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Introduction

In the October 1914 issue of the *A.M.E. Review*, an author named Alice M. Dunbar (1875–1935) published “The Poet and His Song,” reflecting on the “life and character” of her former husband, the legendary African American poet Paul Laurence Dunbar (1872–1906).¹ When they first corresponded in April 1895, she went by the full name of Alice Ruth Moore; she was nineteen years old, he twenty-two. Their epistolary courtship lasted nearly two years, until they became engaged in early February 1897. In March 1898 they married; and in January 1902 they separated abruptly, without having children together. Despite his pleas for forgiveness, which she unflinchingly ignored, they never reunited.² In print and in person, turbulence described the six years and nine months of their relationship: infatuation and love, admiration and encouragement, but also suspicion and frustration, exasperation and fury, as well as intimidation and violence.

Even though Alice published “The Poet and His Song” almost nine years after Paul’s death, she retained the surname “Dunbar.”³ In fact, the essay marked her first-ever published study of why Paul perceived the world the way he did. “So if one wishes to get a correct idea of any poet whatever,” she explains at the outset, “he must delve beneath the mere sordid facts of life and its happenings; of so many volumes published in such and such a time; of the influence upon him of this or that author or school of poetry; of the friends who took up his time, or gave him inspiration, and, above all, one must see what the love of Nature has done for the poet.” Alice’s essay seeks to render more human, if more profound and complex, a person she once loved but later came to resent during his lifetime—and after his death in 1906, a person she had eventually come to appreciate. The title “poet laureate of his race,” which Paul assumed during the height of his professional career, underestimated the sophistication of his poetry.⁴

In lyrical prose, Alice describes the poems Paul wrote that best mirrored his unique literary sensibility.⁵ One of these poems was “Sympathy,” published in his fourth book of poetry, *Lyrics of the Hearthside* (1899). The bird’s cage,

according to Alice, actually referred to the “iron grating of the book stacks in the Library of Congress,” where the “torrid sun poured its rays down into the courtyard of the library and heated the iron grilling of the book stacks until they were like prison bars in more senses than one.” Paul worked at the Library of Congress from September 1897 through October 1898; during this period, a series of illnesses cut short his employment there. (The “dry dust of the dry books . . . rasped sharply in his hot throat,” she remembered.) What had initially been the proverbial job to die for turned into a job that was killing his body and spirit. Being “a poet shut up in an iron cage with medical works” was “ironic incongruity,” Alice wrote. Among the stacks Paul was not a patron but a prisoner; now he “understood how the bird felt when it beat its wings against its cage.”⁶

Alice could very well have been overstating the misery surrounding the nature of Paul’s job in the Library of Congress. Others who witnessed him there tell a different story, suggesting that the Library of Congress, for all its faults as an oppressive work environment, could never truly suppress Paul’s brilliant sense of not only literary time and place but also how distinctive forms of art, such as music and poetry, could converge, stimulate his imagination, and move audiences.⁷

Although its autobiographical basis in Paul’s stint at the Library of Congress may be debatable, the poem “Sympathy” nonetheless testifies in profound, existential ways to the miraculous and transcendent bond between the poet and the world. The poem highlights the “direct ratio” of the poet to sympathy—to the knowledge, as the poem’s speaker puts it, of three refrains: “what the caged bird feels,” “why the caged bird beats his wing,” and “why the caged bird sings.” Paul struggled with the belief that he lived and wrote like a bird trapped in a cage, however gilded it might have been by the acclaim of admirers. The poem would reverberate in the century after its publication, its lyrical poignancy and thematic cogency extended in Maya Angelou’s *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (1969).⁸ In its depiction of how a young black girl could grow and achieve a personal sense of dignity in the face of rampant racism and sexism, Angelou’s autobiography reveals the perennial relevance of Dunbar’s original song: a caged bird beating its wings is the story of the individual imprisoned by societal preconceptions and struggling to escape.

Describing the life and times of Paul Laurence Dunbar requires that we tell this story. Prodigious and prolific, he was a serious professional writer for a total of eighteen years, from 1888 until his death. During this time he released fourteen books of poetry, four collections of short stories, and four novels, a

body of work that showcased his mastery of literary genres—the Western lyric, the Romantic poetry of England, the “Fireside” or “Schoolroom” poetry of the United States, the realism and naturalism of American fiction, the racial uplift of African American literature, and the dialect of informal English. Newspapers and magazines across the country syndicated many of the individual texts in his eighteen books of poems and short stories. Across various mainstream and obscure periodicals, he also published essays on the progress, productivity, and challenges of African Americans from the era of slavery to newfound franchise and freedom in the decades after the Civil War. (For Paul himself, the achievements of his life and literature, whether accurately or not, served as his benchmarks of racial progress.) To wide acclaim, he recited his poems or delivered speeches in private homes, churches, schools, and auditoriums across America’s East Coast and Midwest as well as in England’s cities. And he drafted experimental works, including librettos and drama, that exhibited his prodigious artistic versatility. The quality, breadth, and diversity of his literature inspired countless people around the world.

A biography of Paul Laurence Dunbar, however, cannot be merely a story of the intellectual ideas that informed the way he wrote literature. Nor can it be only an exploration of the mental, emotional, and moral compass by which he oriented himself in the world. It must also recount the wider historical forces that inevitably shaped his personality—the forces that guided the various personal and professional choices that lay before him and that, he believed, would determine the course of his life, career, and legacy. One must tell the full story of an African American who privately wrestled with the constraints of America in the Gilded Age, but who also sought to express or mitigate this strife through the written and spoken word.⁹

Reared during and after Reconstruction, Paul belonged to a generation of African Americans—of so-called New Negroes—whose parents had been enslaved and who were adjusting to the capitalist modernity of America. It was a time when “the man of letters” had to become “a man of business,” as William Dean Howells—the so-called Dean of American Letters, a renowned critic and writer who had become one of Paul’s most influential patrons—acknowledged in 1893: “unless he sells his art he cannot live, that society will leave him to starve if he does not hit its fancy in a picture, or a poem, or a statue; and all this is bitterly true.”¹⁰ But it also was a time when such an edict leaned on an expectation that African Americans who sought to make a living through literary writing had to tailor it to racial stereotypes. Professional opportunities for such writers were limited to certain types of writing, including the depiction of undereducated

dialect or African Americans in the racist mold of blackface minstrelsy. Autobiographical undertones about how Paul himself faced this conundrum can be found in his poem “The Poet,” included in his 1903 collection *Lyrics of Love and Laughter*:

He sang of life, serenely sweet,
 With, now and then, a deeper note.
 From some high peak, nigh yet remote,
He voiced the world’s absorbing beat.

He sang of love when earth was young,
 And Love, itself, was in his lays.
 But ah, the world, it turned to praise
A jingle in a broken tongue.¹¹

Paul resented how much the world underappreciated his literary skills and creativity. The facts corroborate his belief. Critics, editors, publishers, patrons, and fellow writers rarely acknowledged publicly, or even privately, Paul’s ability to experiment with the various traditions of Western poetry in formal English—from the lyric to the ballad, the rondeau to the sonnet—beyond the stereotypical language of African American dialect he likewise happened to know and write so well. To Alice especially, he complained about how these circumstances so unfairly limited him, about how they forced him to bear a burden of racial authenticity more onerous than what any other African American writer of his era had to shoulder.

Nonetheless, and perhaps ironically, Paul overcame these personal reservations and social conditions to write and recite dialect in ways unprecedented in their artistic excellence and commercial success.

To make proper sense of Paul Laurence Dunbar, one has to begin his story well before his birth on June 27, 1872. One must understand the antebellum lives of his parents, Joshua Dunbar and Matilda Murphy, as Kentucky slaves; their separate experiences during the Civil War; their acculturation to the postwar city of Dayton, Ohio, where Paul was born; and their combustible marriage, violent exchanges, and eventual divorce. As Paul matured, he came to embody contradictions while rebelling against the world’s stifling expectations. He tried to be a faithful boyfriend or husband to women, but his wandering eyes

betrayed his pleas of fidelity. Alcoholism afflicted his father and eventually overtook him, too, to the horror or fascination of sober onlookers. Paul enjoyed reading, writing, and reciting literature in formal English, but the commercial vogue for the persona and dialect of the so-called Old Negro, or of the undereducated, docile slave, pressured him at times to change course to improve the sales of his published literature. Racial politics divided the African American intelligentsia into partisan camps either supportive or critical of the industrial ethos of the most famous African American educator at the turn of the twentieth century, Booker T. Washington. As Paul's perspective on racial progress evolved, he would come to support both camps at different times. Under such duress, the conflicted dimensions of Paul's personality became more manifest. He was a temperamental judge of others' failings, yet he himself was insecure. Toward the patrons of the white literati he was obsequious, yet with the patriarchs of the black intelligentsia he ingratiated himself. And to multiple women he wrote private letters that alternately expressed extremes of excessive love and merciless condemnation.

The remarkable life and times of Paul Laurence Dunbar break down into three main parts. Against the backdrop of the Civil War, Reconstruction, and the rise of Jim Crow segregation, the first section, "Broken Home," describes the early lives and eventual challenges of Joshua and Matilda, Paul's parents; the circumstances and consequences of Paul's birth and his fatal inheritance of Joshua's virtues and vices; his rearing in Dayton, Ohio, where he entered an entrepreneurial newspaper partnership with his high school classmate Orville Wright, who would later be known, along with his brother Wilbur, as a co-inventor of the first airplane that could achieve controlled, sustained, and powered flight; and the years leading to 1893, when he published his first book, *Oak and Ivy*, and befriended the legendary African American abolitionist and statesman Frederick Douglass at the World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago. Spanning five eventful years, the second section, "A True Singer," bookends the era when Paul entered his literary prime and tried to grasp what being a professional African American writer meant. Literature authored by African Americans most excited mainstream audiences when it portrayed the stereotypical dialect of slaves, which became the mythical object of white nostalgia once the Emancipation Proclamation liberated 3 million slaves in 1863 and portended the metaphorical disappearance of their racist caricatures and vernacular. This section traces the origin and growth of his infatuation with Alice, leading to their tumultuous courtship and engagement; and it highlights the extent of Paul's personal and professional reach to the era's rising political stars.

The final section, “The Downward Way,” begins in 1898 with his marriage to Alice, the joy of which was tempered over time by episodes of his grave illnesses, his confusing negotiations with editors and publishers, his financial obligations to support his mother, and his erratic behavior worsened by an irrepressible and obscene addiction to liquor.

A prominent part of this book involves analyzing Paul’s volatile relationship with Alice, whose own comprehensive biography is long overdue and which accrues more information from the research I have conducted. I plumb his professional networks, which included patrons and politicians on both sides of the so-called color line. White men whom he came to know and admire included the writers James Newton Matthews, James Whitcomb Riley, and William Dean Howells; the medical doctor Henry Archibald Tobey; and Theodore Roosevelt, a government official he revered and reached out to—a gesture that this governor of New York and, later, president of the United States reciprocated. Others in Paul’s orbit were legendary African American intellectuals of his time, including Frederick Douglass and Booker T. Washington above all, and to a lesser degree the musician Will Marion Cook, the writer James Weldon Johnson, the activist Alexander Crummell, the author Victoria Earle Matthews, and, in England, composer Samuel Coleridge-Taylor. Paul’s countless interactions with editors and publishers, from the renowned Major James Pond and his daughter, Edith, to Frank Dodd of the publisher Dodd, Mead, reveal how he navigated the perks and pitfalls that accompanied his sudden rise to literary celebrity.

In portraying Paul’s life, I attend especially to how broad historical forces shaped his personal, public, and professional identities. Newspapers, magazines, and recitals, in the United States and during his six-month tour of England in 1897, dictated his tactics and strategies to broaden his literary appeal for commercial gain. Political factors in the postwar stability of American society—including the period of Reconstruction (circa 1865–1877), the nomination of William McKinley for president (in 1896), and the gubernatorial and then presidential rise of Theodore Roosevelt (from 1899 to 1901)—played a hand in his access to elite constituencies of readers and sources of political power. The customs of racial taxonomy defined and authenticated his “blackness,” to be sure, while segregationist policies for public interaction between blacks and whites limited his social mobility and his professional opportunities. And he gravitated to the great minds of literature in the extensive library that he built over time and collected in *Loafing-Holt*, the second-floor study in his final Dayton home, where he died on February 9, 1906.

Paul Laurence Dunbar was the first African American born after slavery—that is, the first modern African American writer—to achieve commercial prosperity and international stature exclusively by his literary works. But he was not just a writer of literature. Although only an occasional librettist and lyricist for musicals, he nevertheless helped achieve two unprecedented milestones in the history of American culture: he wrote the libretto for the first musical with a full African American cast to appear on Broadway, a one-act show called *Clorindy, the Origin of the Cakewalk*, which premiered in 1898; and he wrote the lyrics for *In Dahomey*, which debuted in 1902 as the first full-length Broadway musical to be both written and performed by African Americans.

Despite these accomplishments, the blessing and curse of Paul's celebrity status compelled him to behave in extreme or unpredictable ways, ranging from his poised and gentlemanly decorum during his trip to England to the shameful misbehavior in—to repeat Alice's lament—"the mere sordid facts of life and its happenings." Like a poem, the essential meaning of Paul's life and literature defies easy paraphrase.

Since the late 1960s, academic and public interest in Paul Laurence Dunbar has steadily risen, coinciding with the centennial of his death in 2006 and the sesquicentennial of his birth in 2022.¹² The election of Barack Obama as the first African American president of the United States likewise inspired scholars of American history to examine precedent circumstances under which African Americans aspired for high political office and intellectual leadership. Many scholars have gravitated toward Reconstruction, the era lasting roughly from 1865 to 1877, when Dunbar happened to be born and reared and when his early mind matured. During this time, the federal government sought not only to restore to the Union the eleven southern states that allied with the Confederacy during the Civil War (1861–1865) but also to consummate the constitutional franchise of African Americans in the wake of their emancipation from slavery.¹³ My biography hinges on the very cultural, political, and ideological implications of Reconstruction for Paul's phenomenal emergence in the late nineteenth century as a leading writer, intellectual, and spokesperson for his race.

During Reconstruction, so-called Radical Republicans employed a vocabulary of higher law that anchored the arguments for African American franchise to the idealistic republican principles of the nation's founding almost a century

prior, during the Revolutionary War. Although not unanimous in strategy or conviction, the Radical Republicans objected to the immorality of slavery and its denial of the natural rights of African Americans to “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.” Even though federal emancipation in 1863 undermined slavery, ingrained prejudice after the Civil War perpetuated the constitutional disfranchisement of African Americans. The Radical Republicans turned to an obscure provision in the Constitution that assured each state a Republican government. In another sense, the provision granted the federal government and its supporters license to intervene in state practices and enforce the entitlements of citizenship. According to historian Eric Foner, “A government that denied any of its citizens equality before the law and did not rest fully on the consent of the governed could not be considered republican.”¹⁴

A host of constitutional amendments established the newfound franchise of African Americans after the Civil War: the Thirteenth Amendment in 1865, which formally ended slavery; the Fourteenth Amendment in 1868, which accorded citizenship to African Americans and certified the rights of citizens to due process and equality before the law; and the Fifteenth Amendment in 1870, which declared the rights of citizens to vote regardless of their “race, color, or previous condition of servitude.” The Civil Rights Acts of 1866, 1871, and 1875 aimed to add further legal protections and assurances of equal treatment for African Americans. For a time, the core equivalence between Revolutionary-era republicanism and Reconstruction-era radicalism governed the progress of African Americans in the postbellum era. Under these postwar circumstances, African American men who served in the Union Army returned to their home states to reunite with family members (if they could be found) and look for work.

However, the notion that the federal government could control the conduct of individual states, particularly those in the South, fueled controversy. As the postwar tool of Radical Republicans to enfranchise African Americans and protect their rights as citizens, Reconstruction could not progress unencumbered. Constitutional cornerstones began to crack and buckle beneath the pressure imposed by the more resentful and retrogressive elements of American society, jurisprudence, and politics. For example, in December 1874 the Forty-third Congress assembled in the wake of Democratic domination of that year’s elections, weakening the grip of Republicans on both the White House and Congress. (Ten years would elapse before the Republicans again commanded both branches.)

For each electoral advantage that Democrats gained, African Americans despaired that the nation took one step closer to the reinstatement of slavery. Slowly but surely, Democrats were reassuming the governmental helm of southern states. In April 1877 the southern Democrats conceded that Rutherford B. Hayes, the Republican candidate for president the previous year, could be declared winner over their own candidate, Samuel Tilden, under two conditions: first, southern and northern capitalists had to work together to ensure the industrial and economic revitalization of Confederate territories, and second, Hayes had to remove federal troops from southern state capitals, where they had been sent to supervise contentious gubernatorial and legislative elections. The so-called Compromise of 1877 began to nullify the Republican principles of Reconstruction that ultimately secured the political franchise of African Americans. As one Kansas Republican stated in February of that year, “I think the policy of the new administration will be to conciliate the white men of the South. Carpetbaggers to the rear, and niggers take care of yourselves.”¹⁵

Judicial rollbacks accompanied the electoral compromise. Most notably, in the 1873 Slaughter-House cases and the 1876 cases *United States v. Cruikshank* and *United States v. Reese*, the Supreme Court weakened federal ability to uphold the liberties and due process of citizens, their right to assembly, and their right to vote, especially when these entitlements, in this court’s view, conflicted with the individual jurisdiction and will of the states. Ironically, the very laws that once shielded the lives and franchise of African Americans in the South now exposed them to terrorist violence. Random white mobs and formalized, paramilitary organizations like the Ku Klux Klan plundered the homes of African Americans and castrated, raped, and lynched African American men with impunity. Additional laws designed to save citizens from being victims of fraud and corruption seemed inapplicable to African Americans.¹⁶

Political disfranchisement amplified the legal vulnerability of African Americans in postbellum times. During this period, as historian Nell Irving Painter rightly notes, “blacks never held political office in proportion to their numbers,” and “any black representation at all was a novelty.”¹⁷ The electoral relegation of African Americans to the lower congressional chamber—the House of Representatives, as opposed to the upper one, the Senate—starkly attested to this disproportion. For African Americans and their supporters, minimal representation was better than no representation at all.

Most whites believed, in contrast, that they would suffer if the political status quo improved or even remained the same for African Americans. As the

Reconstruction period of emancipation and enfranchisement faded in national memory, racist efforts to undo these political attainments grew emboldened and systematic. Eventually, these efforts became victorious in their own right. Discouraging African Americans from running for the House of Representatives and relegating them to less prestigious and powerful posts, such as state legislatures and city councils, were tactics espoused by vocal Democratic constituencies and neglected by the deafening silence of Republican acquiescence.

By the Compromise of 1877, anti-Reconstruction sentiment in the media had reached a crescendo. Punditry in periodicals and books ranged from the Democratic criticism of government to the broader allegation, condoned by many white conservatives and liberals, southerners and northerners alike, that African Americans were fundamentally incapable of representing themselves in the realm of intellect, much less politics. The hallmark egalitarianism of Reconstruction gave way to the purportedly more realistic and practical, but essentially white-supremacist, doctrine of Redemption. Spearheaded by secessionist Democrats and Union Whigs, Redemption sought to ensure Reconstruction's utter failure.

Historians have shown that racial progress in the nineteenth century culminated with the Reconstruction-era electoral victories of the first African American congressmen and judges. Politicians and, less directly, cultural leaders emerged from African American communities to guide ideological discussions on how electoral politics could combat racial prejudice, injustice, and inequality, and how laws could work on behalf of African American progress toward complete civil rights.¹⁸ Recent scholarship has enabled the discovery of new archives and literary forms emergent during and in the wake of Reconstruction, such as in association with the African American writers Charles W. Chesnutt, Frances Ellen Watkins Harper, Pauline Hopkins, and Paul Laurence Dunbar himself. The “unfinished revolution” suggested by Eric Foner in his classic 1989 book *Reconstruction* encourages a historiography that extends the story about the analogous opportunities and challenges of African Americans from the postbellum nineteenth century into the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.¹⁹

A comprehensive biography of Paul's life and times enables us to grasp the personal and creative choices he made while maturing into a professional literary writer on the heels of Reconstruction, when he became an emblem of modern African American letters but also a key protagonist in the epic story of race relations in America. Only recently have literary experts begun to pursue this wider lens of analysis, revising the long-held premise that his “dialect

poetry” waged merely a “masked critique of the white racism, invisible to white readers but legible to black audiences.”²⁰ The meaning and consequences of his life and literature turned out to be more complex than that.

Writing a biography of a famous American writer—especially in the case of Paul Laurence Dunbar, born of African descent less than a decade from slavery’s end—invites a host of challenges. Some difficulties include the process of selecting the most relevant details for biographical inclusion; overcoming the practical limits suffered by the African American archive during the era and aftermath of slavery; cutting through the myths of his celebrity to the facts of his life; and capturing the essence of his writings, despite how numerous, dispersed, and sensationalized their publications. Perhaps the greatest challenge was documenting only the portion of the literature, life, and legacy of his wife, Alice, that revolved about his experiences, even though recent scholarly interest, including my own, in her historical significance and literary accomplishments continues to grow, and even though she deserves her own independent biography, one comprehensive enough to tell her life story in all its complexity, wonder, and inspiration. I describe these largely academic issues in the epilogue to this biography, whose conceptual and methodological puzzles rivaled the various puzzles embodied by Dunbar himself.

By the end of this book, new features in Paul’s portrait should emerge even for experts in his life and literature. First, he was more concerned and frustrated with the plight and practices of African American communities than the standard record suggests. Evidence of this sentiment appeared in the editorials he wrote for the *Dayton Tattler*, the newspaper he edited and circulated for the African American Dayton community in December 1890; in the frequency with which he wrote poems in formal English, not in the dialect suggestive of African American vernacular; in his resistance to using African American protagonists in his early novels; in his and Alice’s private rebukes of fellow African Americans; and in his oscillations between agreement and disagreement with Washington’s doctrine of racial uplift. Second, he was more mentally and emotionally unstable than the standard record suggests. Private letters of correspondence between Paul and Rebekah Baldwin tell us that she, a lesser-known girlfriend on the margins of previous biographies, is crucial when attempting to fathom the unpredictable personality and behavior that he would demonstrate later in his more notorious relationship with Alice. His letters to Alice

reveal that he expressed suicidal thoughts in regret of having committed violence against her. And throughout his life, he expressed deep disappointment with the course and outcome of his career.

Just as the “caged bird,” as Paul deploys the term in “Sympathy,” represents a biographical metaphor of the societal constraints on his life and literature, “For the Man Who Fails,” a poem also appearing in *Lyrics of the Hearthside*, reveals his inner turmoil. In this poem, the speaker addresses “the noble heart and mind / Of the gallant man who fails,” not only the man “who wins the game” and earns “Fame.” An intervention of sorts, the closing of the poem imagines a tale of redemption before it is too late, before history casts a fatal glance upon the life and legacy of “the gallant man”:

We sit at life’s board with our nerves highstrung,
And we play for the sake of Fame,
And our odes are sung and our banners hung
For the man who wins the game.

But I have a song of another kind
Than breathes in these fame-wrought gales,—
An ode to the noble heart and mind
Of the gallant man who fails!

The man who is strong to fight his fight,
And whose will no front can daunt,
If the truth be truth and the right be right,
Is the man that the ages want.
Tho’ he fail and die in grim defeat,
Yet he has not fled the strife,
And the house of Earth will seem more sweet
For the perfume of his life.²¹

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Note: Paul Laurence Dunbar's works are in **bold** type. Page numbers in *italic* type indicate illustrations. "PLD" and "ARM" refer to Paul Laurence Dunbar and Alice Ruth Moore (or Alice Dunbar), respectively.

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