

**Master Players In A Fixed Game: An Extra-Literary History of  
Twentieth Century African-American Authors**

by  
**Ralph DeWitt Story**

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*Master Players In A Fixed Game*  
*An Extra-Literary History of*  
*Twentieth Century African-American*  
*Authors*  
*1896 – 1981*

*By*  
*Ralph DeWitt Story*

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment  
Of the requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Arts  
(English Language & Literature)

Doctoral Committee:

Professor Alan Howes, Chairman  
Professor William Alexander, Co-Chairman  
Associate Professor Murray Jackson  
Professor Lemuel Johnson

To my loving parents, Jean and Ralph Story  
Sr., my wife Sylvia, my beautiful daughter,  
Kaila Adia, and my students whose belief  
and confidence in me gave me the strength  
and courage to complete this doctoral project.

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## INTRODUCTION

In a recent issue of the *New York Times Review of Books* (February, 1981) there is an article by Mel Watkins titled, "Hard Times For Black Writers," which outlines the current difficulty black creative writers have getting published. <sup>1</sup> Watkins was perhaps hindered by the spatial constraints which typically limit the depth and breadth of magazine articles, for had he probed the question in a more historical manner with his interview subjects, all of whom are professional writers (John A. Williams, Ishmael Reed, Toni Morrison, Quincy Troupe, etc.) he and numerous readers would have perceived the present dilemma as the *norm* and not just a contemporary phenomenon in need of cursory explanation. What probably baffled Watkins, however, and what perplexes many of us who have long been interested in and/or affected by this recent development, is how—in light of the tremendous outpouring of works by black writers during the late 1960s / early 1970s—the situation for black writers has changed so dramatically, so swiftly in just seven to eight years? To answer this question and the questions implied by the article one really has to look no further than the mass media. By merely watching television, listening to the radio, going to the movies, or scanning the daily newspapers one can see that black artists and black art are nowhere near as visible as they were ten years ago for various reasons. Ishmael Reed has identified a primary one: ". . . with the conservative tone of the political scene now, nobody wants to become involved with it." <sup>2</sup> The "it" Reed was referring to has layers of meaning. On the one hand he was alluding to the "black problem" and books by black writers which address that "problem". But Reed was also talking about books written by black writers about black people. At the very heart of this interpretation is the fact that the "black problem", books by black writers, and books by black writers about black people are inseparable in the American psyche, and publishers are—despite their wide diversity—representative of American opinion and taste. If they are not, they at least have the power to point millions of American readers in specific directions. And at this point in time, books by black writers are books which most American publishers are not thrilled

about publishing because they do not believe American readers are very interested in “Black” subject matter.

An in-depth search through African-American historiography would reveal that black folk have repeatedly been subjected to the whimsical, but definite changes in the political, social and cultural milieu of American life. And black writers have, for the most part, fared no better. This subset issue, however, has not received sufficient or exhaustive scrutiny because as Harold Cruse has said, “in our historical view, the cultural approach to the black struggle was not (and still is not) as crucial or important in our historical experience” as the struggle of the black masses. Thus, to understand the contemporary African American writer’s struggle it is first necessary to explore the historical development and institutionalization of racism in the twentieth century, the dependency of all writers on publishing institutions to get their works to the public, the pervasive ignorance regarding African American history—its omission and estrangement from “mainstream” American history—and how all of these factors have had a uniquely adverse and residual impact on twentieth century African American writers and readers of African American literature.

Black writers have been, are, and will be black people. Understanding this simple and obvious fact allows the social critic to at once understand some of the general-specific conditions and experiences of African American writers as inevitably a part of the broader, collective moments of a people engaged in a struggle—a struggle for freedom, equality and respect. And since David Walker’s time<sup>3</sup> it has been clear that black writers have provided the more germane, diverse descriptions of this conflict. So it is that the black writer’s expression—no matter the form, content, or delivery system for that expression—has been suppressed (David Walker’s *Appeal*, 1829), ignored (Paul Laurence Dunbar’s non-fictional prose), or embraced (R. Wright’s *Native Son*, Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man*) haphazardly / transiently because it is dependent upon the dominant culture’s media apparatus, for the most part, to achieve visibility and

recognition. Well-known cases in point would be the publication of many books by black writers from 1923-1932 referred to as the Harlem Renaissance, or Harlem Awakening, and the prolific outpouring of books by black writers during the Black Arts Movement of the late 1960s-early 1970s.

In both of these eras the initial impetus for the surge of creativity came from the energy and aspirations of black people, with members from their group serving primarily as spokespersons to the people and secondarily to a dominant culture suddenly interested in what blacks were thinking and doing. But this interest has been periodic and not consistent; it also seems to be linked to turmoil in the streets since both creative periods for black writers were preceded by riots in numerous American towns and cities in 1919 and from 1964-1968.<sup>4</sup> Yet when the dominant culture's interest waned--in the aftermath of the Awakening as a result of the Great Depression and again in the mid-point of the 1970s due to seemingly insoluble conflicts and disinterest--black writers experienced, as Watkins has said, "hard times." It is the recording of this fact that has gone typically unnoticed, as if history (or better yet, the literary historian) looks kindly upon some facts and frowns upon others. Indeed, had not George Orwell and James Joyce, as Richard Kostelanetz has pointed out, taken the time to document their trials and tribulations of getting books to readers, the record on literary politics would not be nearly as complete since both were and are considered to be highly successful writers. "De facto censorship" has not just affected African American authors:

What Orwell exposed was not the familiar kind of censorship that occurs after publication, but the more subtle and less visible blockage that publishers exercise among themselves, largely on their own initiative. . . .

Ten years of my life have been consumed in correspondence and litigation about my book *Dubliners*: It was rejected by 40 publishers; three times set up, and once burnt. It cost me about 3,000 francs in postage, fees, train and boat fare, for I was in correspondence with 110 newspapers, 7 solicitors, 3 societies, 40 publishers and seven men of letters about it. . . 5

African American writers, because they are African Americans, have been obligated to participate in the contemporary politics which affect their people and, subsequently, their books. Even the past, history itself, is an area of disputes, a mine-field of arguments over what happened to black folk before the invention of television.

In the case of black folk, recorded history in the minds and craft of most western historians is full of huge, gaping holes which are just now being filled. American History treats African Americans as if their existence in the U.S. has been incidental, of tertiary importance. Or more recently history includes a few black historical figures as token participants in the American saga to placate the 1960s charges of biased textbooks. A more relevant point was raised by Lerone Bennett when he said “the true American history has not been written.” And in an imaginative sense the great Chicano fiction writer M. Mendez has said “history disdains those nations who do not flatter her with offers of gold and power.” 6

History serves the purpose of those who write it and black historians have only reluctantly been given the opportunity to write a history of their people that would reach millions of white American readers. *Roots* became a phenomenon for this very reason; nothing remotely resembling African American history had ever reached the American masses. Yet *Roots* was, in Haley’s own words, “faction.” (Haley coined the term in a *Playboy* interview since his work is part fact, part fiction.) The as yet unwritten literary history of African American authors is an unavailable resource. This means serious students and readers of African American literature must read many different (and diffident) books to gain even a skeletal understanding of the historical conditions and experiences of African American writers.

More often than not the black historian becomes in the process of his work, a “revisionist “ historian and as a consequence, his works are in conflict with dominant

culture versions of the past whenever they touch upon the historical conditions and experiences of black folk. This has had a definite impact on twentieth century African American authors.

The black American writer, conscious of how little information most readers have about black life at their disposal, has had a dual role to play for many years. S/he has had to be both imagist and revisionist: opponent of the palatable, “sanitized” Eurocentric version of history which relegates Blacks, Indians, Chicanos and Puerto Ricans to footnote status, as well as the craftsperson grappling with aesthetic problems which have their resolution in the imaginative responses to life—what it means and has meant to those sensitive and perceptive enough to recreate it.

Certainly this conflict between “real” history and the social history produced in “fiction” has not received the kind of critical attention it deserves. In fact, in the public domain it is as if these categories are created arbitrarily to resolve debates about the reality of the past captured in TV mini-series like *Holocaust* and *Roots*, since, as Nell Painter has asserted, to most persons “ history is the history they read in textbooks. “ Consequently, African American scholars have been involved in a perpetual (but behind the scenes) intellectual disagreement with their majority population historian colleagues (and likewise their imaginative counterparts who write fiction such as William Styron) over what constitutes “history.” This has been an increasingly paradoxical struggle that has strained and estranged the black writer from an audience which, absent any detailed information about black life, has been victimized by the dominant culture’s virtually hegemonic ideological-informational monopoly on history.<sup>7</sup> The American masses have really little choice in the matter and tend to , as Robert Chrisman has said, accept “the same ideology and cultural values as the ruling classes.”<sup>8</sup> It is of no surprise, given such widespread and uniform scarcity of information, that the dominant culture’s

literary critics have rarely given a book (or books) by a black writer very favorable criticism.

Reactions to the works of black American writers have indeed been enigmatic. Quite a few literary critics and anthologists (e.g., Darwin Turner, Addison Gayle, Abraham Chapman) have, in the course of researching their subjects, discovered extra-literary incidents, or circumstances which followed the publication of a black writer's work—circumstances which could have involved any writer or writers, but which happened to black writers much more frequently. The black writer has been attacked for his/her creative delineation of black life and, in the same breath, how much light or darkness her/his work has shed on the “black problem.”

The experiences of Chester Himes after *Lonely Crusade* (1947) are a case in point. Black and white critics did not like *Lonely Crusade* because it violated their standards for the novel form regarding language and plot. Yet their more vehement reactions were prompted by the novel's “failure” to provide solutions to America's racial dilemma:

After the publication of *Lonely Crusade* Himes found himself in a position that few other American novelists have occupied. He was being assaulted by communists, fascists, white racists, black racists, and practically every reviewer within those extremes. Again the familiar criticism of Himes' excessive violence both in scene and language appeared, but he was also denounced for an ugly narrative, confused thematic structure and philosophical dialogue and too limited an outlook.

9

After the generally negative reviews of *Lonely Crusade*, Himes had such difficulty writing that he eventually resolved himself to leave the United States. In 1953, during the height of the Cold war, he joined the other two famous expatriate African American novelists Richard Wright and James Baldwin in France. All three writers had reached the same conclusion about practicing their craft in the U.S.: one could not be an African American writer and take political positions *as* an African American writer if

one wanted to satisfy critics and a conservative American audience. Himes sums it up himself in the “Dilemma of the Negro novelist.”

From the start the American Negro writer is best by conflicts. He is in conflict with himself, with his environment, with his public. The personal conflict will be the hardest. He must decide at the outset the extent of his honesty. . . . He will have begun an intellectual crusade that takes him through horrors of the damned. And this must be his reward for his integrity; he will be reviled by the Negroes and whites alike. Most of all, he will find no valid interpretation of his experiences in terms of human values until the truth be known. <sup>10</sup>

African Americans, since they have always been “controversial” , whether as narrators or characters, spark automatic and at times vociferous debate over what constitutes reality and how the reality has been rendered by African American authors. Richard Wright’s *Black Boy* (1945), for instance, prompted two Mississippi Congressmen—Thomas Bilbo and Jeanette Rankin—to place the following statement in the *Congressional Record*:

It is a damnable lie from beginning to end. It is practically all fiction. There is just enough truth to enable him to build his fabulous lies about his experiences in the South. . . .It is the dirtiest, filthiest, lousiest, most obscene piece of writing that I have ever seen in print. . . .But it comes from a Negro and you cannot expect any better from a person of this type. <sup>11</sup>

Fortunately for Wright other readers did not find the book so distasteful, but the statements of influential persons have a way of lingering, taking on added weight and stature in time, whereas African American writers have not had the readily available media forums to answer their many critics. They have had to rely almost exclusively on the publication of their autobiographies and letters to the editor done in retrospect long after the debate has cooled to make their reactions known. Where does this leave those novice students, which most American readers are, including intellectuals, when it comes to understanding, in Morris Dickstein’s words, “the internal history of Afro-American literature” ?

In the course of this particular extra-literary investigation this writer found elements of truth in all these assertions. He also got the general impression that African American writers—like any other “workers” who want to be “employed”, or stay employed occasionally—have been none too eager to blame publishers (until the 1960s) for not publishing their books consistently. They might have needed to call on these same publishers (as potential employers) in the future and as a consequence of such reluctance, the readily accessible public record on African American writers does not reveal as much on these matters as one would think. Nonetheless, the general perception American writers have of the publishing industry, that a “literary establishment” of the kind that Richard Kostelanetz described *does* exist, is a perception shared by most African American authors and especially young ones.

If one yells too loudly about the “bosses”—black or white—the bosses strike back by not publishing the “screamer’s” books and pass the word through the industry’s influential networks and circles that the screamer is a problem. The African American writer in this scenario is thus more vulnerable because he has fewer contacts (agents and editors) , moves in what are considered to be secondary social-literary circles, and also lacks an auxiliary support system which is well-entrenched (e.g., a consistently available underground press circuit, or even off-off Broadway venues). His /her principal disadvantage in this regard is the scarcity of African American publishers.<sup>12</sup>

It is as if the African American writer has had to court, covet, and continue some kind of explicit (or implicit) affiliation—social, political, cultural, or other—in order to have staying power on the literary scene. It just so happens that most of these affiliations would be relationships to long-standing political or social networks overwhelmingly comprised of whites. The African American writer cannot, in the process of practicing his craft, alienate any segment of the audience for his books (left, right, ethnic or establishment) without paying the price of eventual or temporary obscurity. Lewis Coser,

Charles Kadushin and William Powell implicitly reject this contention in *Books* (1982) because it is their finding that publishing is truly a dynamic enterprise with much variation from publisher to publisher (due to the segmentation of the industry) and hence collusion would be unlikely. Yet non-white minority writers made up such a small number of their respondents that “to complete the picture of the book writer today as a member of the “establishment”—male and well-educated—we found only 2 percent of our respondents to be black. “<sup>13</sup>

African American writers have encountered their difficulties because their books have, in one way or the other, exposed elements of African American life some would seek to keep hidden, or they have exposed elements of American life most American literary critics have not experienced and do not believe exist. Again, what separates the African American writer’s conditions and experiences from those of the white American writer is the nebulous and unpredictable audience reaction s/he has received for his/her treatment of subject matter or his/her particular point of view. But despite such ragged reactions, s/he has kept on writing, publisher or no publisher, boom or bust, without being too concerned about the surrounding and puzzling milieu in which s/he works. There are, to be sure, exceptions: African American writers who were perceptive enough long ago to realize that there is more to writing books than the imagination—especially if you intend for those books to reach a sizable audience. It is these exceptional individuals, for the most part African American authors, who have shaped the historical-chronological account which follows.

Certainly a project of this kind could not include the *whole* of African American literature, from Lucy Terry (1754) to George Cain (1972). It does have specific limitations and like most other products it is focused by this writer’s taste and ability to touch on as many critical, overlapping discoveries as possible within a specific span of time. It is not an anthology because there is no pressing need for more African American

literature anthologies at this time. It could not, also by choice, and content, delve into the problems for African American writers prior to the twentieth century where there did not exist a mass audience for books; when a relatively small number of African American readers were purchasing or were able to purchase books. Moreover, the reaction of 18th century readers to Phyllis Wheatley was pretty much the same as the reactions of early 20<sup>th</sup> century readers to Paul Laurence Dunbar: both were viewed as amusing novelties. Focusing selectively on those 20<sup>th</sup> century African American authors whose careers were problematic and whose activities have been documented (but discussed only individually and not in relation to those of succeeding generations) sheds more light on the extent of the problems African American writers have confronted historically. This study, briefly summarized: (1) evaluates the political, cultural and sociological milieu of the times in which the writer's expression flourished; (2) examines the personal constraints placed on the writer directly attributable to writing for an ambivalent and divided audience; (3) relies on the works of writer-critics of longstanding reputation in the specialization of African American literature (written during or shortly after the writer's work appeared in print) and takes advantage of more recent studies which emerged in the 1970s; and (4) reveals undercurrents active in the American body-politic which have postponed a substantial gain in visibility for African American literature.

As in all tales there are some main players, such is the case with this one, writers to whom this writer is enamored and indebted.

Certainly W. E.B. DuBois (1868-1963) is a central figure in any serious African American historical study and his candid (but perhaps overlooked) literary commentary on black art, artists, periodicals, and persons is absolutely essential to this discourse. So too are Langston Hughes, James Weldon Johnson, and J. A. Rogers whose essays and columns are required reading for understanding the African American writer in the 1920s and 1940s. Also, one must not downplay the bulwark contribution of Harold

Cruse in *Crisis of the Negro Intellectual* (1967), a book whose enormous value I've only recently come to appreciate. Still others like the Dean of African American letters, Sterling Brown, is more than a significant contributor for his decisive analysis of African American writers in the twentieth century and particularly in the 1950s.

The works of Richard Kostelanetz, Charles Kadushin, Lewis Coser and Walter Powell were also invaluable, threshold pieces which informed this discourse.

I extend my deepest appreciation to Professors Alan Howes, William Alexander, Lemuel Johnson and Murray Jackson for giving me inspiration and support. I also thank my long term first mentor, James C. Kilgore, Dr. Sylvester Davis, my boy and childhood friend Lathan Donald (Nondu-El), my other mentor and guiding light, Quincy Troupe, John A. Williams, Dr. Darwin Turner and Arthur P. Davis—all *heavyweights* who were instrumental in the early phase of my study and this study.

I am likewise genuinely appreciative of the research conducted on my behalf by students James Lee, Wanda Lundy, and Cheryl Leslie at Wayne State University. And to my historian colleague Bazel Allen, whose paradoxical, provocative and decisive insights I both enjoyed hearing and, on more than one occasion, was stunned by, I extend warm thanks and heartfelt appreciation for his help on the last phase of this project. I am, moreover, indebted to my friends and younger colleagues Dionardo Pizana, Richard Newton, Anthony Reed, Kenneth Gear and Brad Pollock.

Finally, Addison Gayle and the many great multicultural, multi-ethnic writers I've read deserve special recognition for so many of the views expressed within these pages.

R.S.  
Ann Arbor, Michigan  
1982

Footnotes to *Introduction*

<sup>1</sup> Mel Watkins, "Hard Times For Black Writers," *New York Times Review of Books*, February 22, 1981, pp. 3-5, 26-27.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*,

<sup>3</sup> David Walker's *Appeal* (1829), a pamphlet addressed to the slaves of the United States, prompted immediate political and social reactions in the north and south (Aptheker, 1965) (Wiltse, 1965) (Katz, 1969). Southern states made attempts in 1830-31 to suppress the work and punish those readers black and white, who had it in their possession. Northern readers considered it a "bold, daring inflammatory tract." Shortly thereafter, southern states passed legislation, or strengthened those laws already on the books which made it against the law to teach slaves how to read and write. Thus, the association of literacy with danger by many blacks in the nineteenth century was set in motion. Also, the African American writer as radical, or dangerous spokesperson, was an impression which had residual lingering power (in the minds of many) well into the twentieth century.

<sup>4</sup> See John Hope Franklin's *From Slavery to Freedom* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1947), pp. 480-486, 642.

<sup>5</sup> Richard Kostelanetz, *The End of Intelligent Writing*, (New York : Sheed and Ward, Inc., 1973), p. xvii, vi.

<sup>6</sup> Michael E. Mendez, *Tata Casehua e Otros Cuentos* (Berkley : Editorial Justa Publications, 1980), p. 24.

<sup>7</sup> See Carl Boggs' interpretation of Antonio Gramsci's "Ideological Hegemony" in Boggs' *Gramsci's Marxism* (London, England : Pluto Press, 1976), pp. 36-54. Also see Anthony Smith's *The Geopolitics of Information: How Western Culture Dominates the World*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980).

<sup>8</sup> Robert Chrisman, "Blacks, Racism and Bourgeois Culture", *Black Scholar*, January – February, 1976.

<sup>9</sup> James Lundquist, *Chester Himes* (New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing Co., 1976), p. 13.

<sup>10</sup> Chester Himes, "The Dilemma of the Negro Novelist," in *Beyond the Angry Black* (New York: Cooper Square, 1966), pp. 51-58.

<sup>11</sup> Michael Fabre, *The Unfinished Quest of Richard Wright* (New York: William Morrow & Co., 1973), p. 282.

<sup>12</sup> See *Black World*, March 1975, Vol. XXVI, No. 5, pp. 72-79.

<sup>13</sup> Lewis Coser, Charles Kadushin and Walter Powell. *Books: The Culture and Commerce of Publishing* (New York: Basic Books, 1982), p. 234.

## CHAPTER I

### PAUL LAURENCE DUNBAR: MASTER PLAYER IN A FIXED GAME <sup>1</sup>

During Paul Laurence Dunbar's junior year in Dayton, Ohio's Central High School (1890), a notable event was taking place miles away. The First Mohonk Conference brought together an assortment of influential politicians, educators, and clergymen whose joint mission was to define the modern "Negro Problem." Indeed, as Herbert Gutman points out:

No more prestigious group of northern and southern whites had come together to discuss the Afro-American condition than those gathered in upstate New York. With rare but important exceptions speaker after speaker blamed the blacks' difficulties on the blacks themselves. "The negro today is the product of his sad and dismal past. . . He has no history and never has been a history maker. <sup>2</sup>

Typical of the times and majority's opinion of Afro-Americans, "not a single black attended the conference."

These years—the 1890s—were some of the most difficult years for blacks in their struggle for equality; these years were marked by the pervading feeling that blacks needed "benevolent" guidance'; these turbulent years were especially significant for vigilante type violence that sought to permanently disenfranchise and severely limit the "place" and "space" of black folk: their roles and mobility in American society. Little did Dunbar know that even before he began his literary career, a wave of racist, retrogressionist beliefs had taken hold of popular opinion, literally determining the destiny of a people—sight unseen:

The real world inhabited by poor rural and urban Southern ex-slaves and their children between 1880 and the start of the vast northward migration after 1900 was invisible to nearly all observers. Partly that is explained by the increasing popularity in the 1880s and 1890s of the belief that essential restraining influences on unchanging “Africans” had ended with the emancipation, causing a moral and social retrogression among the ex-slaves. 3

Although little definitively was known about blacks at this time, a number of spokespersons—so-called authorities on black life—had gained a sizable audience and, in the process, created a vicious imagery and, subsequently, distorted history of blacks that pervaded the mass consciousness of the nation. But the proliferation of a vicious imagery, particularly associated with blacks as fictional characters in literature, was another matter; the symbolic destruction of the black image was well underway and virtually complete. This was the age of Little Black Sambo.

In fiction a variety of types had flourished both during and after the Civil War. The stage was dominated by minstrel shows with virulent titles like “Rufus Rastus”, “All Coons Look Alike To Me”, and “Go Way Back and Sit Down.”<sup>4</sup> Newspapers carried ludicrous cartoons such as Spare Ribs and Gravy or had characters with names like “Asbestos” or “Smokey.” Even film, in its infancy at the turn of the century, was reflective of the society’s condescending attitude toward blacks. For instance, the great Thomas Alva Edison “proved to be a pioneer in the exploitation and exploration of this type (“coon”) when he. . . .photographed some blacks as ‘ interesting side effects.’ 5

Much of this ridiculous imagery had its roots in the earlier work of those now classified as the “Plantation” writers: writers such as Joel Chandler Harris, Thomas Nelson Page, and A.C. Gordon, Southern regionalists who “almost always. . . .used the genre (dialect) to parade the stock Negro, contentedly servile on the plantation or comic in his favorite pursuits.”<sup>6</sup> Apparently, the fact that slavery had ended some three decades before was unimportant and irrelevant; the nation in the 1890s, the era historian Rayford Logan called , "The Betrayal of the Negro", was torn between opposing

ideological currents: a pastoral, idealized past and a heavy-metal industrialized future of flux and uncertainty. When given the choice, American readers decided in favor of nostalgia, seeking a return to the “good old days” prior to the Civil War, before regional, cultural, and ethnic differences were very obvious and accentuated, to coin a phrase, “when black folk knew their place.”<sup>7</sup> Perhaps, given the nature of the times, the rather clear-cut regional divisions between the “North” and the “South”, this reading regimen provided some a comforting and almost pleasant retreat from reality. Moreover, the steady influx of immigrants from Europe was making the America of old almost obsolete. Nevertheless, a sentimental escapade did little to obfuscate the truth chronicled in the newspapers, the fact that blacks struggled to assert themselves, and survive, against tremendous odds in a nation seemingly resolved to return them to slavery:

In the last sixteen years of the nineteenth century, there had been more than 2,000 lynchings, the great majority of which were Negroes, with Mississippi, Alabama, Georgia, and Louisiana leading the nation. . . .

Few regarded these manifestations of violence as an inherent part of the industrial imperialism to which America was committed, in the ideology of which the subjection of the black man to caste control and wage slavery was an integral part. . . .<sup>8</sup>

It is understandable that by the time of Paul Laurence Dunbar’s first work—*Oak and Ivy* (1893)—the black man’s role, as artist, artistic subject, and as person, was extremely constrained by tons of propaganda and eventually, institutionalized injustice. In more than one way Dunbar’s poetry was received by the reading public as a novelty; his audience, and the white forerunners of his genre, had *stoneset* the conditions of his craft, placing restraining parameters on the substance and style of his work, and additionally, whatever popularity he accrued:

When black writers tried to use dialect to reproduce sounds characteristic of our people, they were told that the only emotions dialect could convey were humor and pathos. We can either laugh at you or be maudlin over you. Our early writers accepted this two-valued orientation, apparently not realizing that this judgement on the possible uses of dialect had nothing to do with dialect, but rather with the only two feelings the arbiters of culture were willing either to show toward us themselves or to allow us to show. <sup>9</sup>

In addition to limiting the black writer's employment of dialect to humor and sympathy, there were societal anxieties about the current status of blacks that had to be addressed indirectly. The black writer was obligated to be entertaining, to assure readers that although blacks had changed since the emancipation, they were still, basically a "kind", "helpless", "lazy" lot with no thoughts of malice, or better still, retribution for past foul deeds. It is with these broader requirements that Dunbar launched his artistic career.

Dunbar wrote primarily for a white audience, consequently, satisfying an audience looking only for types necessitated compromise(s) and a willingness to withstand economic obstacles:

. . . There were of course, practical problems which reinforced the exercise of such a sensibility; the expectations of a white audience who largely provided the cash (although Dunbar's celebrations of the simple delights of black life were enjoyed by a rather sizable black audience) and the expectations of publishers of magazines and books. <sup>10</sup>

In spite of the fact that Dunbar's books were read by a certain number of blacks, the vast majority couldn't "afford to spend a dollar for his book."<sup>11</sup> Even more pertinent to consider is the fact that Dunbar didn't have the opportunity to submit work to black editors and publishers:

During much of this time, middle-class black communities of some size and importance existed in only a few centers, such as Atlanta, Georgia, and Washington D.C., and the audience for books by black authors was small indeed. There were no black owned trade-book publishing firms, and those books that black authors produced had to be acceptable to white publishers, few of whom were known for their sympathy for black people. Dunbar, though born and brought up in Ohio, deliberately chose to write in dialect partly because dialect stories about black people were more readily accepted by both publishers and readers. <sup>12</sup>

In Dunbar's earliest work he clearly separated the two idioms, the "Oak" from the "Ivy", the standard verse from the dialect. Predictably, as Addison Gayle contends,

Dunbar's intentions went overlooked; his niche in literature was achieved solely on the merit of his dialect pieces:

Only later in life was he to learn that within this title he had planted the seeds of a truer metaphor; that of the ivy engulfing the oak, strangling the life out of it, so that in time what was first ornament replaced the dominant element, and was admired as if it had always been the more important of the two. <sup>13</sup>

Over the years an assumption about Dunbar's intent has outweighed the truth, the assumption that he relished his role as a dialect poet. Contrary to this assumption, Dunbar was conscious of his audience's preferences and expressed his dissatisfaction with these limitations more than once:

You know of course that I didn't start as a dialect poet. I simply came to the conclusion that I could write it as well, if not better than anybody I knew of, and that by doing so I should gain a hearing, and now they don't want me to write anything but dialect. . . .<sup>14</sup>

Evidently it wasn't important to readers or publishers that Dunbar's second book, *Majors and Minors* (1895), clearly demonstrated his desire to write most of his poetry in standard English; of seventy-four poems, only twenty-six were in dialect: the title (again) reinforcing the intentional division of the two forms. <sup>15</sup> In contrast, Dunbar's biographers and critics have verified his desire to read his dialect poetry at every occasion, as if he had to make a choice, and that this decision, sadly, compromised his integrity. (Few (if any) of the analyses have speculated on the practical considerations inherent in a "live" performance.) <sup>16</sup> Notwithstanding the compromise, Dunbar was a skillful orator, one who was very adept at "delighting an audience" <sup>17</sup> even when the work he cherished most, his standard poetry, received "condescending recognition." <sup>18</sup>

*Lyrics of Lowly Life* (1896), Dunbar's third work, is the book that catapults him from regionally recognized versifier into the role of nationally known poet. No less than America's prime literary mover of the day—William Dean Howells—wrote the introduction, giving Dunbar his largest "hearing." Howells' introduction is an entity unto

itself; analyzed in retrospect it tells us much about the patronage system in general, so prevalent in Dunbar's age, and serves as a specific example of how white critics—both friend and foe alike—have been consistently ambivalent whenever the work of a black writer, or black writers, is placed “under a microscope.”

First of all, with contradictory objectivity, Howells says he judges works of art without considering the writer's background, race, etc., and then proceeds to delineate facts irrevocably tied to class and race, i.e., that Dunbar's parents had been slaves. Secondly, he does cursory damage to Dunbar's standard pieces by suggesting they are comparable to the work “of most young poets.” Third, he obliterates the existence of other African American writers prior to Dunbar by uttering the following:

So far as I could remember, Paul Dunbar was the only man of pure African blood and of American civilization to feel the Negro life aesthetically and express it lyrically. <sup>19</sup>

In this one sentence one can see the beginnings of what eventuated into a trend—singling out one black writer for praise while simultaneously obfuscating the talent and lifework of others existing before (and sometimes after) the “chosen” artist. On the one hand, Howells is showering Dunbar with a complimentary remark; on the other hand, he tries to escape reaction, as if anticipating it, by saying at the outset, “So far as I could remember”. By implication Howells is suggesting that if *he* cannot recall these writers, then they must not have been too significant. As a matter of fact, there were many African American writers in print, and known, before Dunbar: Gustavas Vassa, Lucy Terry, Jupiter Hammon, Phyllis Wheatley, William Wells Brown, George M. Horton, Francis Harper, and the eminent Fredrick Douglass. There were also many dialect writers in print prior to Dunbar, writers such as James Campbell, James Carrothers, Eliot Henderson, Daniel Davis, and J. Allen. But the most startling omission made by Howells is his failure to at least allude to Charles Chesnutt—a black writer with whom he was

definitely familiar. Again he circumvents the mention of Chesnut—a very light-skinned African American—by referring to Dunbar as “the only man of pure African blood.”

The most telling comment that Howells makes is the slanderous description of Dunbar’s dialect poetry. In this instance he undercuts and dismisses all previous compliments and performs a reduction through innuendo:

We call such pieces dialect pieces for want of some closer phrase, but they are really not dialect so much as delightful personal attempts and failures for the written and spoken language. <sup>20</sup>

Howells’ phrase, “for want of some closer phrase” is actually a euphemistic signal for the audience he is addressing. He then follows up the signal with explicit language. Dunbar’s dialect pieces are “delightful” because they are “attempts and failures” representative of the general “errors” African Americans make when using the written and spoken English language. There is no mistaking Howells’ true intentions, for as Gayle contends, he goes on to “equate the souls of black people with dialect language.” <sup>21</sup>

In nothing is his essentially refined and delicate art so well shown as in these pieces, which as I ventured to say, described the range between appetite and emotion. . . .which is the range of the race. He reveals in these a finely ironical perception of the Negro’s limitations. <sup>22</sup>

One wonders how Dunbar coped with what had to be his extremely ambivalent reaction; how could he respond to such “beneficent” gamesmanship—praising him, gaining him the hearing he desired, while in the same breath maligning his people and putting him into a traditional role: that of the “darky” entertainer? Dunbar knew that after Howells critique it would be an uphill struggle to escape categorization, to garner a respect and appreciation for his standard verse equal to the curious praise extended to his dialect work. For the most part, Dunbar’s immediate reply to Howells was lukewarm. . . .  
. . .with the exception of one comment:

. . . .My greatest fear is that you may have been more kind to me than just.