

## Paul Laurence Dunbar and the African American Elegy

A hush is over all the teeming lists,  
And there is pause, a breathspace in the strife;  
A spirit brave has passed beyond the mists  
And vapors that obscure the sun of life.  
And Ethiopia, with bosom torn,  
Laments the passing of her noblest born. — Paul Laurence Dunbar,  
"Frederick Douglass" ll. 1-6)

Quietly, this stanza begins Paul Laurence Dunbar's long elegy for Frederick Douglass. Here, Dunbar's speaker solemnly utters sentiments that suggest Douglass's importance within the context of an American narrative of race. As well, he prophesies a kind of racial deliverance toward which Douglass's political activities had moved the black race, indeed the black nation. Language, trope, and affect are sifted through a mother's loss, a loss felt by the black race, a loss felt (perhaps) by all of Dunbar's readers. The tension between individual and collective loss becomes important to how we read this early African American elegy, as Dunbar mines multiple literary and cultural traditions to find the language that befits his purpose of marking the passage of such a great black leader. With the skill of his dialect poems, he turns to established literary forms—imbuing them with racial pride and literary virtuosity.

What he imagines as Douglass's passing is the trope of the death of the race's "noblest born," which he thematizes as both matrilineal and intergenerational. By figuring "Ethiopia" as Douglass's mother, an argument about racial identity ensues; the black race is that maternal essence that Douglass's presence had embodied. His absence, nonetheless, speaks to the urgency of racial identity: the Ethiopianism of this passage, to relish a term from Wilson Moses, speaks to an emerging sense of blacks as belonging to a black nation whose experiences are foretold in biblical prophecy. Blacks *will* triumph, as Biblical myth forecasts. Yet 1895, the year of Douglass's death, marks a bleak moment in black history. The work of the poem is to convince Dunbar's readers that the black generations from which Douglass's leadership issues will continue even without him. And Dunbar insists those generations will persist because of him: "still thy voice is ringing o'er the gale." Dunbar, in fact, is able to initiate a tradition of African American elegy. His poems of the late nineteenth century inspire a tradition that thrives even among poets writing today.

While the year 1895 marks the death of Frederick Douglass, it marks the ascent of another, Booker T. Washington. Although we currently inherit Washington variously, particularly given the poignancy of W. E. B. Du Bois's critique of him in *The Souls of*

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*Black Folk* (1903), it is nonetheless the case that Dunbar wants to present an argument about racial leadership, avoiding the difficulties of the differing politics of Douglass, Washington, and Du Bois, for that matter. Even as he penned "Frederick Douglass" to mark the passing of this greatest of black leaders, his spacious, gracious elegies make room for a more problematic figure like Washington. If the overall thrust of the Douglass poem is to look forward, both of the poems "Frederick Douglass" and "Booker T. Washington" look backward. Given the place of autobiography in the emergence of an African American literary history, and given that both Douglass (in his works of 1845, 1855, and 1892) and Washington in his *Up from Slavery* (1901) privilege autobiography as a basic black epistemology, it is not surprising that Dunbar's Washington poem rehearses the details of Booker T.'s life. While Dunbar's poem "Frederick Douglass" emphasizes a more generalized racial past, his "Booker T. Washington" turns on the specificity of Washington's escape from slavery. Writing at the turn into the twentieth century, given the various structures of political, social, and economic oppression that blacks endure, it seems especially apt to elegize Washington by re-writing his escape from slavery. Slavery, for Dunbar, is an over-determined signifier. It points to a specific historical institution, but more generally it functions as a metaphor for historical oppression. For Washington to escape slavery means that blacks might escape their current oppression. "Booker T. Washington" begins with the line, "The word is writ that he who runs may read." This particular elegy presents as an on-going strategy of Dunbar's elegiac project the quest for freedom and literacy—or to be more precise, the quest for freedom through literacy.

For Dunbar, literacy means a number of different things. Of course, that entails literally being able to read and write. But it also entails a kind of cultural and historical literacy. Dunbar's poetry constructs a pantheon of heroes and, by so doing, presents their lives as texts to be read. They come to function as exemplars of racial identity in the face of racist ideology. To risk a cliché, Dunbar wants us to read his texts both literally and figuratively, and his poems encode the terms through which our figurative imaginations might be stabilized. The form of the elegy itself operates as a strategy of reading. With race as the basic grammar of identity, Dunbar encourages readers to see his poem as being replete with both racial and gendered signifiers. The history of American slavery is displaced onto a template of African origins. While this displacement is explicit in Dunbar's "Frederick Douglass," it operates more subtly in Dunbar's "Booker T. Washington." The poet teaches us how to read the poem's historical economy of figurative language. The sonnet ends with this sestet:

Strong, silent, purposeful beyond his kind,  
 The mark of rugged force on brow and lip,  
 Straight on he goes, nor turns to look behind  
 Where hot the hounds come baying at his hip;  
 With one idea foremost in his mind,  
 Like the keen prow of some on-forging ship. (ll. 9-14)

The final simile is the most telling; Washington the runaway slave is likened to a ship. That final rhyme completes the image potential of the ninth line of the poem, where we get the verbal slippage of "brow" and "lip." This history of slavery in the United States, thereby, is displaced onto the experience of the Middle Passage, which the poet Robert Hayden would later characterize as a "Voyage through death / to life upon these shores" (ll. 6-7). In Dunbar's elegy, the individual life comes to stand for the American experience, which in turn represents a sense of an African past. The importance of this strategy is unmistakable. The journey that both Douglass and Washington undertake involves a

movement toward a specific racialized inheritance. Their quest for freedom is not something new, but in some ways a return to African origins and sustenance. Dunbar teaches us to read these individual poems as racial allegories, part of a collective text that its canon presents, one that includes such figures as Robert Gould Shaw and Harriet Beecher Stowe as objects of his elegiac imagination, if only to demonstrate what has taken scholars today so long to understand: that race itself is an allegory of historical experience. Dunbar reads race as historical struggle and works to mourn the loss of both black and white leaders devoted to the racial cause.

In this discussion, I am using a set of terms that point to how I see Dunbar as initiating a *tradition* of African American elegies. I should underscore here that I am not arguing that the African American practice of the elegy is necessarily distinctive from other traditions of the elegy. But I want to suggest that such practice is continuous. Dunbar's poems of the 1890s point us directly to more recent elegies written by African Americans in the latter part of the twentieth century. To underscore Dunbar's relationship to later black poets, I turn briefly to Robert Hayden and Michael S. Harper, and what I am pointing to are distinctive and characteristic poetic practices. In maintaining that Dunbar's elegies function as racial allegories, I want to argue that Dunbar and other African American male poets are particularly invested in how individual utterance might illustrate communal values and how the individual comes to stand for a specific community. That community might be constituted variously, but it is a conspicuous feature of these elegies that they turn on asserting the poet's relations to living communities—that these meditations on the dead enact an emotional and ideological relationship to the living. Here, I am making an argument that is somewhat similar to Kurt Fosso's in *Buried Communities: Wordsworth and the Bonds of Mourning* (2004), particularly his contention "that in Wordsworth it is not community that leads to a connection to the dead so much as it is the dead, and more specifically the relationship of the living to them, that leads to community" (7). In Dunbar's "Frederick Douglass," the act of elegiac mourning reaffirms the connections among African Americans at the time Dunbar was writing. The poem functions as a metonym for the hyphenated "African-American," a term now in use, for the unstable identities of blacks in the post-Reconstruction era. The sense of looking backward to an empowering sense of an African past becomes a way to militate against the racism implicit in their tentative "American" identities. The sense of community stabilizes Dunbar's treatment of Booker T. Washington as a figure who, while still alive, might be lost to the controversy over his ideologies of race and social uplift. Dunbar writes to mend the breach of community that ensued over the controversy of Washington's life.

In African American elegies, race often stands for community, and that sense of community is often structured through a figurative glimpse of the past. Dunbar's "Frederick Douglass" shows us how we might return to what the poet Michael S. Harper calls "the past in the present moment" in its concluding stanza:

Oh, Douglass, thou hast passed beyond the shore,  
But still thy voice is ringing o'er the gale!  
Thou'st taught thy race how high her hopes may soar,  
And bade her seek the heights, nor faint, nor fail.  
She will not fail, she heeds they stirring cry,  
She know thy guardian spirit will be nigh,  
And, rising from beneath the chast'ning rod,  
She stretches out her bleeding hand to God! (ll. 61-68)

For black writers of the nineteenth century, references to Ethiopia commonly suggested the entire African continent. Within the politics of locating race within a geographical terrain, Ethiopia functions as a site of identity in a range of tem-

poralities. Dunbar authenticates racial identity within this discourse of Ethiopianism. The politics of a return to Africa mapped out in the nonfiction prose of such figures as Martin Delany and Alexander Crummell suggests for Dunbar a symbolic landscape through which his poems journey toward black self-identification. In this particular elegy, the reference to Ethiopia in the first stanza and then subsequent allusions point to Africa as a gendered space, one that suggests both African origins and a kind of nascent Pan-Africanism that, say, would be more fully realized in 20<sup>th</sup>-century politics of a figure such a

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Marcus Garvey. Dunbar summons Douglass, this figure whose life has now past, as way of both recalling an African past and predicting a pan-African future. This move feels oddly prescient, given the direction of 20<sup>th</sup>-century black culture and politics. Here, the African mother performs the agency of radical black politics whose future Douglass's past struggles have predicted. I should point out the obvious: here we have embarked on religious terrain, but the sense of this particular poem and of African American elegies more generally is that religion functions primarily as a political discourse. Dunbar is taken with the religion of black liberation. For Dunbar, Douglass prophesies "deliverance." The texture of religious reference reminds us how Afro-Christianity, for Dunbar and even for us now, depends heavily on the sense of the Hebrew Bible. Indeed, the past in the present moment in the poem is both racial and Biblical. These two co-exist, as I have elsewhere argued, through Dunbar's imaginative reading of Exodus as a founding document for African American identity (Blount 582-93).

Ethiopia in the poem "Frederick Douglass" is gendered as the mother, intimating the language of Africa as the motherland, calling attention to the structure of the heterosexual family as a network of identity. Douglass is the "noblest born," presumably of the race, and it certainly is true that Douglass was for the nineteenth century what W. E. B. Du Bois was for the twentieth century. In the elegies at hand, family matters. Part of the patterns of figuration at work in the African American elegy depend on viewing familial relations as a model for what Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., would characterize as the "beloved community." The figure of the mother in the poem depends a great deal on historical gender assignments and relations. To that extent, while the elegy as a genre has tended to be a place for marking male identity, it is important that the figure of the mother be assigned a certain degree of authority, albeit constrained by 19<sup>th</sup>-century essentialist thinking. What does us pause, then, is the extent to which the elegy works as part of slavery's masculinist figurative legacy. As we know, the elegy has tended for men to enact a rite of passage between men. In the American canon, Whitman's elegy to Lincoln ("When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd") is perhaps the most influential, and one can feel there the generic pattern of the transmission of male authority. The death of the empowered male figure becomes an occasion for the younger male poet to assert his literary authority. A similar kind of rite of passage occurs in Dunbar's "Frederick Douglass." The poem first appears in *Majors and Minors*, Dunbar's second collection, which William Dean Howells would review in the June 27, 1896, issue of *Harper's Weekly*. For better or worse, that review would catapult Dunbar into lit-

erary prominence, serving as the introduction to *Lyrics of Lowly Life*. Howells's review would serve to authenticate Dunbar's talents as a writer, yet Howells would dismiss Dunbar's poems in standard English, opting instead to give authority to Dunbar's poems written in dialect. If we look at Dunbar's canon as a whole, two-thirds of his published poems are written in standard English. Dunbar enjoys the constraining pleasures of literary forms, often writing in complex stanzaic patterns with aplomb. When Dunbar published "Frederick Douglass" in 1895, he had yet to arrive, as it were, as a poet. In mourning the loss of Douglass for the black community, he is also stating his aspirations as a poet that he might become a black writer of significance. The patrilineal patterns of descent and ascent, one that we have come to expect in the elegy, are nonetheless disrupted to a certain extent because of the way the poem posits the figure of the mother as a vehicle of inheritance. So that while he seems to be relying on normative gender expectations, the extent to which Ethiopia herself confers literary authority disrupts some of the residual gender constriction of the elegy form.

It is important, as well, that as we decode the ideological strategies of Dunbar's racial allegories, we do not fail to attend to questions of nation. These work in seemingly contradictory ways. The poem "Frederick Douglass" calls on its readers to imagine a black, pan-African nation, yet at the same time Dunbar's fluency in seemingly "white" literary convention calls on his calm access to literary authority that transcends race. Dunbar writes as an American elegist, reaching back not just to Whitman but to the inheritance of the American Puritan elegy which they share, even as he locates himself within the borders of English poetic tradition as he revels in the kind of belated Romanticism that would characterize African American poetry well into the twentieth century. Nationalisms of various sorts are at work in Dunbar's elegies, but the equation is fairly stable. Race-family-community-nation, that is, as long as Dunbar himself can define that calculus of social and literary relations.

Later in his career, Dunbar would write another elegy for Frederick Douglass. This time he compresses his lyric voice to fit the sonnet form:

Ah, Douglass, we have fall'n on evil days,  
 Such days as thou, not even thou didst know,  
 When thee, the eyes of that harsh long ago  
 Saw, salient, at the cross of devious ways.  
 And all the country heard thee with amaze.  
 Not ended then, the passionate ebb and flow,  
 The awful tide that battled to and fro;  
 We ride amid a tempest of dispraise.

Now, when the waves of swift dissension swarm,  
 And Honor, the strong pilot, lieth stark,  
 Oh, for thy voice high-sounding o'er the storm,  
 For thy strong arm to guide the shivering bark,  
 The blast-defying power of thy form,  
 To give us comfort through the lonely dark.

This second elegy for Douglass betrays a darker hue than the first. If the traditional functions of elegy are to lament, praise, and console, here we find the work of mourning somewhat incomplete. Written at a time when Dunbar may well have been bitter about the tepid reception of his poetry in standard English, the state of race relations in the US, and the fragmentation among black leaders, he turns back to Douglass as a source of inspiration for the black community and what it means for him to write poetry. Historians of the African American experience have carefully documented the intensity of the racial oppression in the US in the post-Reconstruction era: the rise of Jim Crow laws, the patterns of disen-

franchisement, employment discrimination, the horrors of lynching. Dunbar gives this volume the title of *Lyrics of Love and Laughter* (1903), but the irony would only have been lost on a few of his readers. In writing about Douglass, Dunbar wants and needs him. For Dunbar, this age of black oppression is, as Paul D. Escott might put it, "slavery remembered." And so he turns to Douglass, whose flight from slavery to freedom was linked, as he highlights in his narratives, to the acquisition of literacy and a literary voice. Dunbar seeks to flee the oppression of his times and the expectations of his readers, those readers who would follow Howells's advice and both privilege and misread Dunbar's poetry written in the black vernacular. In the poem "The Poet," he would describe that poetry as "a jingle in a broken tongue," language bristling with scathing irony pointed directly at his readers (l. 8). In this elegy, Dunbar chooses the sonnet as the place to stake his claim on Wordsworth's "scanty plot of ground." He would surmise that his audience would misread the excoriating aggression of poems such as "The Haunted Oak," written to denounce the sensibility of a people who would regard a lynching as a social spectacle. What Dunbar's elegy calls for is "the blast-defying power of . . . form" (l. 13). The poem imagines Douglass's body, not just intact but emblematic. Dunbar might well have Douglass's physicality in mind, but he also calls attention to the body of work, literary and political, that Douglass accomplished. Could he, Dunbar, writing in 1903, assume the literary authority that he had imagined in his 1895 elegy for Douglass? The poem's speaker betrays a degree of uncertainty, and contemporary readers can imagine little distance between the poet and that speaker. Dunbar calls, repeatedly, for Douglass's guidance, his insight, his voice. Yet the poem is ambiguous about whether those calls are answered. That "lonely dark" with which the poem ends figures variously as environment and personhood (l. 14). Yet again the poet turns to the elegy to enact a sense of community. But this time that move is less successful. In terms of Dunbar's career, he has shifted from poetry to fiction, writing four novels, the last of which, *The Sport of the Gods*, is published in 1902. That title tells all. At best we can ask whether Dunbar can imagine himself as writing in a tradition that can both remember and transcend hardship. As a poet, what Dunbar most needs is an imagined community of ideal readers. Dunbar turns back to elegy, because one of the important functions of elegy for black poetry is that it allows them to place their audience in their poetry. Dunbar writes the poem "Douglass" for Frederick Douglass. He is also writing to Frederick Douglass. Only by including Douglass within the poetry as a figure for the poet's audience can he imagine an elegy that achieves the work of consoling Dunbar against history.

Just as Frederick Douglass would appear again and again as the subject and object of African American elegists, the importance of Paul Laurence Dunbar's poetry for the African American literary tradition is underscored by poems other black male poets choose to write about him.<sup>1</sup> Toward that end, two poets of the post Black Arts era, Robert Hayden and Michael S. Harper, use Dunbar as a way of establishing their relationship to African American literary tradition, and engage in the work of literary interpretation in signaling Dunbar's importance as an early practitioner of the African American elegy. Hayden is probably best known for his poetry about African American history. His canon includes an elegy for Frederick Douglass. That, and perhaps more, Dunbar taught him. His elegy "Paul Laurence Dunbar" (1978) runs:

We lay red roses on his grave,  
 speak sorrowfully of him  
 as if he were but newly dead  
 And so it seems to us

this raw spring day, though years  
 before we two were born he was  
 a young poet dead.  
 Poet of our youth—  
 his "cri du coeur" our own,  
 his verses "in a broken tongue"  
 beguiling as an elder  
 brother's antic lore.  
 Their sad blackface lilt and croon  
 survive him like  
 The happy look (subliminal  
 of a victim, dying man)  
 a summer's tintypes hold.  
 The roses flutter in the wind;  
 we weight their stems  
 with stones, then drive away.

This delicate, beautiful poem captures the sense of agony of Dunbar's "Douglass": this struggle to represent black identity honestly without the markers of literary authority to compel the politics of reading practices. Hayden's sense of Dunbar, "as if he were but newly dead," is crucial here. What the elegy allows for are conventions of literary community, even intimacy. Dunbar is but newly dead precisely because Hayden has chosen him as the subject of this elegy. And it is Dunbar's grave, which becomes the poem itself, that allows for Hayden's authority and his ability to interpret Dunbar's canon as his own literary marker. The poem "Paul Laurence Dunbar" functions as those roses that "flutter in the wind." Hayden can "weight their stems" with his own words. As is typical of 20<sup>th</sup>-century African American elegies, one gets less a sense that the younger writer imbibes the more established writer's authority and more the sense that we have entered the elegy as a space for mutual sustenance. Hayden's lyrical personae recognize the debt they owe to Dunbar. They share in the responsibility of tending his grave, that is, his literary reputation.

The contemporary African American poet Michael S. Harper, so invested in the elegy as a literary form, undertakes the task of renaming the genre. For him, elegy allows him the space to perform African American literary tradition; he characterizes that space as the African American praise poem. This essay is not the place to develop fully Harper's notions about what this literary and cultural form entails, yet his notions of tradition are crucial to understanding the kind of literary work Paul Laurence Dunbar initiates. Harper writes in a poem entitled "Corrected Review":

Our mode is our jam session  
 of tradition,  
 past in this present moment  
 articulated, blown through  
 with endurance,  
 an unreaching extended  
 improvised love of past masters  
 instruments technically down . . . (ll. 11-18)

For Harper, jazz is the model for what happens when black artists, including poets, participate in artistic traditions. The "jam session of tradition" is the space of elegy toward which Dunbar beckons, even if his sense of solitude does not allow him the sense of community that both Hayden and Harper exude. Elegy, praise-poem, jam session, perhaps all of these terms will do. Harper's "Paul Laurence Dunbar: 1872-1906" seeks to achieve the beloved community toward which Dunbar gestures:

Minstrel and mask:  
a landscape of speech and body  
burned in verbal space,  
the match cinder unstandard:  
double-conscious brother in the veil—  
double-conscious brother in the veil—  
double-conscious brother in the veil—  
double-conscious brother in the veil— (ll. 8-15)

For Harper, what I would call the African American elegy depends on the work of literary interpretation. Indeed, the darkened hue of Dunbar's "Douglass" should remind us of Du Bois's famous figure of African American identity in *The Souls of Black Folk*. Perhaps Dunbar's somber tone embodies the texture of Du Bois's figure of double-consciousness. By viewing him as a literary relative of Du Bois, Harper seeks to elevate Dunbar's reputation. While Dunbar as a writer may still have been constrained by a sense of slavery remembered, the distance of historical time allows Hayden and Harper to remember Dunbar with grace and insistence. Such elegiac maneuvering suggests a central question that pulls us back to Dunbar's canon. Even as his poems remember slavery, they prophesy deliverance. But are readers of the twenty-first century brave enough to be part of Dunbar's nation?

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**Note** 1. In *Color* (1925), written during the Harlem Renaissance, Countée Cullen embarks on the work of re-reading Dunbar through the vehicle of the elegy.

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