically sub-human.

Another example of this heightened strain of discriminatory praise levied at writers of black dialect in this era is late-nineteenth century poet Frances Ellen Watkins Harper. A writer and public speaker whose work was “filled with wit and irony and ... colloquial speech,” Harper became the foundation for “a new idiom in black poetry which ripen[ed] into the dialect verse of Campbell, Davis, and Dunbar ... Written to be heard as well as read, Harper’s poems characteristically concentrate[d] on slavery, lynching, temperance, Christianity, or moral reform”

(Ammons 63). Though undeniably an influential presence in the American literary sphere, she still faced the same type of derogatory and patronizing plaudits that sadly characterized much criticism of black writers at the time. Elizabeth Ammons mentions that Harper once remarked in her personal correspondence with a friend: “I don’t know but that you would laugh if you were to hear some of the remarks which my lectures call forth’ ... ‘She is not colored, she is painted”” (62). In addition, Ammons notes that, “After the war an Alabama newspaperman said to be a diehard Rebel” was “Thoroughly racist even in his praise, [as] he marvelled, ‘We followed the speaker to the end not discerning a single grammatical inaccuracy of speech, or the slightest violation of good taste”” (62).

Despite serving as positive feedback on the surface, each of these two comments upon Harper’s work reflect the tendency of white critics to frame the creations of black dialect authors and speakers as being exceptional for supposed whiteness. “‘She is not colored, she is painted”” attempts to laud Harper by joking prejudicially that a truly black individual could not have been so talented and articulate. Likewise, the *Mobile Register* reviewer’s description of her speech emphasizes its clarity and technical soundness as if these were rare or unlikely qualities to be found in a black orator. Similarly to how Dunbar and Chesnut were singled out for praise because of what readers perceived as racially atypical levels of literacy and skill, Harper too had to face critics who looked favorably on her work from a racially-condescending perspective. Unable to delude themselves as to her aptitude, these white audience members and reviewers chose to underscore what they felt to be aspects of Harper’s skill that set her apart from those in her own race, rather than admit to a reality where talented writing and speaking translates to excellence regardless of skin color.

None of the qualities, criticisms, and prejudicially-loaded praises of black dialect writings, as framed in this chapter within the context of the whole of American dialect literature's ascension into the mainstream around the late nineteenth century, are outdated concepts. The socio-political subtext of writers such as Charles Chesnutt, the white reception of both dialect literature and its loosely related neighbor, the coon song, and the alternately exoticizing and condescending appreciation shown for the work of black writers such as Chesnutt, Paul Laurence Dunbar and Frances Ellen Watkins Harper all bear relevance to the way African American literature manifests itself today. This thesis considers the particular example of Dunbar and contemporary rapper Kendrick Lamar in the succeeding chapters. The black dialect writer and his or her modern artistic descendant, the black rapper, have a great deal in common.

Chapter Two

“We’ll ‘Splain It By an’ By”: The Subversive Vehicle of Black Dialect in Paul Laurence

Dunbar’s Poetic Verse



As black American dialect literature emerged into the nation's cultural consciousness at the turn of the twentieth-century, white readers and critics tended to interpret and respond to such works with either racially motivated derision or patronizing diminishment. This chapter focuses on one African-American writer of dialect in particular, Paul Laurence Dunbar, in an effort to understand how arguably the premier black literary figure of his generation functioned in this environment. Though he achieved a relatively high degree of acclaim and status in his day, Dunbar still dealt with reader condescension and misinterpretation fueled by both ignorance and bigotry, often simultaneously. Using the vehicle of vernacular verse available to him, Dunbar succeeds at subverting his predominantly white audience's prejudicial expectations of the black American experience.

Born in Dayton, Ohio in 1872, just seven years after the Civil War's conclusion, Dunbar came of age as a person and a writer in an American society still working through the physical and psychological processes of racial integration. Dunbar was the only black student in his class at Central High School in Dayton (Powell), yet he thrived intellectually and creatively, serving as both the editor of the school paper and, in his senior year, the president of its Philomathean Literary Society (Revell 14). Just four years after graduating from Central in 1892 Dunbar emerged onto the nation's literary stage in 1896 with the publication of his first collection, *Majors and Minors* (Revell 14-15). He would go on to become one of the most famed and most prolific black writers in the United States, penning "well over four hundred poems, four collected volumes of short stories and enough uncollected stories to make another one or two volumes, [and] four novels" (Revell 18). Within this remarkable body of work, Dunbar's vernacular verse was the driving force behind his success, and remains what he is known for today.

Analysis of Dunbar's "An Ante-Bellum Sermon" demonstrates poignantly the writer's use of dialect poetry, one of the few literary forms then accessible to black writers, to challenge the suppression of black voices in American socio-political discourse. Published in 1896 as a part of his *Lyrics of Lowly Life* collection, this piece takes on the form of a sermon given by an enslaved black preacher to his fellow slaves sometime before the Civil War began. Dunbar's choice of historical context itself is a multi-faceted statement: by placing his speaker in the pre-War past, within an ostensibly Christian framework, the writer ensures that those white critics and readers who expect dialect works to be quaint folk tales find all of their prejudicial boxes checked. Anyone consciously or unconsciously ignorant enough to avoid finding social critique within "An Ante-Bellum Sermon" did not have to. Thus, Dunbar coats his subversive message in a palatable, period-piece exterior in order to clear hurdles of potential censorship.

Before delving into the latent messaging of "An Ante-Bellum Sermon," it is worth highlighting the intentionality and skill with which Dunbar crafts his dialect work. From a technical standpoint, the writer shows impressive awareness of the importance of poetic form and structure within a style often regarded by the uninformed as amateurishly casual. Take the first two stanzas, for instance:

We is gathahed hyeah, my brothahs,
 In dis howlin' wildaness,
 Fu' to speak some words of comfo't
 To each othah in distress.
 An' we chooses fu' ouah subjic'
 Dis—we'll 'splain it by an' by;
 "An' de Lawd said, 'Moses, Moses,'

An' de man said, 'Hyeah am I.'"

Now ole Pher'oh, down in Egypt,

Was de wuss man evah bo'n,

An' he had de Hebrew chillun

Down dah wukin' in his co'n;

'T well de Lawd got tiahed o' his foolin',

An' sez he: "I'll let him know--

Look hyeah, Moses, go tell Pher'oh

Fu' to let dem chillun go." (Dunbar 13)

Like the rest of the poem's eleven total stanzas, these consist of eight lines in an A-B-C-B scheme, that is, "hymn meter," rhymed quatrains of iambic trimeter, with three stressed beats to a line: "Now ole Pher'oh, down in Egypt / Was de wuss man evah bo'n." Maintaining a measured cadence throughout the piece allows the reader, or listener, to follow the rhythm of Dunbar's speaker without any jarring diversions that would disrupt the flow of the sermon, thus replicating an effective oratorical device within poetic meter. Additionally, Dunbar takes care to alternate how he positions the forceful third beat within the ending of each line from an unstressed to a stressed syllable, such as in the final two lines of this second stanza: "Look hyeah, Moses, go tell Pher'oh / Fu' to let dem chillun go." In doing so, a call and response pattern is established, where an unstressed beat ending one line enables the speaker to conclude the following line with a single stressed beat, thus reaching a resonant crescendo. Far from the shoddy mimicry of colloquial speech, Dunbar's dialect work exemplifies all the meticulous attention to detail and structure of a skilled poet.

Throughout “An Ante-Bellum Sermon,” Dunbar also exhibits nuanced understanding of the possibilities for linguistic transformation exclusively inherent to vernacular writing. Freed from standardized spellings and punctuation usage, the writer of dialect poetry can manipulate the construction of words and their pronunciation in more creative ways than a poet whose palette of verbiage is limited to the confines of so-called “standard” English. For example, in the first stanza Dunbar transforms the “-er” sound to an “-ah,” seen in words such as “hyeah,” “wildaness,” and “othah.” This absence of a solid “-r” pronunciation in Dunbar’s dialect verse marks it as non-rhotic, an intriguing adaptation of the traditionally rhotic English language. Though this rhotic/non-rhotic distinction could perhaps be seen as something of a superficial alteration meant to portray the unique phonetic qualities of black dialect, Dunbar also employs this tactic when fitting words into the final stressed beat of his lines. In the fifth stanza, when his speaker says, “An’ de lan’ shall hyeah his thundah, / Lak a blas’ f’om Gab’el’s ho’n, / Fu’ de Lawd of hosts is mighty / When he girds his ahmer on,” the decision to abbreviate “horn” to “ho’n,” the writer not only maintains stylistic consistency in terms of using non-rhotic⁷ pronunciation for the “-r” sound, he also enables “ho’n” to rhyme with “on,” shaping the former word into an arrangement more closely adherent to his chosen A-B-C-B rhyme scheme (Dunbar 14). Alongside the evident care taken by Dunbar to write a technically sound work of art, his poetic reconstruction of the phonetic flexibility of dialect speech enables him to perform a vernacular voice within that framework, demonstrating that the unique characteristics of dialect do not stand at odds with commonly held linguistic standards for poetic composition, but are in fact highly compatible with notions of form and meter because of their versatility in the hands of

⁷ The *Oxford Living Dictionary* of English defines “rhotic” as, “Relating to or denoting a dialect or variety of English (e.g. in most of the US and south-western England) in which r is pronounced before a consonant (as in hard) and at the ends of words (as in far).”

a skilled writer.

“An Ante-Bellum Sermon” hardly exists as a simple exercise in thoughtfully crafted dialect poetry, however. Rather, it is the message Dunbar conveys within such an expertly organized framework that lends this piece its expressive potency. To begin with, the poet uses his opening two stanzas to establish an intriguing correlation between the captivity of the Israelites in Egypt, as Biblically recorded in the book of Exodus⁸, and the American institution of slavery that directly affects both Dunbar’s black preacher and the black members of said preacher’s audience. That this poem’s speaker would point to the story God’s deliverance of the Israelites from their Egyptian captors as a means by which to “speak some words of comfo’t / To each othah in distress” tellingly highlights the freedom of expression that the speaker seeks to claim despite not being physically free. Since owners often utilized the Bible to establish and maintain a psychological hold over their slaves by divesting them of any previous religious beliefs and practices and replacing them with Anglo-Christian docility and respect for authority⁹, on one level, the speaker is doing precisely what his masters would see as beneficial. Rather than responding to the inhumane conditions of his captivity, a “howlin’ wildaness” destitute of free will, by inciting unrest amongst his audience, he instead prompts them to look to Scripture for consolation.

Tellingly, the specific Old Testament episode addressed in the speaker’s sermon is ripe with parallels and implications that undermine the legitimacy of American slavery as a practice consistent with the values of Christianity. Extrapolating the story’s cast list into the mid-19th

⁸ Exodus 1-14

⁹ “There were many white preachers who were able to reach the slaves they preached to ... But even the most talented and devoted among them faced certain grave obstacles resulting from the tension between their desire to spread the gospel and their need to use Christianity as a form of social control” (Levine 44).

century, “Ole Pher’oh, down in Egypt,/ [who] Was de wuss man evah bo’n” becomes a white slave owner, and “de Hebrew chillum / Down dah wukin’ in his co’n” are analogous to the enslaved black population. Following this juxtaposition down its logical path, black slaves take on the role of God’s chosen people while those who continue to claim racial supremacy and the right to possess other human beings stand in stark opposition to God’s will, and “de Lawd [is] tiahed o’ [their] foolin’.” Importantly, this resounding condemnation of the hypocrisy embedded in the espoused Christian beliefs of many slaveholders comes subtly veiled by poem’s speaker in the guise of religious indoctrination. Given no platform to openly decry the unjust nature of slavery, Dunbar’s speaker takes advantage of an opportunity to preach from his master’s preferred text for encoding obedience, the Bible, subverting racial hierarchy through a façade of facilitation.

That Dunbar’s speaker would tread carefully fits well with what is known about this particular Bible story’s impact in the Slavery-era South. One mid-century white clergyman from Maryland even went so far as to urge his colleagues to avoid this passage, writing that “You must be careful, however, when slaves are present, how you talk about Pharaoh making slaves of the Hebrews, and refusing to let the people leave Egypt. At any rate, you must make *no direct application* of the subject” (Levine 46, emphasis mine). Direct application is precisely what the speaker in “An Ante-Bellum Sermon” seeks to convey to his audience, but he remains clearly cognizant of the potential consequences of perceived dissent. In fact, after taking a couple more stanzas to finish the Exodus narrative, the speaker then provides a disclaimer:

But fu’ feah some one mistakes me,

I will pause right hyeah to say

Dat I’m still a-preachin’ ancient,

I ain't talkin' 'bout to-day.

But I tell you, fellah christuns,

Things'll happen mighty strange;

Now, de Lawd done dis fu' Isrul,

An' his ways don't nevah change,

An' de love he showed to Isrul

Wasn't all on Isrul spent;

Now don't run an' tell yo' mastahs

Dat I's preachin' discontent. (Dunbar 14)

Dunbar's speaker states satirically exaggerated renunciations of any attempt at criticizing slavery as he experiences it, thus deflecting the paranoid gaze of his master, while continuing to utilize Southern white Christians' own religious text of choice to undermine the moral justification of continued white oppression of blacks. Pointing out that "de love [God] showed to Isrul / Wasn't all on Isrul spent," implies not only that deliverance could be hoped for by the speaker's fellow slaves, but also that the God of white Christianity has not changed His mind since He punished the Egyptians, and that He remains in opposition to the continuance of slavery as practiced in the United States by white people. Rather than simple equivocation, the disclaimers uttered by Dunbar's speaker free him up to make the boldly subversive claims that drive the majority of the sermon.

Perhaps the boldest of the claims made by Dunbar's speaker comes in the poem's seventh and eighth stanzas, when he moves beyond implications of parallels between the Israelites and enslaved Africans and into direct conversation with those who would interpret the Bible falsely

to validate slavery as an institution:

... I'se a-judgin'
 Bible people by deir ac's;
 I'se a-givin' you de Scriptuah,
 I'se a-handin' you de fac's.
 Cose ole Pher'or b'lieved in slav'ry,
 But de Lawd he let him see,
 Dat de people he put bref in,--
 Evah mothah's son was free.

An' dahs othahs thinks lak Pher'oh,
 But dey calls de Scriptuah liar,
 Fu' de Bible says "a servant
 Is a-worthy of his hire,"
 An' you cain't git roun' nor thoo dat,
 An' you cain't git ovah it,
 Fu' whatevah place you git in,
 Dis hyeah Bible too'll fit (14).

The twin assertions of agency and humanity made by Dunbar's speaker here, first in taking ownership of the right to hold up slaveholding Christians to the standards of their own holy text, and second in establishing the premise that all humans are equals in the eyes of God, are especially powerful in light of their anachronistic nature. An enslaved black man publically claiming a superior interpretation of Christian scripture, and maintaining that any white Christian

who disagrees “calls de Scriptuah liar,” seems a contextual impossibility, but this tension arises not out of authorial ignorance but intention. The physical practice of slavery, as outlawed by the Thirteenth Amendment nearly thirty years prior to “An Ante-Bellum Sermon,” is not the target of Dunbar’s message: rather, he seeks to use the fictitious example of an enslaved black preacher asserting his people’s right to humanity and intellectual freedom in the face of institutional hostility to show how the structure of the oppression may have changed, but the problem persists. Tellingly, the poet only utilizes the rhotic “-r” ending of standardized English twice in “An Ante-Bellum Sermon,” and both occur in this stanza: “An’ dahs othahs thinks lak Pher’oh, / But dey calls- de Scriptuah *liar*, / Fu’ de Bible says ‘a servant / Is a-worthy of his *hire*,’ [emphasis mine].” These lines stand out as singular exceptions to the otherwise-consistent phonetic structure within “An Ante-Bellum Sermon.” Given Dunbar’s evident care for technical cohesion, his choice to retain the standard rhotic spelling of “liar” and “hire” underscores this rhyming pair’s significance within the poem, seemingly intended to leave little room for interpretive error on the part of his white audience as his enslaved speaker condemns the fundamentally erroneous manner in which Southern white slaveholders justified their atrocities by distorting Scripture. Dunbar’s incisive criticism of the racially motivated perversion of Christianity used to diminish the humanity of blacks in America has weight precisely because his speaker would not have had the liberty to voice it, and it is the contemporary continuance of this denial of expressive freedom for black voices that the poet wishes to emphasize.

Since he writes within a dialect form that inherently lends itself to both bigoted stereotyping and racially charged condescension from white audiences, Dunbar would have been painfully aware of how “interpretation of dialect as the authenticating oral signature of the printed folk poem enabled poems with no pretense to being oral folklore, like Dunbar’s, to

become a dominant mode of articulating cultural fantasies about racialized folk” (Cohen 251). Since dialect literature stood as one of the only accessible outlets for black artistic expression in that time, though, Dunbar found a way to achieve legibility within this dialect space. “An Ante-Bellum Sermon” serves as an example: his pre-emancipation speaker’s camouflaged assertions about the unsustainability of slavery in a Christian society, with lines such as “de Lawd done dis fu’ Isrul, / An’ his ways don’t nevah change,” would prompt the author’s contemporary readers, if their biases did not stop them at the door of internal investigation, to question whether bigotry or discrimination of any sort can be justified before God. Just as his speaker works under the guise of religious fervor to destabilize the institution of slavery in the Christian South, Dunbar himself challenges the validity of racial prejudice by writing in dialect speech. Simultaneously, though, he makes the proclamations of his speaker fundamentally anachronistic in order to call attention to the contemporary manifestations of how prejudice continues to oppress black thought and expression in America.

This reading of “An Ante-Bellum Sermon” is consistent with much of the more modern scholarship on the poem; for instance, Marcellus Blount remarked in 1992 how Dunbar’s “preacherly text is certainly an antebellum sermon to be understood, in part, within the context of legalized slavery. Yet it is crucial to see that Dunbar is also addressing the issues of the political and economic oppression of blacks at the time he is writing” (590). However, a contrast can be seen in how mid-20th century writers viewed the work. In 1953, Phillip S. Blumberg wrote on Dunbar for *The English Journal*, published by the National Council of Teachers of English, saying, “Most assuredly our growing boys and girls will have their love for democracy deepened and heightened by an acquaintance with such poems as ‘An Ante Bellum Sermon’ ... [which is] full of charm, tenderness, and beauty. The qualities of humor and pathos will be at once

apparent to all” (96). That this tidy, mid-century summation of Dunbar’s value in the American canon should focus on the writer’s perceived “charm, tenderness, and beauty” comes as no great shock, given the reflexive generalizations so often attached to works in the black vernacular voice, but the emphasis on Dunbar’s capacity to reinforce a “love of democracy” within students is more puzzling. Though Blumberg’s mini-review was penned almost fifty years after Dunbar died, clearly the subversive impetus behind “An Ante-Bellum Sermon” still alarmingly went unnoticed by educated white readers.

Though “An Ante-Bellum Sermon” stands out as one of Dunbar’s most assertively subversive dialect poems, some of his other vernacular works, such as “Christmus On The Plantation,” provide more perplexing commentary on American race relations. In this latter piece, the poet tells a post-War story from the perspective of an ex-slave who still works for his old master despite having been free for some time. The speaker opens by noting the dour mood of all the black servants despite the festive nature of the season, noting that “a da’ky’s allus happy when de holidays is neah, / But we wasn’t fu’ dat mo’nin’ Mastah’d tol’ us we mus’ go, / He’d been payin’ us sence freedom, but he couldn’t pay no mo’” (Dunbar 137). When the master and his former slaves are all gathered in sadness together, lamenting the fact that the farm will be sold and all will go their separate ways, “ol’ Ben come[s] f’om the crowd” to state on behalf of all the black workers that they intend to stick with their old master and pitch in to save the plantation:

‘Er in othah wo’ds, you wants us to fu’git dat you’s been kin’,
 An’ ez soon ez you is he’pless, we’s to leave you hyeah behin’.
 Well, ef dat’s de way dis freedom ac’s on people, white er black,
 You kin jes’ tell Mistah Lincum fu’ to tek his freedom back.

‘We gwine wo’k dis ol’ plantation fu’ whatevah we kin git,
 Fu’ I know hit did suppo’t us, an’ de place kin do it yit.
 Now de’ land is yo’s, de hands is ouahs, an’ I reckon we’ll be brave,
 An’ we’ll bah ez much ez you do we’n we has to scrape an’ save” (Dunbar 138).

The speaker notes that Ben’s speech is met with wholesale approval, as “hit seemed to us, de day was bright agin” (Dunbar 138).

In many ways, this poem seems almost to have been written by a different author altogether than that of “An Ante-Bellum Sermon.” Gone are the Biblical condemnations of white supremacy and assertions of black agency, in favor of a story about willful black participation in racial subjugation. In addition to what appears to be tacit acknowledgement of the happy negro caricature, this narrative problematically reinforces an understanding of emancipated black Americans as a compliant, servile class of people willing to go so far as renouncing their independence, with the black servants’ spokesman telling his master that they would rather “Mistah Lincum ... tek his freedom back,” than part from him. In short, “Christmus On The Plantation” could be reasonably interpreted as supporting notions of racial prejudice and inherent black servility, instead of attacking them.

It is certainly tempting to categorize this poem either as an aberration, a mistake that Dunbar no doubt would renounce if given the opportunity today, or even to contend that Dunbar seeks to achieve racial harmony by crafting tales of “sentimentality,” that provide “evidences of virtue which should be brought to the attention of white readers in the hope of appealing to their consciences to stop abusing a people who had served them faithfully,” as argued by Darwin T. Turner (162, 168). Though these theories merit discussion, both of these stances represent a

choice to overlook what Dunbar seeks to accomplish through the piece's thought-provoking reversal of the historic racial power dynamic in America that lies beneath its conciliatory narrative shell. "Christmus On The Plantation" presents, in a microcosm, the nation's traditional racial hierarchy stripped of its power: a white master without neither the money nor the rule of law at his disposal to retain the services of his former slaves. Unlike in "An Ante-Bellum Sermon," where Dunbar targets the institutionally sustained inequality between blacks and whites, here he challenges readers with a scenario in which black men and women, who having once been enslaved themselves know full well the torturous inhumanity of that system, hold the fate of white patriarchy in their hands. When viewed from this perspective, the decision made by Dunbar's black characters to stay and work with their former master to save the plantation seems less subservient, and more empowering than at first glance.

The temporal setting of "Christmus On the Plantation" also has as much bearing on the meaning of its narrative as the pre-War context of "An Ante-Bellum Sermon" does on its message. By having the events of the former poem take place when the black workers who drive its plot are now free citizens, Dunbar gives the weight of agency to their decision to remain loyal to their old master in his times of financial hardship¹⁰. The black workers confront the possibility of moving on from their old plantation from a standpoint of individual liberty; they are living a reality that the black preacher in "An Ante-Bellum Sermon" can only hope to experience. That Dunbar chose to have these black servants stick by their old master out of feelings of loyalty

¹⁰ In his autobiographical *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, Douglass describes the manner in which he changed his name for the final time: "I gave Mr. Johnson the privilege of choosing me a name, but told him he must not take from me the name of 'Frederick.' I must hold on to that, to preserve a sense of my identity" (66). This moment illustrates Douglass's awareness of how one's agency can be maintained and strengthened even when it appears to have been surrendered. A similarly nuanced understanding seems latent within Dunbar's "Christmus On the Plantation," with respect to the former slaves' decision to remain and work alongside their former master.

does admittedly complicate any interpretation of this piece as definitively subversive, but their freedom is an impossible detail to ignore. Though not defiantly assertive, “Chrismus On the Plantation” does portray an instance of black agency that cannot be discounted.

Dunbar’s body of dialect work does not simply represent an oscillation between diametric poles of subversion and sentimentality, though. In fact, the racial commentary that the writer weaves into poems often works precisely because of his delicate handling of the form’s inherently sentimental qualities. In “Accountability,” a shorter piece also featured in *Lyrics of Lowly Life*, Dunbar writes again from the perspective of a slave:

... We is all constructed diff’ent, d’ain’t no two of us de same;
 We cain’t he’p ouah likes and dislikes, ef we’s bad we ain’t to blame.
 Ef we’s good we need n’t show off, case you bet it ain’t ouah doin’
 We gits into su’ttain channels dat we jes’ cain’t he’p pu’suin’

... When you come to think about it, how it’s all planned out it’s splendid.
 Nuthin’s done er evah happens, ‘dout hit’s somefin’ dat’s intended;
 Don’t keer whut you does, you has to, an’ hit sholy beats de dickens, —
 Viney, go put on de kittle, I got one o’mastah’s chickens. (6)

On the surface, this poem portrays the philosophical musings of a speaker who ponders aloud questions of human nature and fate in dialect speech, a narrative almost certainly understood by his contemporary readers as merely a quaint representation of slave life, or at the very least a work meant simply to entertain rather than inform. Some modern critics even fall prey to interpretive underestimation: for instance, Joanne Gabbin classifies this work as being one of Dunbar’s “confessional poems,” claiming, “it is clear that Dunbar was aware of the mandates of

the religion he embraced. That knowledge of sin and transgressions, of which he often made light, convicted him mightily when his own transgressions nipped at his heel, as in ‘Accountability’” (229). Though religious motivation may have played a part in Dunbar’s creative process, simply categorizing “Accountability” as an affirmation of divine ordination borne out of Christian guilt misses his point entirely.

Though the tone and speech of the speaker in “Accountability” may seem both simplistically rustic and religiously fervent to some, Dunbar actually lends these qualities to his poem’s narrator in order to build momentum for a subversive turn in the final line. With lines like “We is all constructed diff’ent, d’ain’t no two of us de same; / We cain’t he’p ouah likes and dislikes, ef we’s bad we ain’t to blame,” in a way that could resemble a potential validation of inequality and segregation; after all, racial prejudice manifests itself through the stigmatization of racial difference. Yet, the speaker undermines all this talk with his ending statement, “I got one o’ mastah’s chickens.” This concluding revelation illustrates how the speaker’s echoing of a prejudicially problematic worldview was delivered tongue-in-cheek while he stole from his master’s estate. Writing for a post-slavery audience, Dunbar depicts a theft that represents not only a subtle act of quotidian rebellion by a slave against his master, but also a metaphorical destabilization of the rhetoric that fuels the institutionalized white supremacy under which the enslaved man suffers.

Importantly, while Dunbar clearly achieves a remarkable degree of legibility as a black writer through his dialect poetry, he, like many of his black contemporaries, had the subversive message of his work distorted and glossed over by the white editors and critics of the time. The influence of racially prejudiced editorial authority on Dunbar specifically is most clearly evident in his relationship to William Dean Howells. Howells is commonly credited with introducing

Dunbar's work to literate America through his review of *Majors and Minors*, Dunbar's second book of poetry, published in 1896 (Jarrett 495).¹¹ The significance of this endorsement warrants acknowledgment, for it lent Dunbar a certain social and professional legitimacy that at the time could sadly come only through white appreciation. Gene Jarrett notes that, "Cultural institutions like journals, magazines and newspapers, and marketing apparatuses turned Dunbar into a racial phenomenon," in the wake of Howells's review (521). The piece clearly served a lasting role in representing Dunbar's work to the public, as well, for it would eventually be edited to serve as a preface to Dunbar's *Lyrics of Lowly Life*, a collection containing, among other pieces, "An Antebellum Sermon" (Jarrett 523). For good or ill, Dunbar had Howells to thank for his overnight ascension into literary fame.

Further examination of Howells's review reveals that however well-intentioned the white critic may have been, he chose to ignore the capacity of dialect literature as a means for black American writers to convey serious thought, and even the necessity for unfettered black voices in social discourse, in favor of a more palatable, conciliatory reading of Dunbar and others. In the revised version of his *Harper's Weekly* review of *Majors and Minors* that accompanied *Lyrics of Lowly Life*, Howells claims, "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 its own accent of our English" (Jarrett 512). Howells's statement here betrays a feeling of obligation to a strict racial dichotomy, and a desire to perpetuate a differentiation between the two races in order to remain assured in his understanding of a superior white American identity.

¹¹ "When Dunbar dropped off the book at Herne's hotel, the thought that Herne would hand *Majors and Minors* to Howells, who would then review the book for *Harper's Weekly* and thereby launch Dunbar's literary career, was far-fetched, to say the least. Remarkably, these events occurred in this exact way" (Jarrett 495).

He admires Dunbar's dialect work for the "charmingly suggested" way in which he feels it distinguishes the two races as separated by a "difference of temperament," and the very thought of society ceasing to acknowledge this dissimilarity frightens him. Illustrating the prevalence of white anxieties over the security of their racial hegemony in a post-slavery society, Howells appreciates Dunbar's black voice not for its voice but for its blackness, its otherness, its "own accent" of what Howells sees as the white man's language.

Michael Cohen attempts to outline Howells's desire for stark racial delineation here as simply a linguistic distinction by which "racial difference" can be maintained, stating that, "Blackness, in Howells's definition, was an 'accent' of 'our English,' an oral/aural construct, and the sounds of race were visually materialized on the page by printed dialect" (251). Cohen's assessment of the critic seems largely appropriate, but falls somewhat short of acknowledging how this understanding of black dialect literature inherits an interpretive paradox. Howells, and all who view black dialect as valuable for the ways in which it contrasts the whiteness of standard English that they hold dear, cannot view blackness as "an oral/aural construct" with inherent differences worth highlighting without also noticing the difference of authorial perspective provided by black writers. For someone to read "An Ante-Bellum Sermon," in the post-slavery era as Howells would have done, with its powerful condemnation of racial oppression, and its assertion of black intellectual and spiritual agency, as being valuable solely for the blackness of its language requires either fundamentally misunderstanding or deliberately choosing to ignore the author's expressions about what it means to be black in America. In Howells's case, neglecting to appreciate the black experience as much as he does black dialect seems intentional. Elsewhere in the review, the critic lauds Dunbar for demonstrating "white thinking and white feeling in a black man" (Andrews 333), with the "white" descriptor clearly

representing something positive and worth aspiring to, while the author's "black" racial identity exists merely as an obstacle to literary accomplishment that must be overcome by any writer of color in order to be taken seriously. Ironically, Howells seeks to commend African American dialect literature as noteworthy for its blackness, but can only bring himself to perceive whiteness in its message.

These problematic sentiments of Howells extend well beyond his review of *Majors and Minors*; his feelings about black writers' function within society are well documented, and underscore the delusional nature of his approach to Dunbar's work. William Andrews notes:

Through his reviews of Dunbar's poetry, Chesnut's first stories, and [Booker T.] Washington's autobiography, Howells developed a fairly consistent psychological profile of the Afro-American consciousness, one which emphasized the black man's 'conservative' temperament, his positive outlook, his 'patience' in the face of injustice, his 'unfailing sense of humor,' and his freedom from 'bitterness' and subversive impulses. (335)

As was the case with much of the positive feedback received by black writers of the time, Howells seeks to elevate Dunbar and his contemporaries only so far as they may be understood as placating intermediaries between the races, voices given no real agency aside from the bare minimum necessary that allows interpretation of their work to assuage the anxieties of white xenophobia. Leaving Douglass and Washington aside, the terminology with which Howells attempts to categorize Dunbar, and through him black America at large, simply does not align with the "subversive impulses" readily found in the latter's dialect poetry. Though likely

intended as uplifting, the critic's emphasis on the "patience" and "unfailing sense of humor"¹² he derives from black writers reflects his own unwillingness to confront the uncomfortable truths offered forth in this literature. Howells's compliments are by nature deficient, for he seeks to acknowledge Dunbar's tolerance without recognizing the criticism the poet levies at the social forces he must tolerate, those of racial prejudice and discrimination.

That Howells, Dunbar's foremost supporter within the literary world's upper echelon, could not bring himself to fully comprehend the import of Dunbar's vernacular works points to the troubling dilemma facing black artists who work in dialect. Clearly, the form possesses tremendous potential for racial commentary and social criticism, as the preceding examination of "An Ante-Bellum Sermon," "Christus On the Plantation," and "Accountability" has shown. Any reading these of works as purely sentimental snapshots of African American culture and language misses the point entirely; yet, as in the case of Howells, readers often choose, intentionally or reflexively, to categorize dialect works as such rather than allowing the author's provocative message to take hold of their racial pre-conceptions and shake them to their core. The impressive achievement of Dunbar, and, as discussed in the next chapter, of Kendrick Lamar, is the black artist's successful navigation of the boundary between the stereotypical and the subversive, between portraying the black American experience that audiences pay to read or hear about, and the black American reality that the artist seeks to make the audience engage with.

¹² "In 'going before the master,' the enslaved were required to sing or dance for the slave owner's pleasure as well as to demonstrate their submission, obsequiousness, and obedience. What was demanded by the master was simulated by the enslaved" (Saidiya Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection* 8).

Chapter Three

“You Vandalize My Perception but Can’t Take Style From Me”: Reading Kendrick Lamar’s

Lyrics As Poetic Subversion of Rap’s Racial Stereotypes



Paul Laurence Dunbar wrote in dialect at a time when vernacular literature was a cultural phenomenon in the United States, yet many white readers and critics either disparaged works like Dunbar's out of fears about dialect's influence on the sanctity of their language and the nation's moral fiber, or tried to cite them as evidence for the validity of racist tropes and generalizations about African Americans. Though his work and circumstances are far from wholly analogous to those of his predecessor, Kendrick Lamar's rap lyrics inhabit a similar artistic space. Lamar, like Dunbar, subverts marginalizing conceptions of black Americans within a popular but traditionally black poetic form often considered low art by critics, while his capacity for socio-political expression is often both discredited and devalued by prejudiced audiences.

Alongside the *Playing In the Dark* excerpt from Toni Morrison, a second source plays a key role here helping make sense of white anxieties about black rap music, this one a quotation by sociologists Scott Appelrouth and Crystal Kelly, who in their article, "Rap, Race and the (Re)Production of Boundaries," a 2013 piece published in *Sociological Perspectives*, assert that:

It was precisely [rap] music's foreignness—its blackness—that was at the root of its boundary transgressions and thus its threat. But it was not only rap's style that was different, so too was its message and those who delivered it. ... If "whites were 'nervous' if not 'afraid'" of rap it was because the music's growing popularity was viewed through a conceptual prism that symbolically reproduced the boundaries of a longstanding racial hierarchy in which whites were "pure" and thus vulnerable to the "pollution" of blacks.

(321)

This isolation of the "blackness" of rap as the root of the apprehension demonstrated by white critics of the genre fits in well with both Morrison's ideas about the formation of white

America's self-perception, and the previously examined desire of William Dean Howells to foster the growth of non-subversive, conciliatory black literature through Dunbar's vernacular poetry. White denigrators of black rap regurgitate earlier white criticism of black dialect unconsciously, but directly, because the sanctity of the white American language, and by extension, culture, that both seek to preserve can only be defined in opposition to the inherent blackness that dialect literature once, and rap music currently, gives voice to. When considered in tandem, the analytical lens that Morrison provides and the sociological perspective offered up by Appelrouth and Kelly combine to provide an ideal framework within which to situate white criticism of Kendrick Lamar, and black rap music as a whole.

The reception that black American dialect literature received around the turn of the twentieth century parallels closely that of the rap music of black artists in the United States from the last quarter of the twenty-first century through to the present, both in terms of its popularity and the social discourse it inspires. Rap is the single most listened-to style of music in the nation today: in 2017, "the R&B/hip-hop genre represented 24.5 percent of all music consumption in the U.S. – the largest share of any genre"¹³ (Caulfield). Similar to the manner in which dialect literature became one of the most socially influential art forms in the nation, rap has ascended into a place of equal, and perhaps even greater, cultural ubiquity. Intriguingly, yet unsurprisingly, the same linguistic and moral concerns have been raised about rap that were once levied against vernacular writings. For instance, the genre's value as an art form was dismissed when it first entered America's social consciousness. A *Los Angeles Times* piece published back in July of 1990, during the early stages of rap's commercial and cultural development, stated that

¹³ "The 24.5 percent share represents a combination of album sales, track equivalent album units and streaming equivalent album units – *including both on-demand audio and video streams* [author's emphasis]" (Caulfield)

“Rap ‘is not music in any definition of the word. This is garbage, it’s boring and insulting to anyone of any intelligence at all! There’s no ‘art’ in all this. Not even time will vindicate such an assault on the senses” (Appelrouth and Kelly 316).

Though this writer’s simplistic dismissal of rap did little to impede the genre’s rise into an industry powerhouse, objections to rap over the its often-violent subject matter¹⁴ and obscene language have continually been raised, most notably by white listeners. Rachel E. Sullivan, in her 2003 piece entitled “Rap and Race: It’s Got a Nice Beat, but What about the Message?” for the *Journal of Black Studies*, writes that:

Of particular interest are the criticisms leveled by White politicians, almost all of whom viewed rap as producing potential victimizers. Vice President Dan Quayle attacked rapper Tupac Shakur for promoting violence. President George H. W. Bush also voiced his antirap (anti-Black) sentiments when he criticized Ice-T and Body Count’s song ‘Cop Killer.’ (Ironically, neither politician had heard these albums; in fact, Dan Quayle did not even pronounce Tupac’s name correctly, and Bush failed to realize that Body Count was in fact a heavy metal group.) (607-608)

The opinions of Quayle and Bush illustrate the significant extent to which a perception of rap as a morally corrosive art form has infected white America¹⁵, but they also highlight a fundamental ignorance within such critiques. Quayle’s mispronunciation of Tupac’s name and Bush’s faulty categorization of the band Body Count together reveal a lack of consideration of import of the

¹⁴ In their 2009 article in *Sociological Forum*, researchers Gwen Hunnicutt and Kristy Humble Andrews stated, “The idea that violent music precipitates violence in society is pervasive,” and “There is little doubt that rap serves as a key contributing factor in the social construction of African-American culture” (613).

¹⁵ “Rappers, industry insiders, and fans noted that it was not until rap gained a white listenership that civic authorities and moral entrepreneurs began their calls to censor the music as a ‘threat’ to society” (Appelrouth and Kelly 320).

stories told through rap, and the significance of rap as an artistic outlet for social expression. Crucially, rap's detractors benefit from the preservation of this knowledge gap that enables them to malign the genre without understanding it. If rap as a whole can be solidified in public perception as a destructive force on the moral fiber of society, then any socio-political expression, any cultural criticism, any attacks on white hegemony latent within the songs can more easily be dismissed or ignored. This deliberate stigmatization, not coincidentally, mirrors that faced by black writers of dialect literature more than a century ago. Just as Dunbar and his contemporaries wrote in a time where "the misrepresentation of African-American dialect ... was a popular means of encoding racist beliefs in black intellectual inferiority" (*Strange Talk* 10), black rappers face the same challenge of creating art for an audience that includes many people who choose to hide behind complaints of vulgarity and immorality that allow them to view the genre in caricature, thus validating their own personal prejudice and inoculating themselves against any assault on their xenophobic worldview.

Neither success nor fame exempted Dunbar from having to balance the conflicting demands of wanting free personal expression and needing to work around audience expectations, and Kendrick Lamar is no different. The 30-year-old rapper, born Kendrick Lamar Duckworth in Compton, California, has accomplished nearly everything an aspiring musician could dream of attempting: four studio albums, three of which are certified platinum with one gold¹⁶; 29 Grammy Award nominations, including twelve wins, for everything from Best New Artist back in 2014 to Best Rap Album in this year's cycle; and even a full-length soundtrack accompanying Ryan Coogler's 2018 film, *Black Panther*, heavily featuring his own work (Tiffany).

¹⁶ Statistics courtesy of the Recording Industry Association of America (RIAA).

Despite his having earned all of these accolades and acclamations, Lamar's work draws much criticism from white cultural purists who object to the content of his lyrics, using interpretations that distort the work to fit racist pre-conceptions, and in doing so exhibit their own insecurity about the subversive nature of his songwriting. *Fox News* anchor Laura Ingraham provided a telling example of this reality in her interview with *Vibe* magazine's editor-in-chief, Datwon Thomas, on November 28, 2017. While discussing the Grammy nominations received by Kendrick Lamar for his album *DAMN.*, and fellow rapper Jay-Z, Ingraham attempts to discredit and disparage the work of both artists, asking, "Are the lyrics of Kendrick ... what our kids need to be hearing?," and, "is that music particularly good for young, especially young men today, of any race, of any background?" ("Rap Music"). Her evident paranoia about the work of Lamar and others resembles the xenophobic anxieties felt in early-nineteenth-century New England homes about how dialect stories may corrupt their children, as noted in Gavin Jones's *Strange Talk* (1). Importantly, like Bush and Quayle, Ingraham's understanding of the music she criticizes appears superficial to say the least. She claims to have listened to both Lamar's and Jay-Z's latest albums "several times," but cannot even remember their correct titles on air, first confusing the title of Jay-Z's song "The Story of O.J." for the larger work's name, and then stating that Lamar's latest album is "oxymoronically entitled "Humble," when in fact its title is *DAMN.* ("Rap Music"). In addition, though she first expresses concern for how rap music will affect all of America's youth, regardless of race, when she provides an example of a vulnerable young mind later on it is that of a "gang banger in Chicago," a description which, though not stated explicitly, certainly insinuates that Lamar's songs will lead young black Americans into a life of crime rather than away from it ("Rap Music"). From the *Los Angeles Times* in 1990 to *Fox News* in 2017, rap has been caricatured to the point of absurdity by those

too dependent upon their own racial prejudice to engage with rap's lyrical content and allow their limited conceptualization of the black American experience to be troubled.

Among its many interesting facets, Kendrick Lamar's music stands out for its resistance to typification. Fully cognizant of the white critical tendency to look within rap lyrics for confirmation of their assumptions about black rap artists being pro-drug, pro-gang activity, and pro-violence, Lamar actively subverts these expectations within his art, and often in ways that the casual listener would miss or dismiss. Take, for example, the track "m.A.A.d city" from his 2012 album, *good kid, m.A.A.d city*, which peaked at tenth on *Billboard's* "Hot Rap Songs" chart ("Chart History"): Lamar's first verse begins with the lines, "Brace yourself, I'll take you on a trip down memory lane / This is not a rap on how I'm slingin' crack or move cocaine / This is cul-de-sac and plenty Cognac and major pain / Not the drill sergeant, but the stress that weighin' on your brain." From the beginning, the artist establishes this song as a personal narrative, connecting it to the oral tradition of storytelling that so frequently appears in dialect literature, while also distancing himself and the track from any perceived endorsement of drug dealing. In fact, on the latter point he actually direction the listener's attention towards the trauma and anxiety suffered by the Compton community as the result of drug-fueled gang activity, through the end-rhyming of "cocaine" and "pain." Not allowing for the possibility of his intentions being distorted, Lamar uses these early lines to delineate the aims of his song's social commentary and disarm assertions of its promotion of violence.

With the rest of this first verse Lamar delivers his story of witnessing the aftermath of a murder when he was a child, while poetically accentuating the tragically interwoven nature of violence within his community. The rapper states:

Seen a light-skinned nigga with his brains blown out

At the same burger stand where *beep* hang out
 Now this is not a tape recorder sayin' that he did it
 But ever since that day, I was lookin' at him different
 That was back when I was nine, Joey packed the nine
 Pakistan on every porch is fine, we adapt to crime
 Pack a van with four guns at a time ...
 A wall of bullets comin' from AK's, AR's, "Ayy, y'all, duck!"
 That's what Momma said when we was eatin' the free lunch. ("m.A.A.d city")

Lyrically, this section displays Lamar's impressively diverse skillset as a poet, while compelling his audience to consider acts of gang-related violence alongside its effects on the domestic sphere. The repetition of "nine" to refer both to his age and a .9mm caliber handgun underscores the troublingly regular presence of violence in his life at a young age, and the following internal rhyming of "Pakistan" and "Pack a van" from the next two lines continues this conceptual fusing together of Compton's gang-activity and its impact on the daily lives of the community's black citizens. Lamar even utilizes the spoken nature of rap as an art form to reinforce this connection, by pronouncing the two syllables of "AR's" almost identically to those in "Ayy, y'all", phonetically blending the acronym for an assault rifle with his mother's warning. In just part of one verse, Lamar uses multiple poetic devices and pronunciation similarities to create three moments where listeners must consider how violent crime and gang activity pushed their way into every element of his personal life growing up, and the lives of those around him. In no way glorifying the destructive forces present within his community, here the rapper subverts surface-level interpretation of his lyrics, and presses the audience to understand the extent to which his upbringing, and that of black youth in similar circumstances, was shaped by uninvited trauma.

In this track's final verse, Lamar switches out of past-tense storytelling and addresses the audience directly in order to question the manner in which they interpret his lyrics, thereby undermining and interrogating the prejudices behind race- and genre-based generalization of rap music. Worth noting is the sonic shift that occurs in this portion of the song: Lamar's voice, which has been centrally stationed in the listener's ears throughout, now pans back and forth from left to right while being pitched up and down. The motion created by these audio manipulations heightens the change in narrative perspective, and makes the audience work harder to track Lamar's voice as it moves, ensuring that he has their full attention in this concluding section, which he begins by asking:

If I told you I killed a nigga at sixteen, would you believe me?

Or see me to be innocent Kendrick you seen in the street

With a basketball and some Now and Laters to eat?

If I mentioned all of my skeletons, would you jump in the seat?

Would you say my intelligence now is great relief?

And it's safe to say that our next generation maybe can sleep

With dreams of bein' a lawyer or doctor

Instead of boy with a chopper that hold the cul-de-sac hostage. ("m.A.A.d city")

Lamar breaks the fourth wall in this verse to set up a hypothetical for his listeners, asking if their perception of him would change if he admitted to having participated in the violence that his first two verses describe, or if his being famous and articulate exempts him from guilt in their eyes, which would enable listeners to avoid the uncomfortable truths of his message. Elements of this line of questioning demonstrate authorial awareness of the highly racial manner in which rap

music is viewed by white audiences, as asserted by Appelrouth and Kelly¹⁷: if white listeners take Lamar's success along with what they perceive as his "innocence" and "intelligence," and use these attributes to convince themselves that the "next generation" of black youth can freely aspire to becoming "a lawyer or doctor," this would allow them to hold up Lamar as an African-American success story without acknowledging the validity of his message regarding the deeply traumatic nature of his upbringing. By directly provoking audience consideration of this possibility, Lamar denies them any opportunity to use his current status to whitewash his past, a past that he knows is shared by many other black men and women in America, and one he hopes to call attention to in order that it may eventually not be the requisite future of the "next generation."

Later on in this concluding verse, Lamar provides perhaps the track's most sophisticated injection of social commentary in the form of a literary allusion that could almost go by unnoticed within the couplet, "The Children of the Corn, they vandalizin' the option / Of livin' a lie, drown their body with toxins" ("m.A.A.d city"). Still speaking of the black youth of Compton, the "next generation" mentioned just prior, his description of them matches the title of a Stephen King short story called "Children of the Corn,"¹⁸ in which a community of youths all choose to kill themselves before reaching adulthood in order to please a pitiless deity who

¹⁷ Appelrouth and Kelly also note that generally rap has been "Defined as a low/coarse/banal and black music, rap, its musicians, and its listeners were demarcated from musics, musicians, and listeners who were by implicit or explicit contrast elevated/refined/exceptional" (303). Lamar seeks to prevent people from classifying him as "elevated/refined/exceptional," which could create distance in their minds between his experience and the black American reality that he depicts.

¹⁸ In this work of fiction, a married couple pass through the small rural city of Gatlin, Nebraska, and are killed upon discovering that the town has been taken over by a cult of youths who all commit ritual self-sacrifice upon reaching the age of nineteen in worship of He Who Walks Behind the Rows, an omniscient supernatural being who, in punishment, lowers the sacrificial age to eighteen at the story's end ("Children of the Corn," *Stephen King Wiki*).

demands it of them. With this highly specific reference, Lamar delivers a subtle yet powerful metaphor for how he views life in Compton. The rapper sees the way in which the black youths of his community engage in violence and gang activity as similar to how the isolated, racially homogenous (white) Children of the Corn participate in a death pact: a culture is being imposed upon each group that corrupts their innocence and drives them to violence,¹⁹ perpetuating a cycle of killing amongst themselves. By reaching into the canon of one of the most widely disseminated white American authors ever to draw this nuanced comparison, Lamar also orients his message in a context that the white portion of his audience are more likely to understand and appreciate. Through the inclusion of this reference in his final verse, Lamar ensures that “m.A.A.d city” cannot simply be heard or read as stereotypically glorifying violence or crime in black communities, instead calling attention to the troubling and traumatic nature of the environment in which many black children in Compton and elsewhere are forced to grow up, all while using a variety of poetic devices, shifting narrative perspective, and literary allusion to subvert and interrogate audience expectations.

Lamar’s versatility as an artist is evident not only within individual tracks, but within his discography as a whole. In no way reliant solely on storytelling, some of his most insightful and thought-provoking songs take on the form of direct address to the audience, such as in “The Blacker the Berry,” from his 2015 album, *To Pimp a Butterfly*. In this track, Lamar speaks on the modern racial dynamic in the United States, first addressing the prejudicial and exploitative elements of white American society, then talking to his fellow black citizens, and finally himself, all the while undermining the racial tropes and caricatures that he recognizes have been used to

¹⁹ It hardly seems an accident that the leader of the Children of the Corn, Isaac, is mentioned as being nine years old, the same age as Lamar when the violent events that inspire this song’s first verse occur: “That was back when I was nine, Joey packed the nine.”

marginalize black Americans. In the first verse, directed seemingly at a white xenophobic audience, Lamar reclaims black identity through the defiant espousal of racial stereotypes. By owning aspects of his heritage that white society has traditionally used to discriminate against and denigrate black people, the artist disarms attempts at othering his music and his culture through caricature. He raps:

I'm African-American, I'm African

I'm black as the moon, heritage of a small village

Pardon my residence

Came from the bottom of mankind

My hair is nappy, my dick is big, my nose is round and wide

You hate me don't you?

You hate my people, your plan is to terminate my culture

You're fuckin' evil I want you to recognize that I'm a proud monkey

You vandalize my perception but can't take style from me. ("The Blacker the Berry")

Importantly, Lamar begins his repossession of black identity in the first line of this excerpt by demanding the titles of both "African-American" and "African," thus asserting himself as a member of American society while simultaneously embracing his African ancestry, which itself has historically been used as grounds for others to deny him the rights and privileges of the former designation. The following phrase, "I'm black as the moon" also presents a clever racial metaphor, given that the moon has both light and dark sides of the same whole. His ensuing listing of physical attributes that he possesses reclaims them as aspects of the African ethnic identity he feels worth celebrating in spite of their adherence to stereotypes. By emphatically

owning both these characteristics and his African roots, Lamar disrupts the prejudicial conception of blackness as a shameful otherness.

For Lamar, this retrieval of his heritage and the physical traits often associated with it is necessary to counteract what he perceives as systemic discrimination and exploitation of black Americans. The direct address of either “You” or “You’re” that begins each of the last four lines of this excerpt shift the artist’s focus away from his personal acceptance and embracement of blackness, and towards the societal forces that have long stood in opposition. His interrogation of the audience over their “hate” towards black Americans reads as rhetorical, as he points towards intentions to “terminate [his] culture” and “vandalize [his] perception” as part of the struggle he faces for simply being black in America. Laura Ingraham’s denial of rap’s merit in public discourse on the grounds of moral concerns is emblematic of the vandalizing tendency that Lamar seeks to expose and contradict. In a sense, Lamar uses this first verse to seize hold of the American perception of blackness, for centuries defined by the anxieties and expectations of white hegemony, and refashion it in a mold of self-worth. The artist’s reference to himself as “a proud monkey” encapsulates his purpose for this verse in one phrase: taking ownership of the black American identity by embracing the generalizations typically used to lower society’s opinion of blackness, thus weakening their efficacy.

Though the intended audience appears to remain the same in the second verse of “The Blacker the Berry,” Lamar turns his focus towards American expectations of black participation in the social hierarchy:

I mean, it’s evident that I’m irrelevant to society

That’s what you’re telling me, penitentiary would only hire me

Curse me till I’m dead

Church me with your fake prophesizing that I'mma be just another slave in my head

Institutionalized manipulation and lies

Reciprocation of freedom only live in your eyes

The rapper's employment of religious terms in these lines is tellingly reminiscent of Dunbar's "An Ante-Bellum Sermon," as here again Christian language is being used antithetically to one of its tragic historical purposes: to perpetuate the subjugation of black people through indoctrination. By stating that blacks are "Church[ed]" with "fake prophesizing" to believe in their own collective insignificance, he connects this modern manifestation of racial oppression with the type of pacifying proselytization that Dunbar exposes and destabilizes through his speaker's counter-slavery interpretation of the Bible. With this track, Lamar actively seeks to subvert not only racial stereotypes, but also the same religious mechanisms of subjection that Dunbar challenged over a century prior. Introspective as well as socially critical, Lamar's "The Blacker the Berry" radically repossesses the African American identity from its history of xenophobic detractors, denounces the institutional oppression that continues to plague black people in America, and empowers Lamar's fellow African Americans to feel inspired by their heritage and their humanity as they seek to address the violence that he knows all too well.

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Though Kendrick Lamar and Paul Laurence Dunbar do not write and perform in an identical manner or for identical audiences, the ways in which they each push back against white America's intentional misconception of blackness, destabilizing the oppressive generalizations and stereotypes that continue to be placed upon black Americans, unite their art despite the century of time that separates them. What Lamar accomplishes in "m.A.A.d city" and "The Blacker the Berry," countering the anxious categorization of rap music as pro-drug and pro-

violence while reclaiming the worth of blackness, ought to be viewed as an extension of the work done by Dunbar in “An Ante-Bellum Sermon,” “Accountability,” and even “Christmas on the Plantation,” to return a vital agency to black characters and challenge the structures of white hegemony whose influence suppressed the voice of even an acclaimed author such as himself. Neither artist exists in a vacuum, and though their efforts have certainly influenced the lives of many, the fact that Dunbar’s struggle to elevate our nation’s collective understanding of blackness while undermining white prejudicial authority continues today illustrates the ongoing dissonance in our society between the widespread recognition of these black poets and the shallow cultural engagement with the subversive content of their poetry. It is my hope that the literary mode of rap music, led by Kendrick Lamar and others, will continue to reject marginalization while stimulating productive change at every level of American policy and society. Our responsibility as an audience, scholarly or otherwise, is to ensure that we do not, to borrow from Morrison one last time, align ourselves with those who, “seem to take pleasure in, indeed relish, their ignorance of African-American texts,” instead allowing the thought-provoking nature of rap lyrics to unsettle our society’s collective perceptions, and to expose the fragilities of racial prejudice and oppression that have been comfortably ignored or enabled throughout our nation’s history.

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