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Black Naturalism, White Determinism

Paul Laurence Dunbar's Naturalist Strategies

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Paul Laurence Dunbar was born into a country with already existing expectations regarding African Americans. While this is not a novel observation, it is intended to acknowledge the differing assumptions critics and readers, both then and now, bring to his work. As a black male author in a predominantly white literary world, Dunbar had to navigate the racial presumptions of editors and readers alike in order to succeed. To be financially successful while maintaining his political and aesthetic stance, Dunbar had to create literary strategies capable of critiquing the social, political, economic, and cultural problems facing African Americans that, at the same time, would not explicitly confront white readers' internalized beliefs regarding blacks. As Gene Jarrett argues in *Deans and Truants* (2007), Dunbar's experience with the racial realism of William Dean Howells led to Dunbar's experimentation with literary naturalism.¹ And it is this experimentation that informs Dunbar's naturalist depictions of white determinism. While I am broadly concerned with Dunbar's larger naturalist strategies, my specific interest is in the naturalist strategies Dunbar employs to represent the interactions between African American and white characters, strategies intended to subvert socially sanctioned white assumptions regarding African Americans.² In this sense, Dunbar's experimentation with naturalist strategies early in his career—in the short fiction he was writing at the same time as his early novels—allows him to present white determinism as a corrective to the biological assumptions perpetuated by white literary naturalism.

In *The Racial Contract* (1997), Charles Mills points out that in regards to the logic of race, “[w]e are blinded to realities that we should see, taking for granted as natural what are in fact human-created structures” (123), a blindness contingent upon a collective white complicity with es-

tablished systems of power. Whether overt or accidental, this complicity foregrounds supposedly race-less or universal claims to human identity that leave existing racial hierarchies silently intact. Mills goes on to note that “[t]he hypocrisy of the racial polity is most transparent to its victims” (110). For Dunbar, this hypocrisy reflects the logic of white determinism. As Mills explains, one of the virtues of the “Racial Contract” is that “it simultaneously recognizes the *reality* of race (causal power, theoretical centrality) and demystifies race (positing race as constructed). Historically, the most influential theories of race have themselves been racist, varieties of more or less sophisticated biological determinism” (125). Mills’s choice to invoke Ralph Ellison’s “*inner eye*” as a means to understand American racism and the racial contract is illuminating, in that Ellison’s literary trope draws upon the same logic of white determinism Dunbar creates to confront the white social control affecting black existence and well-being.³ Dunbar’s naturalism presents white social control as a deterministic influence on black life. White naturalism traditionally subordinates human agency to the laws of nature, portraying social practices and institutions as environmentally or biologically necessary. Dunbar’s black naturalism, on the other hand, focuses on the discrepancy between white and black social agency, even when both groups may be unaware of that difference. Dunbar’s white determinism thus differs from the determinism of white naturalism; while whites believe that black cultural and racial difference is based on biological difference, that difference is a product of the systemic discrepancies that exist between whites and blacks, including but not limited to white agency and autonomy, entrenched white political power, and white economic control.

In Dunbar’s fiction, white determinism affects both white and black characters. For whites, it conditions their interactions with blacks, in that they are governed by the illusions they have internalized. The white gaze functions as a force of socialization, and white claims regarding African Americans, even when incorrect, wield cultural power when accepted and carried forward. Furthermore, there are almost no repercussions for internalizing these incorrect assumptions, specifically as this view most often reflects the normative status quo. White cultural institutions like the press, the legal system, the political system, and even the church contribute to reproducing this mindset, making it appear as natural to white subjects. Even whites who choose to be agents of change or desire to interact freely with blacks—and here I am thinking of characters like Dr. Melville from “The Lynching of Jube Benson” (1904) or Skaggs from *The Sport of the Gods* (1902)—tend to create problems for black characters precisely because they are not fully aware of the attitudes accompanying their behav-

ior.⁴ In Dunbar's hands, white determinism reveals the manner in which sociological belief masks itself as biological truth, and white Western hubris masquerades as scientific legitimacy.

For black characters, white determinism functions as the overarching "natural" law governing their lives: it is the material reality affecting their daily lives. Thus, the central issue for Dunbar's black characters is often whether they are cognizant of whiteness as a controlling force in their lives. And Dunbar's fiction is littered with characters on both sides of the divide. Those who are conscious of their social position in regard to white power—characters like Rev. Howard Dokesbury in "The Ordeal at Mt. Hope" (1898) or Robinson Asbury in "The Scapegoat" (1904)—stand as models for how to negotiate and live within the organizing superstructure of whiteness. However, for characters who remain oblivious, or who uncritically cast their lot with whiteness—characters like Bertram Halliday in "One Man's Fortunes" (1900) or the entire Hamilton family in *Sport*—their failure is preordained. Joe Hamilton, for example, ensures his destruction by internalizing white norms and codes of conduct, norms that are unavailable to him as a black man.⁵ These characters' decisions to explicitly confront established white systems of power (Halliday) or to inadvertently assume that the choice to follow white codes of behavior will lead to a material improvement in their lives (Hamilton)—to pretend, in other words, that the white determinism governing their lives does not exist—leaves them frustrated and broken at the end of their narratives.

Dunbar's naturalist ethos traces the social imperatives of white determinism, using a combination of white and black perspectives to reveal the reality of African American life. Central to Dunbar's vision is an interest in documenting racial difference and inequality as a creation of whiteness and white social consent; it is a naturalized logic that carries public endorsement, allowing white social belief to parade itself *as* scientific and biological reality. While Dunbar's short fiction reveals the multiplicity of Dunbar's different naturalist strategies, it is *The Sport of the Gods* that brings together the different threads of Dunbar's naturalistic vision; the novel provides the most compelling example of Dunbar's naturalist strategies of white determinism. But before turning to Dunbar's short fiction and *Sport*, it is necessary to examine white determinism in more detail.

Contextualizing White Determinism

Dunbar's white determinism applies mainly to texts featuring both white and black characters. To better understand the way that the social forces governing African American life became the focus of Dunbar's naturalist

vision, I first want to consider the period's established literary values. As Shelly Fisher Fishkin observes in "Race and the Politics of Memory: Mark Twain and Paul Laurence Dunbar" (2006),

the national media in the 1880s and 1890s—publishing houses and popular magazines like *Scribner's*, *Lippincott's*, *Century*, *Harper's*, and the *Atlantic Monthly*—largely ignored the impact that economic deprivation, the convict-lease system, lynchings, and the rollback in civil and political rights were having on African Americans, preferring instead nostalgic, sentimental stories filled with benevolent masters and grateful ex-slaves or heartwarming tales of reconciliation and reunion between Northern and Southern whites. (285)

The ubiquity of these romantic and wistful representations reflect the growth of stereotypical cultural perceptions regarding blacks in the white imagination, assessments that, once accepted, were rapidly transformed into biological definitions. Arthur John makes a similar point in *The Best Years of the Century* (1981), noting that "southern writers used blacks to dramatize the accepted theory of race relations, painting them either as faithful family retainers or as confused freemen and women under the friendly wardship of white people" (65). The tension between "dramatize" and "accepted theory," in that one implies construction for literary effect while the other invokes the application of scientific principles, points to the ways that reinforcing stereotypes could be used to document pseudo-scientific beliefs concerning black inferiority. In this way, fictional representations of blacks became a tool for authors to articulate the role of black bodies in the public sphere, and literature was put to work in the service of naturalizing white social control.

The emergence of naturalism as a representational strategy participated in perpetuating the social construction of racial difference. In the recent *Oxford Handbook of American Literary Naturalism* (2011), Eric Carl Link identifies naturalists as "those authors who engage, at a thematic level, post-Darwinian reconsiderations of the relationships between humans and nature." He continues:

[t]his engagement manifests itself in explorations of natural law, evolution, atavism, and degeneration, as well as in the philosophical, sociological, and psychological implications of such engagement. As a result, the issues pursued by the American literary naturalists are wide ranging but include, to cite just a few examples, questions concerning the deterministic pressures of heredity and environmental forces, the theologically challenging implications of materialism and biological reductionism, the emergent issues in race and gender theory invoked by

aspects of evolutionary theory, and the ethical complications of social Darwinism. (72)

The textual explorations of hereditary and biological determinism pursued by American naturalists were influenced by the emerging scientific discourse of the period, but they were equally contingent upon the representations of blacks promoted by American realist literary practice as well as magazines and publishing houses. June Howard's observations in *Form and History in American Literary History* (1985) are relevant in this regard. Discussing Frank Norris's vision of naturalism, Howard states that,

[f]or Norris as for others of his period hereditary determinism offers a satisfying way of understanding individual destiny in terms of biology, social problems in terms of the evolution of the species—in short, the historical as the natural. But its consequences as worked out in the narratives themselves often reinscribe the disturbing social contradictions that the abstract theories claim to resolve. (93)

Keith Newlin's examination of Dreiser's naturalistic vision in the recent *Oxford Handbook* comes to similar conclusions; he observes that "Dreiser's lifelong habit of dipping into scientific and pseudo-scientific explanations for human action and then incorporating them into his fiction reveals his desire to achieve this 'total knowledge' and therefore make sense of his world" (108). Norris's conflation of "social problems" with "evolution" and the "historical as the natural" erases individual human agency and action through making the sequential events of history causal. While the past undoubtedly influences the present, it is neither natural nor preordained. And in the case of white representations of African Americans, these cultural attitudes became the means by which white social standards reinscribe and reinforce the white normative gaze, whether based on material reality or not. Dreiser's "desire to achieve this 'total knowledge' and therefore make sense of his world" functions in a similar manner; in drawing upon "pseudo-scientific explanations" to categorize the world, Dreiser allows an interest in fictional cohesion to stand in for sociological understanding, presenting the period's "accepted theory of race relations" that John points to as normative and thus natural biological truth.

As the critical comments on Norris and Dreiser indicate, the objectivity required to represent the laws of the natural world in the naturalist novel is simultaneously influenced by an author's relationship to the current social order; an author's investment in the latter complicates her or his ability to lay claim to the former in exclusively disinterested terms.⁶ In other words, using the novel as a space for objective scientific experimen-

tation is compromised by an author's complicity with larger social mores. As June Howard argues in *Form and History*, "belief in the transparency of representation" (17) as it relates to the supposed objectivity of literary representation

fails to take into account how deeply metaphor is embedded in our language. . . . [I]t transfers commonsensical assumptions about how one ordinarily perceives other people directly into literary convention, when such assumptions demand to be more closely bound to culture, class, gender, to have their content specified by reference to particular historical situations. (19)

The transition from stereotypical "assumption" to "literary convention" highlights the role of metaphor in naturalizing social perception as inherent or natural truth. Applied to naturalist fiction, when metaphoric comparison is no longer seen as such, and instead is taken for reality, the cultural attitudes of white naturalist authors are allowed to stand in as normative and natural, and authorial assumption is transformed into biological expectation.⁷ This transformation of perception into "literary convention" functions along the same lines as John's observation that "southern writers used blacks to dramatize the accepted theory of race relations" (65). In both, the white literary gaze participates in naturalizing a set of social expectations shared between authors and readers. Thus, the "transfer" that Howard points out directly participates in "reinscrib[ing] the disturbing social contradictions that the abstract theories [of naturalism] claim to resolve" (93), and theory becomes practice. Or, as is more often the case in the history of race relations in America, pseudo-theory becomes practice, with pseudo-theory representing a "white is right" ethos privileging white interests and social values.

The collective cultural blindness that is simultaneously created and reinforced by the uncritically internalized set of white assumptions regarding African Americans found in naturalism represents white determinism in its broadest configurations. While naturalism inherited the basic parameters of its racial thought from realist literary practice and American culture writ large, it was the conflating of white social belief concerning African Americans with natural law that ultimately created the white determinism Dunbar was responding to with his fiction. I have argued elsewhere that Dunbar's *Sport* reveals that "black pastoral identities are *not* inherent truths, but are instead naturalized social conditions that have constructed blacks in the public imagination. Dunbar presents the limitations that African American characters face as a function of white social

behavior, not heredity” (221). It is the influence of “white social behavior” as the logic underwriting and informing white determinism that I want to apply more intentionally—and more broadly—to Dunbar’s short fiction.

Others before me have made similar arguments concerning Dunbar’s relationship with naturalism. John Dudley explains in *A Man’s Game* (2004) that

black authors [like Dunbar and Chesnut] were drawn to [naturalism] for the same array of reasons as any other author: naturalism was, to a degree, fashionable within the broader American literary community. Furthermore, its emphasis on social problems and economic forces would have immense appeal for African Americans, who knew, perhaps better than anyone, the debilitating effects of such forces on the aspirations of the individual and the exercise of free will. (139)

Dudley connects the narrative opportunity to be found in naturalism with the transformative possibilities African American authors like Dunbar and Chesnut hoped to create via literature. In “Dunbar and Degradation: *The Sport of the Gods* in Context” (2005), Lorenzo Thomas notes that the “injustices depicted in [Dunbar’s] novel can be traced to human agency” before arguing that “Dunbar . . . uses the conventions of Naturalism in a manner intended to reveal biological determinism’s inadequacy to explain American race relations” (164). While Thomas contends that Dunbar ultimately satirizes naturalism, I would argue that Dunbar’s attempts to reveal the “human agency” behind white biological assumptions is part of his black naturalist documentation of white determinism’s cultural power. In mapping the process through which white social power and agency masquerade as biological determinism, Dunbar makes traditional naturalist determinist thought serve his own literary ends. More recently, Jonathan Diagle notes that the black naturalism seen in *Sport* offers “both a moral condemnation of characters’ decisions and a window into the conditions that limit these choices” (644). While characters remain unaware of these conditions, Dunbar, in true naturalist fashion, desires to make readers cognizant of them. And as Joe Hamilton’s behavior reflects, blacks are not any more immune than whites to the effects of white determinism.

These three critics focus primarily on *The Sport of the Gods*, Dunbar’s last novel, in making their case for Dunbar’s naturalist strategies. As Gene Jarrett argues in *Deans and Truants*, “Dunbar’s oeuvre suffers from the scholarly reflex to treat anomalous texts as if they never existed. He is well known for his dialect poetry and novel of racial uplift, *The Sport of the Gods* (1902), but less known for his many poems in formal English and his

collections of short stories and novels about the Midwest” (53). In light of his comments, Jarrett turns to Dunbar’s first novel, *The Uncalled* (1898), to examine the growth and development of Dunbar’s naturalist sensibilities. Jarrett concludes, “[t]he formal properties of *The Uncalled* suggest that, before Norris and Dreiser, Dunbar was already experimenting with literary ways of stretching realism in naturalist directions” (64).⁸ While I certainly concur with Jarrett’s assessments of Dunbar, my main interest is in the way Dunbar crafts white determinism through texts explicitly focusing on the interactions between white and black characters, specifically in regard to the literary strategies he develops to challenge the internalized racism of his readers. I invoke Jarrett’s argument not only for its influence on my understanding of Dunbar, but for the ways in which his argument regarding Dunbar’s “anomalous” fiction clarifies the longstanding critical inability to recognize Dunbar’s intentional engagement with naturalism. Both race, and the assumptions regarding race, have contributed to limiting the discussion of naturalism in black texts.

Thus, as Jarrett argues, not only has *The Uncalled* “fallen through the cracks of African American literary studies” (53), it has fallen through the cracks of white American literary studies as well. Eric Carl Link’s contribution to the *Oxford Handbook*—which also provides the definition of naturalism quoted above—uses Wittgenstein’s concept of family resemblances to “refer to that loose confederation of authors whose texts are profitably discussed within the context of the above definition and whose works bear some familial resemblance” (72). This application looks to group authors together under a broad umbrella that recognizes the family of generic similarity. At the same time, the choice to insert a financial term—“profitably”—to describe the collective value accrued by this group shifts the cohesion from a familial to a political resemblance. After all, to be profitable there must be broader agreement than mere subject matter. Familial resemblance should include, to use Jarrett’s language, “anomalous” texts traditionally seen as—and please forgive the pun—the black sheep of the family. While I am cognizant that I am taking liberties with Link’s use of “profitably”—after all, this could equally refer to the intellectual interest of the critic, regardless of the financial root of the term—I think my point is one still worth making, specifically when we ask “profitable for whom?” When race gets included, and specifically white views of African Americans, Dunbar’s desire to challenge the racial assumptions governing not only white naturalist authors but also white realist authors is certainly not a profitable endeavor for the status quo, especially given that these are a part of the normative framework organizing

American culture. In this instance, it is much easier to ignore or dismiss Dunbar, which leads me back to Jarrett's comments regarding Dunbar's "anomalous" fiction, and the way perceived racial difference traditionally impedes notions of family resemblance.⁹ Lisa Long makes a similar point in "Genre Matters: Embodying American Literary Naturalism" (2007), an extended review of John Dudley's *A Man's Game*, Jennifer Fleissner's *Women, Compulsion, Modernity*, and Eric Carl Link's *The Vast and Terrible Drama*. Towards the end of her review, Long asserts that "[b]eing recognized as a legitimate family member of a generic family is crucial to literary visibility" (173).¹⁰ It is making Dunbar a "legitimate family member" that will transform discussions of both Dunbar and American literary naturalism. After all, while the goal of Dunbar's black naturalism is to take on the difference produced by the cultural logic of white determinism, it still functions in a manner similar to other naturalist texts of the period. For Dunbar, white determinism actively participates in producing white cultural belief in biological racial difference. While the most obvious victims of white determinism may be whites themselves, the actual costs are born by African Americans in the material reality they experience at the hands of entrenched white social power. In this sense, white recourse to scientific objectivity becomes the means to justify a social hierarchy privileging whiteness.

Racism as Disease: Dunbar's Short Fiction

Dunbar's speaking tour of England from February 1897 to August 1897 in support of *Majors and Minors* was a watershed moment for both his career and his turn towards naturalism (see Jarrett, *Deans and Truants* 58–59). Not only did he return with a manuscript for *The Uncalled* (1898) and several stories that would be included in his first collection, *Folks from Dixie* (1898), the trip gave him new insights into American race relations. The essays he published after his return provide a window into Dunbar's developing sense of the role white determinism plays in organizing the lives of African Americans. In "England as Seen by a Black Man," published in *The Independent* on September 16, 1897, Dunbar observes,

The negro who takes a right view of the matter must realize that it is not so much what he has lost in coming home as it is what he has learned in being away, that is of value. To be sure, it is a great thing to have been accepted upon the basis of worth alone; to have found a people who do not assert color as a badge of degradation. But it is more to have learned that an unmistakably great people look upon the black race in America with hope, interest, and admiration. (177)

In taking the “right view” of his experiences, Dunbar learns that whiteness is not monolithic, that there are ways to distinguish between the types of whiteness as they exist in America and England, and that not all whites look down upon African Americans. It is this distinction that gives “value” and insight to his perspective when freshly applied to his American context:

I remember being told by a genial Western American that his little son was a perfect aristocrat, and, in support of his statement, he related to me how his young heir would show his extreme contempt for servants and people below his class. He was delighted at the child’s early recognition of his own superiority. To my mind, feeling as I do the danger which menaces us from the very feeling of our independence, it was a serious fault that needed speedy correction. (178)

Dunbar’s description of the child’s behavior as a “danger which menaces us,” coupled with identifying it as a “serious fault” instead of accepting the man’s explanation of it as an “early recognition of his own superiority,” points to Dunbar’s awareness of the ease in which notions of power and privilege are internalized and accepted as legitimate as well as the larger danger that such unconscious action represents. This observation, appearing in an essay highlighting Dunbar’s awareness of the distinctions between whites in America and England and carrying with it the identification of the speaker as a “Western American,” points to the problems created by whiteness as practiced in an American context. That the father cannot see his own influence in his child—the choice of “perfect” to qualify “aristocrat” marks the child’s behavior as natural, as does the empirical “support” provided to justify his claims and document his son’s behavior—further reveals the dangers of unconsciously internalized norms. While race is not explicitly invoked—after all, the man is telling the story to an African American—the description of “people below his class” still rings with the paternalistic logic of Anglo-Saxon superiority.

At the same time, Dunbar’s goal is to augment the happiness and contentment of his fellow African Americans in the face of American social attitudes. While Dunbar is aware “that I shall be accused of applauding . . . the stifling of honest ambition” (179), he nonetheless advises his fellow African Americans to

stop and recognize their limitations—learn a lesson of these stolid people and cease to fret away their little lives in unavailing effort. I want this for the blacks because I want them to be happy. I do not want them to continue to imbibe the dangerous draught which has intoxi-

cated their white brothers of this Western world and sent them raving madmen, struggling for life at the expense of their fellows in the stock-markets and the wheat-pits of our great cities. (180)

The “stolid people” Dunbar refers to are British subjects who exhibit a “stolid, common-sense philosophy of life” (179). The “dangerous draught” of competition that makes white Americans “struggl[e] for life at the expense of their fellows” represents a mindset that Dunbar does not want to see emulated by blacks. After all, this outlook is the same one currently impeding the progress of African Americans; as Dunbar continues, “[h]ere where there is so much opposition to his development, and, remember, I do not assert that is always conscious and intentional, the black man practices defense until it grows into aggression” (180). As with the child’s “extreme contempt,” the unconscious “opposition” to black development allows whites to live “at the expense” of African Americans.

Dunbar further extends the logic behind his observations of white assumptions regarding African Americans in “Our New Madness,” published in *The Independent* on August 18, 1898, noting that whites believe “[black] intellectual capacity is still in doubt. Any attempt at engaging in pursuits where his mind is employed is met by an attitude that stigmatizes his efforts as presumption. Then if the daring one succeeds, he is looked upon as a monster. He is put into the same category with the ‘two-headed boy’ and the ‘bearded lady’” (182).¹¹ Here, the language of monstrosity and abnormality identifies black “intellectual capacity” in the white imagination. The implication that such an idea is biologically unnatural and repugnant to a larger white audience, and thus only describable through recourse to aberrancy, highlights the naturalization of white social belief in regard to African Americans. When compared to the prior “opposition,” where white dislike of black behavior does not curtail the possibility of its existence, this essay points to the increasingly deleterious effects that unconscious white behavior can have on blacks as it becomes the rule of the day. The transformation of the sociological into the biological is one of the central elements of white deterministic thought that Dunbar takes up in his fiction. While there are numerous facets to the black naturalism Dunbar constructs to represent white determinism, I would like to trace out two often-interconnected threads: Dunbar’s documenting of the power wielded by the press in shaping and perpetuating white perceptions of blacks and his challenging the racialization of disease playing out in other naturalist texts by making racism itself into a disease.¹² Both are, in the abstract, standard fare in naturalist literary production; in Dunbar’s

hands, however, they become the means to record the power of white determinism to affect the lives of African Americans in an adverse manner.

Dunbar's emergence as an author coincided with the consolidation of science and literary naturalism as a form of public discourse. As John Dudley notes in "African American Writers and Naturalism," "the scientific discourse that gained currency during the nineteenth century, and which informed the emergence of literary naturalism, served as a powerful and oppressive tool for the perpetuation of slavery and the maintenance of racial segregation" (258). Gary Scharnhorst observes that "the earliest literary naturalists held that most criminals were atavists or evolutionary throwbacks with a hereditary predisposition to commit crime" (339). And Jeanne Campbell Reesman links these points together, remarking that "instead of treating race or criminality objectively, most naturalists went along with popular beliefs in hereditary determinism that fueled both racism and racialism" (274). While naturalism was initially viewed in a skeptical manner by realists like William Dean Howells, it did share an investment in the scientific discourse of the day. And once it achieved a level of autonomy from Howellsian realism, naturalism flourished. Thus, Dunbar's handling of the press and disease find connections in the work of other naturalists.¹³ While Norris and other white naturalists participate in perpetuating racial categories through employing biological determinism, Dunbar uses the same naturalistic structures to question the socially sanctioned beliefs in black inferiority as a form of socialized white determinism.

From the beginning, Dunbar's short stories offer examples of the ways in which the press participates in positioning African Americans while simultaneously providing black characters who contradict such representations, challenging the pernicious assumptions forwarded by the press. In "Nelse Hatton's Vengeance" (1898), the narrative voice observes,

If this story were chronicling the doings of some fanciful Negro, or some really rude plantation hand, it might be said that the "front room was filled with a conglomeration of cheap but pretentious furniture, and the walls covered with gaudy prints"—this seems to be the usual phrase. But in it the chronicler often forgets how many Negroes were house-servants, and from close contact with their master's families imbibed aristocratic notions and quiet but elegant tastes. (62)

The implications behind the stock language of "the usual phrase" is that there is an established descriptive vocabulary in place to represent African Americans, a discourse that can cover the full gamut of black experience from the "fanciful Negro" to the "rude plantation hand." As the narrative

voice makes clear, however, Nelse Hatton and his family do not fit the stock language normatively used to describe blacks.¹⁴ Instead, as Dunbar documents, Hatton's family reflects the depth and complexity of experience within the African American community, one that transcends the formulaic representational rhetoric positioning black life as singular and simple. In doing so, Dunbar calls attention to the types of social, economic, and class distinctions that remained unrecognized in the white popular press, and by proxy, in his white readership.

Dunbar's short fiction also engages the press's role in fomenting white violence towards blacks, both in terms of the press's participation in justifying the violent actions of whites and in purposefully misrepresenting the interactions between whites and blacks. For example, in "The Tragedy at Three Forks" (1900), when Jane Hunster, a jealous white girl, burns down the house and barn of her rival's family, the local community quickly blames blacks for perpetuating the deed. 'Lias Hunster, who is unaware of his daughter's guilt, "voiced the popular sentiment by saying, 'Look a here, folks, I tell you that's the work o' niggers, I kin see their hand in it'" (172). The recourse here to "the popular sentiment" functions in a similar manner to "the usual phrase" in the last example, in that stereotypical assumptions about African Americans—in this case, white beliefs about black criminality—govern the thoughts and actions of whites. The crowd's response to Hunster—"Why didn't we think of it before? It's jest like 'em"—reinforces the stock conventionality of Hunster's comment, even though readers are already aware of Jane's guilt. Dunbar's story clearly indicates the source of this "popular sentiment": "Public opinion ran high and fermented until Saturday afternoon when the county paper brought the whole matter to a climax by coming out in a sulphurous account of the affair. . . . The article went on to give the facts of the case, and many more supposed facts, which had originated entirely in the mind of the correspondent" (172). The incendiary and volatile implications of "sulphurous" indicate the press's role in sparking the violence that consumes the community; "soon" after reading the paper's account, "excited, inflamed and misguided parties of men and boys were scouring the woods," and when two black strangers are found, they are arrested and later lynched. These actions are predicated on the arson committed by a white woman, the duplicity of the "popular sentiment" believed by the white community, and the "factual" lies reported by the correspondent.

The lynching itself, however, allows Dunbar to further pillory the moral bankruptcy of the white community. Once in jail, the prosecuting attorney convinces the two black men that the only way to prevent being

lynched is to confess to the crime. Not surprisingly, “the report got abroad that the negroes had confessed to their crime, and soon after dark, ominous looking crowds began to gather in the street” (173). Jane Hunster fears the coming lynching, telling her fiancé, Bud Mason, that the crowd “mustn’t do it. . . . They ain’t ever been tried! . . . somebody’s jest a lyin’ on ’em to git ’em hung because they’re niggers” (174). Jane’s confession, albeit framed to cover her actions, points to a remorse that comes too late; she may feel terrible, but she does nothing to stop the crowd. Bud, for his part, responds, “Somebody’s got to suffer fur that house-burnin’, an’ it might ez well be them ez anybody else. You mustn’t talk so. Ef people knowed you was standin’ up fur niggers so, it ’ud ruin you.” Bud’s comments link the devaluation of black life with notions of white feminine respectability; he is indifferent to their impending death because of his concern for her reputation in the community, as Jane’s speaking up for those he sees as having no value threatens her good name. Bud, like Jane’s father, is not aware of her guilt, or in this case, her already ruined reputation. Instead of staying with Jane, Bud leaves to attend the lynching; he is killed during a struggle for a piece of rope used in the lynching by Dock Heaters, an earlier rival for Jane’s affection, and it would seem that white violence has turned upon itself. However, different rules apply to whiteness, and the call to lynch Heaters is met with the response, “Give a white man a chance for his life” (175). This “chance,” one not extended to the two anonymous blacks killed in the story, is heightened when Heaters is allowed to escape to avoid having to deal with the law. In this case, the lack of a trial for Heaters has a corresponding beneficial outcome, and the utter indifference expressed by Bud in regards to black life is mirrored in the indifference in bringing Heaters to justice. When Jane acknowledges the inevitability of the results “with a stony, vacant stare” (176), she becomes, according to the naturalist ethos of the story, the “somebody” to suffer, even though the cost of this suffering has been paid in black life.

But this is not where the story ends. While white determinism is connected to a lack of morality—blacks must pay for white criminality while white criminality is excused—the story concludes by returning to the role of the press in sanctioning oppression and inequality:

The press was full of the double lynching and the murder. Conservative editors wrote leaders about it in which they deplored the rashness of the hanging but warned the negroes that the only way to stop lynching was to quit the crimes of which they so often stood accused. But only in one little obscure sheet did an editor think to say; “There was Salem and its witchcraft; there is the south and its lynching. When the blind frenzy of

a people condemn a man as soon as he is accused, his enemies need not look far for a pretext!" (176)

While this conclusion is a bit didactic—and by that I mean naturalistic—it does attempt to call to the reader's attention the discrepancy between what happened in the story and white perception of those events by linking editorial response to notions of justice. "Conservative editors" quite literally blame the victims, both for being lynched and, it would seem, for inciting the violence that led to Bud Mason's murder. The level of difference in the responses—the many versus the "one little obscure sheet"—points to the ability of the press to rationalize white social behavior as well as the institutional discrepancy reflected in the power between the differing perspectives. At the same time, the choice of "think" to describe the minority newspaper clarifies who holds the upper moral hand, even with the lack of social power connected to this position. In indicating the role of the press in inciting the white community's desire for violence as well as its participation in perpetuating false assumptions concerning African Americans, Dunbar's story questions the supposed objectivity of the press by highlighting its role in sanctioning white social control.¹⁵ After all, readers are aware from the start that Jane Hunster's actions are the cause of white violence and anger, not the traditional scapegoat of black criminality put forward by the community as well as newspaper correspondents and editors alike.

"The Lynching of Jube Benson" (1904) offers a similar account. Dr. Melville, the story's narrator, locates the influence of "tradition" and a "false education" (379) on his understanding of blacks. As he recounts his story, he observes, "At first I was told that the black man would catch me, and when I got over that, they taught me that the devil was black, and when I had recovered from the sickness of that belief, here were Jube and his fellows with faces of menacing blackness." Melville's "false education" immediately precedes his description of the coming together of the various search parties after capturing Jube Benson: "The ingathering parties from all directions met us as we made our way up to the house. All was very quiet and orderly. There was no doubt that it was as the papers would have said, a gathering of the best citizens. It was a gathering of stern, determined men, bent on a terrible vengeance" (379). Melville's language links the white community's behavior with the descriptive language of reporting. The "quiet and orderly" account of white behavior minimizes the lawlessness of their actions, while commenting on the quality of the citizens involved gives an implied moral sanction to their decisions. Further,

the use of “gathering” to describe the group’s choice to assemble strips the moment of any violent or mob-like connotations; instead, it carries the ring of a pleasant social event intended for the enjoyment of the participants. However, the initial connection between the press and the community gives way in the final sentence, emphasizing Melville’s transformation from unconscious participant to a more consciously self-aware narrative presence. The parallelism of the last two sentences combined with the shift in tone between them emphasizes the actuality of the “terrible vengeance” enacted here in the name of whiteness. By using a white narrative perspective to challenge the impulse to rationalize community behavior in the justificatory language of the press’s representational rhetoric, Dunbar indicates the type of transformation he would like to see in his readers—until whiteness is able to police and control itself, there will be no actual change in the social interactions between whites and blacks.¹⁶ In both of these lynching stories, Dunbar documents the problems created for African Americans by the cultural and social complicity of the press in reinforcing the dehumanizing stereotypes that whites use to sanction violence against blacks.

Dunbar’s description of Melville’s “false education” as a “sickness of . . . belief” that he needs to overcome also identifies the ways in which racism functions as a disease. Melville’s “false education” teaches him to identify Jube “as a monster” and as someone who “stood for all the powers of evil” (379). Noting Jube’s abilities as an “admirable liar” in scaring off Annie Daly’s other suitors, Melville states, “when I would rebuke him for these deceptions, he would give way and roll on the floor in an excess of delighted laughter until from very contagion I had to join him” (376). In describing Jube’s laughter as a “contagion,” Melville notes more than its infectious qualities and instead draws upon beliefs in black criminality and deception that were linked to biological atavism. While Jube’s actions serve Melville’s interests—and in fact Melville also identifies himself as “a young fool of a hypocrite” in the passage—Melville applies different rules to their respective behavior. Thus, the subsequent attack on Annie leads Melville to draw again on the racial logic of his “false education” to describe Jube’s behavior: “Fully a dozen of the citizens had seen him hastening towards the woods and noted his skulking air, but as he had grinned in his old good-natured way they had, at the time, thought nothing of it. Now, however, the diabolical reason of his slyness was apparent. He had been shrewd enough to disarm suspicion, and by now was far away” (378). For Melville, Jube’s criminal nature is reflected in the intent to deceive. Jube’s outward performance—his grinning and “good-natured”

behavior—can't hide the "skulking" and "slyness" of his inherent racial difference. In doing so, Melville condemns Jube's attempts at cross-racial friendship in helping him to get the girl as a product of racial depravity.

However, in identifying Melville's sickness as one of "belief," Dunbar at the same time undercuts the biological imperative governing Melville's convictions. After all, this is a frame narrative, one retold by Melville from the perspective of the present to convince two other white males—Gordon Fairfax and Handon Gay—that lynchings are not merely spectacles to be "callously" (375) consumed. Described as prematurely aged, Melville comes across as regretful for his role in killing Jube. In the retelling, Dunbar extends his initial presentation of racism as a disease, looking to further unhinge white assumptions regarding African Americans from biological ascriptions connected to degeneration and disease—like those expressed by Melville above—by identifying the social influences creating these beliefs.¹⁷ When Melville describes his experiences during the typhoid outbreak in the town, he notes "the reaction from overwork made me an easy victim of the lurking germs" (376). This description functions both literally and figuratively. Literally, it reflects the onset of Melville's contraction of typhoid via the hard work he does in caring for the community. Figuratively, however, it reflects his internalization of the community's values regarding blacks. After all, Melville is an educated outsider to this community. While Melville at one point refers to the citizens of Bradford as "simple and generous," he also describes the town as "small and primitive" and the people as "coarse and rough" (375). His desire to fit in and be accepted in the community—to successfully woo Annie Daly, for example, whom Melville describes as "superior to her surroundings"—simultaneously invokes the "overwork" that makes him an "easy victim" to the community's views. As a gregarious white male, Melville is quite literally seduced by Bradford's small town values, opting to "adando[n] my intention of seeking distinction in wider fields" (375). Just as the "lurking germs" ambush Melville during his weakness, the malevolent values of the community ensnare Melville in the face of his blossoming love for Annie Daly.

Melville's acceptance of Bradford's viewpoint is expressed in his motivations to search out Jube after the attack on Annie: "I went forward under the impulse of a will that was half my own, half some more malignant power's" (378). While the choice of "malignant" could be read as a naturalist claim to abstract human nature, it is more productive to connect this to Dunbar's larger critique of the influence of white social belief. After all, "malignant" not only corresponds to the description of the malicious "lurking germs," it is also the force impeding and affecting Mel-

ville's own will. The possessive connected to "power" gives agency to this force, an agency that implies social influence more than biological imperative. Coupled with the animalistic descriptions used to depict whites—Melville narrates that the group of men "gathered around [Jube] like hungry beasts" and recounts that he could now "interpret the panther's desire for blood and sympathise with it"—Dunbar indicates the dangers for whites created by white pathological thought. And, as with "The Tragedy at Three Forks," black bodies are made to pay the cost for the maintenance of white determinism. Both stories, however, foreground white inhumanity as a pattern of belief applied with the conviction of biological certainty, a sickness that takes on deterministic dimensions for African Americans.

"Slumming in Determinism": *The Sport of the Gods*

Dunbar's *The Sport of the Gods* (1902) extends his naturalist portrayal of the damage done by the press in general and reporters in specific, as well as the disease of racism. While Skaggs, the slumming white northern newspaper reporter who gets Berry Hamilton out of jail, has been positioned in ostensibly complimentary critical terms,¹⁸ these descriptions do not correspond with Dunbar's collective censure of the press in his fiction. In fact, they do not even correspond with Dunbar's initial presentation of the Southern press; the narrator describes the town's reaction to Berry Hamilton's arrest as accepting the unseemly nature of the events:

The arrest of Berry Hamilton on the charge preferred by his employer was the cause of unusual commotion in the town. Both the accuser and the accused were well known to the citizens, white and black,—Maurice Oakley as a solid man of business, and Berry as an honest, sensible negro, and the pink of good servants. The evening papers had a full story of the crime, which closed by saying that the prisoner had amassed a considerable sum of money, it was very likely from a long series of smaller peculations. (27)

Not only does Maurice Oakley get to dictate Hamilton's criminal charges—they are, after all, the ones "preferred by his employer"—but the story in the paper presumes Hamilton's guilt by describing him as a "prisoner" and through asserting the "very likely" stereotypical assumptions of criminality to explain his accumulation of wealth. Rather than considering Hamilton's hard work and thrift, the press foregrounds explanations that justify the white perspective governing the novel.¹⁹ Thus, it is not surprising when the narrative voice asserts, "whites were not neglecting to re-

view and comment on the case. . . . It had been long since so great a bit of wrong-doing in a negro had given them cause for speculation and recrimination” (29). In other words, regardless of the actual experiences of whites, they use this one example—and a false one at that—to justify their long-standing assumptions about blacks.

Thus Horace Talbot, a white southerner “noted for his kindliness towards people of color” (29), describes his sentiments:

The North thought they were doing a great thing when they came down here and freed all the slaves. . . . But I maintain that they were all wrong, now, in turning these people loose upon the country the way they did, without knowledge of what the first principle of liberty was. The natural result is that these people are irresponsible. . . . Why, gentlemen, I maintain that that [Hamilton] took that money with the same innocence of purpose with which one of our servants a few years ago would have appropriated a stray ham. (30)

The use of “natural” indicates Talbot’s adherence to beliefs in black criminality and atavism; his comparison between Hamilton’s actions and the “innocence of purpose” of a slave stealing a ham reveals his trust in the biological basis of these actions. This “kindliness” expressed by Talbot stands in contrast to Beachfield Davis’s assertion that Hamilton’s actions reflect the “total depravity” of all African Americans. These two positions, the “irresponsibility” (31) of Talbot and the “total depravity” of Davis, operate as the opposing poles of biological determinism whites apply to African Americans. While Talbot’s perspective offers compassion, it is a compassion of paternalism reserved for those he identifies as racial inferiors; as Talbot asserts, “I foresee the day when these people themselves shall come to us Southerners of their own accord and ask to be re-enslaved until such time as they shall be fit for freedom” (31). Hamilton’s “crime” becomes the metonymic moment whites use to justify their inequitable and recriminatory behavior towards blacks, sanctioning as legitimate their beliefs regarding the supposed criminality of African Americans. Having confirmed Hamilton’s guilt in its reporting, the press merely serves to reinforce and approve white social practice and thought.

Skaggs is introduced once the Hamilton family arrives in New York. Described as a “monumental liar” (69), Skaggs is more interested in lining his own pocket than fighting for social justice; Berry Hamilton’s freedom is merely a by-product of Skaggs’s story. Dunbar’s description of Skaggs’s editor as a “sacred Presence” (126) indicates the role the press plays in the novel. As with Melville’s “lurking germs,” the editor’s “sacred Presence”

plays a literal and figurative role; literally, it refers to the power he holds in relation to Skaggs. Figuratively, however, it refers to the larger social power the press wields—the fact that “Presence” is capitalized makes it one of the deterministic forces affecting black life. The introductory and concluding paragraphs to Chapter 17, titled “Yellow Journalism,” extends the narrator’s thoughts on Skaggs in specific and journalists in general. After physically accosting Maurice Oakley and then fighting off Leslie Oakley, his wife, to get the information he wants in the previous chapter, “Yellow Journalism” begins with Skaggs’s reflections about his behavior: “Mr. Skaggs had no qualms of conscience about the manner in which he had come by the damaging evidence against Maurice Oakley. It was enough for him that he had it. A corporation, he argued, had no soul, and therefore no conscience. How much less, then, should so small a part of a great corporation as himself be expected to have them?” (136). As a servant of the press, Skaggs sees himself as removed from the moral implications of his behavior. As long as his actions serve the greater good—an implied white greater good, might I add—Skaggs absolves himself of responsibility for his behavior.²⁰ Skaggs’s thoughts express, quite literally, a traditional naturalist conceit in declaring his lack of culpability for the events his actions set in motion. The narrative voice neither confirms nor denies the validity of Skaggs’s behavior until the end of the chapter, when Skaggs and his fellow reporters at the *Universe* rationalize their exploitation of Berry:

It would be better, they thought, for [Fannie] to tell him herself all that happened. No one of them was brave enough to stand to look in his eyes when he asked for his son and daughter, and they shifted their responsibility by pretending that they were doing it for his own good: that the blow would fall more gently upon him coming from her who had been his wife. (141–42)

Here, the narrative voice records the moral bankruptcy of the reporters, and having served his purpose as a piece of news, Berry is sent packing. As with Skaggs’s pretense not to need his “conscience,” his fellow reporters consciously shirk “their responsibility,” offering the condescending and paternalistic remark that it is “for his own good.” Fannie, on the other hand, indicates the growth of her awareness regarding white determinism in her comments when Berry shows up on her doorstep: “you don’t know nothin’, do you? Dey lef me to tell you?” (144). While Fannie, like Berry, was oblivious to the power of white determinism in the South, she is now cognizant of the ways in which white social control operates by exploiting blacks. And thus, while the Northern press rails against the farce of justice

presented in the Southern press, the Northern press is no less self-serving; each just exploits blacks in its own way. As the narrative voice attempts to drive home, Skaggs is merely another opportunistic white man willing to exploit blacks for his own financial well-being.

Thus while Skaggs goes “slumming in determinism” (125), to use June Howard’s phrase from *Form and History*, he does so without the results usually connected to the behavior of the “privileged spectator” (126). Instead, he is empowered by whiteness to exploit blacks for his own material ends. Howard’s reference to the “spectator’s immobility” (140) does not apply to Skaggs; he is never in danger or unable to act, his privilege is never called into question, and his opportunity for muckraking is both accidental and opportunistic—he cares only as it provides “a fatter lining for his own pocket” (Dunbar, *Sport* 136). As a part of Dunbar’s simultaneous critique of the power of the press and white determinism, Skaggs’s slumming is *not* connected to a desire “to learn through vicarious experience” (Howard 152); he is described by the narrative voice as a “constant visitor” who “came and spent the hours until it was time to go forth to bout or assignation” and *not* one of the “white visitors . . . who were young enough to be fascinated by the bizarre” (Dunbar 67). In Skaggs own words, he comes to the Banner Club for “inspiration” (68) for his pecuniary and financial interests.²¹ Skaggs’s interest is certainly shared by other whites as well; the narrative voice describes the club as a place where “Parasites came there to find their victims, politicians for votes, reporters for news, and artists for all kinds of colour and inspiration” (66). The infectious implication of “parasites” recalls the language of racism as disease seen elsewhere in Dunbar. Both the focus on the health and vitality stolen from the victims and the parallelism in the list between “parasites,” “politicians,” “reporters,” and “artists” indicates their role in creating the “poisonous miasma” (67) of this world. While some of these figures may themselves be African Americans—after all, the relationship between Mr. Thomas’s group and Joe Hamilton is described as “Shearing another lamb” (65)—this is more the exception than the rule. The link between the “inspiration” in this quote and Skaggs’s own comments reflects the pernicious influence Skaggs represents in the novel: he is another parasite living off the black community, draining both their strength and resources. In this way, Dunbar inverts naturalist conceptions regarding race and disease by portraying the debilitating effects of disease as ostensibly white, in that whiteness both participates in creating separation between white and black communities, and then actively exploits that separation for white financial gain.

Skaggs’s behavior, and that of reporters in general, highlights the com-

plicity of the press in sustaining stereotypical white conceptions of African Americans. Skaggs's interest in abdicating his individual moral responsibility in the face of larger determinist forces—the “great corporation” he works for, in this case—rings false when he is actually benefitting from his position in the social order; the “good” (135) he claims to have done is merely self-interest writ large. Skaggs's actions are part of the self-deluded white economic privilege underwriting Dunbar's white determinist vision. In this sense, Skaggs does follow the “sacred Presence” he serves; both manufacture “an opportunity to crow” (137) when one is not forthcoming, and Skaggs's vision of “good” covers the social agency privileging particular groups. Reesman's discussion of Donald Pizer's concept of “ethical” naturalism is useful here: “Pizer argues that the naturalist hero or heroine does not merely capitulate to social, economic, biological, and other forces arrayed against him or her, but instead in the struggle against such forces evinces an admirable moral goal, and further that the struggle itself is predicated on ethical grounds” (275). While Skaggs is by no means the “naturalist hero” of the novel—the closest to that would be Sadness—his is the most powerful white voice in the novel. His refusal to confront his own power and privilege—he “capitulate[s] to social, economic, biological, and other forces arrayed against him,” precisely because it serves his personal interests—stands in stark contrast to Dr. Melville in “The Lynching of Jube Benson.” While Melville is by no means perfect, he does recognize his complicity with white deterministic forces and is engaged in a moral struggle. Skaggs, on the other hand, actively avoids this struggle, serving instead as foil for the narrative voice to skewer, albeit in an ironically detached manner.

Melville's individual ethical struggle, however, faces its own complications from the press. Handon Gay, one of the two men listening to Melville's story and described as an “ambitious young reporter” (375), surreptitiously records Melville's story, although he is “careful to hide [this fact] from the speaker.” While Gay may be moved to a new depth of insight by Melville's story, his ultimate reaction is left indeterminate in the story—he may, like Skaggs, continue to exploit black suffering in the face of white racism for his own ends, perverting Melville's story to one that would better interest a white readership. Melville's personal struggle is complicated not only by the press, but by the silence of white characters like Jane Hunster and Colonel Saunders, who refuse to bring to light the lies supporting white determinism, as well as by white racial belief in the inherent biological difference of African Americans, a problem Melville suffers from himself. And as previously indicated, the white investment in black

criminality and biological inferiority not only puts African Americans on the defensive, it reifies the inequality blacks face in American society. In this sense, Dunbar's naturalist documentation of white determinism presents the ease with which American racism replicates itself in conjunction with the struggle necessary to remove the blindness it creates. And, as subsequent generations of African Americans authors demonstrate, it remains a fruitful lens to apply to their own times.

The Legacy of White Determinism

Of the numerous African American authors following in Dunbar's footsteps, Ann Petry is the closest adherent to Dunbar's white deterministic vision. Petry's *The Street* shares numerous narrative strategies with Dunbar in terms of examining the power and influence of white determinism on black subjects. Lutie Johnson, Petry's protagonist, struggles to escape the physical and mental economic constraints of 1940s Harlem; her awareness of the effects of whiteness upon blacks is simultaneously complicated by her blind allegiance to Benjamin Franklin's "pull-yourself-up-by-your-bootstraps" rhetoric. Johnson's acceptance of the Chandler's model of success directly links to the Hamilton family's acceptance of the Oakley's model of success—both foreground white sensibilities that are not equally open to African Americans. Her realization that blacks have two choices—to accept their second class citizenship or turn to crime—offers a sociological critique of the supposed biological beliefs connected to blackness: "So there's plenty of money to be made in Harlem. She supposed there was if people were willing to earn it by doing something that kept them just two jumps ahead of the law. Otherwise they eked out a miserable existence" (154). This realization allows Johnson to recognize that blacks had to "take reckless chances . . . so that they would be able to face a world that took pains to make them feel that they didn't belong, that they were inferior" (158). While the agency implied in the phrase, "took pains," could be attributed to environmental determinism via the use of "world" as the subject of the verb, it could just as easily—and actually should be—connected to white social power and control. This moment comes as Johnson contemplates white attempts to understand black behavior; while the paragraph in which this passage appears is governed by Johnson's perception, it is equally attuned to the limitations in whites' inability to understand the role they play in perpetuating the inequality between whites and blacks. The white perspective notes the suffering blacks experience, but refuses—like Skaggs—to accept any responsibility for that pain. Thus, locating agency in the "world" reflects an inability to under-

stand the relation between the power and privilege embodied in whiteness and the inferiority and lack of belonging that blacks experience: whites see the results without understanding the cause. In this sense, Johnson's thoughts become the vehicle to reveal black reality to white readers.

In another Dunbar-esque move, Petry is also critical of the press's representation of blacks:

The next day's papers said that a "burly Negro" had failed in his effort to hold up a bakery shop. . . . She held the paper in her hand for a long time, trying to follow the reasoning by which that thin ragged boy had become in the eyes of the reporter a "burly Negro." And she decided that it all depended on where you sat how these things looked. If you looked at them from the inside the framework of a fat weekly salary, and you thought of colored people as naturally criminal, then you didn't really see what any Negro looked like. You couldn't, because the Negro was never an individual. He was a threat, or an animal, or a curse, or a blight, or a joke. (198–99)

Johnson's inability to reconcile her experiences with those in the newspaper indicates another disjunction between the white and black perspectives in the novel. The economic privilege provided by a "fat weekly salary" blinds the reporter to the biological assumptions he foment. Further, the use of "burly Negro" is another example of "the usual phrase" of stock language describing African Americans in Dunbar; as Johnson realizes, this logic dehumanizes African Americans through recourse to stereotype. Petry's conclusion also reflects the deterministic influence of whiteness:

Finally, and the blows were heavier, faster, now, she was striking at the white world which thrust black people into a walled enclosure from which there was no escape; and at the turn-of-events which had forced her to leave Bub alone while she was working so that he now faced reform school, now had a police record.

She saw the face and the head of the man on the sofa through waves of anger in which she represented all these things and she was destroying them. (430)²²

Johnson's inability to circumvent the restrictions limiting black social mobility, figured in the wall imagery in the above passage and throughout the novel, leads her to lash out against white social control. While she destroys the outward manifestation of this power by killing Boots Smith, a black man who has allied himself with whiteness, the white power represented by Junto remains unaffected. Johnson's actions indicate the limitations imposed by the overarching power of whiteness in the novel; in striking back she also destroys herself—not only must she flee New York, but she

must also abandon her son, Bub, her primary motivation for overcoming white limitations in the first place.

Even in novels not ostensibly structured around naturalist themes or frameworks, the legacy of white determinism still exists. Colson Whitehead's *Sag Harbor* (2009), offers a recent example when the protagonist, Benji, reflects on the paradox of being one of the "black boys with beach houses" (72). His position is built upon the same white determinism Dunbar's characters face; as Benji recounts,

You could embrace the beach part—revel in the luxury, the perception of status. . . . You could embrace the black part—take some idea you had about what real blackness was, and make theater of it. . . . Or you could embrace the contradiction, say, what you call paradox, I call *myself*. In theory. Those inclined to this remedy didn't have many obvious models. (72)

The theoretical difficulty of embracing the paradox indicates the influence of social perception on Benji—he knows he *can* do this, but the lack of "obvious models" leaves him less certain as to the best manner to negotiate social norms. This struggle is not Benji's first encounter with the white norms influencing his sense of self:

I remember one day in the seventh grade when an old white man stopped us on a corner and asked us if we were the sons of diplomats. Little princes of an African country. The U.N. being half a mile away. Because—why else would black people dress like that? Looking up into his mossy teeth, I croaked a tiny "No" and tugged Reggie into the crosswalk, as my don't-talk-to-strangers/everyone-is-a-child-molester training kicked in. . . . When strangers stopped us on the street asking questions, we knew what to do. Keep walking, brother. What did he look like? Senior partner in the law firm of Cracker, Cracker & Cracker. (7)

While this example is certainly more tongue-in-cheek than earlier ones, it nonetheless highlights the perceptions governing white beliefs regarding African Americans. Benji's ability to recognize the logic informing this man's question, presented at the same time through the rhetoric of childhood "training," is based upon his understanding of the racial codes informing white stereotypical assumptions.

As both Petry and Whitehead demonstrate, Dunbar's white determinist strategies are still valuable when attempting to de-naturalize the biological assumptions silently informing white perceptions regarding African Americans. Melville's ethical struggle to rid himself of the vestiges of his racial thought is an important one, not only to remove the structural

racism masquerading itself as natural, but to explicitly confront the silent complicity that allows it to perpetuate. In making whiteness one of the deterministic forces functioning in American literary naturalism, Dunbar confronts the scientific racism of his day through demonstrating the power of whiteness to adversely affect African American life while simultaneously revealing the reciprocal privilege of ignoring inequality that accompanies this power. If, as John Dudley argues, black naturalism represents an “unusually syncretic form” for its ability to adapt “a wide range of historical and aesthetic traditions” (“African American” 258), then more work is needed to identify and document the strategies employed by African American authors to make naturalism a literary form that can represent and reflect the complexity of American life, both black and white.

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NOTES

1. More specifically, Jarrett argues in *Deans and Truants* that “Howells’s critical impressions of Dunbar—impressions molded by the cultural experience of minstrelsy—should not be dismissed merely as racist, although Howells’s racist slips do factor into his interpretations of Dunbar’s poetry. More important, we must explore Howells’s discussions of accurate or truthful representations of black experiences in the context of the minstrel industry. This approach involves determining the ideological roles of minstrelsy and realism within racism and how these roles determine the place of his criticism in the larger discursive and ideological trajectory of African American literary criticism” (33).

2. I do want to emphasize that Dunbar’s different naturalist strategies are by no means mutually exclusive. In discussing the critical strategies for reading Dunbar’s first novel, Jarrett argues “*The Uncalled* is neither white nor simply raceless; its racialism lies in its historical depictions of class hierarchy and regional culture. Specifically, the novel incorporates African American histories of racial unrest and inequity to expose the thematic limitations of local color, then regarded as a more idealistic version of literary realism. Implicitly, it deviates from traditional Anglo-American literature, which tends to overlook the racial politics of local color while stereotyping nonindustrialized rural spaces as good and urban spaces as evil” (*Deans and Truants* 53).

3. Mills observes that “Being its primary victims, nonwhites have, of course, always been aware of this peculiar schism running through the white psyche. Many years ago, in his classic novel *Invisible Man*, Ralph Ellison had his nameless narrator point out that whites must have a peculiar reciprocal ‘construction of [their] in-

ner eyes' which renders blacks Americans invisible, since they 'refuse to see me.' The Racial Contract includes an epistemological contract, an epistemology of ignorance. 'Recognition is a form of agreement,' and by the terms of the Racial Contract, whites have agreed not to recognize blacks as equal persons. . . . Similarly, James Baldwin argues that white supremacy 'forced [white] Americans into rationalizations so fantastic that they approached the pathological,' generating a tortured ignorance so structured that one cannot raise certain issues with whites 'because even if I should speak, no one would believe me,' and paradoxically, 'they would not believe me precisely because they would know that what I said was true'" (96–97; all brackets are in the original).

4. Melville's consistent use of language that invokes an unequal relationship between him and Jube points to the "false education" (379) Melville struggles with; Melville continues this usage even when he retells his story—he refers to Jube in turn as a "faithful dog," a "faithful servitor," a "boy," and a "coadjutor" in a two-paragraph section of the story (376)—cementing in place a hierarchical relationship that his "friendship" with Jube has supposedly overcome.

5. Whether or not this *should* lead to his destruction is another matter entirely. As the narrative voice makes clear, Joe's inability to publicly enact the white norms he has internalized leads to his downfall.

6. Howard makes a similar point in *Form and History* when she observes that "we must recognize that a claim to represent reality accurately entails not only a descriptive but a prescriptive power, that an account of what *is* exerts considerable influence over what one thinks *can* be and *ought* to be done" (12).

7. Howard indicates the close connections between these two terms: "The verbal resemblance between naturalization and naturalism is not mere coincidence; in both cases an appeal to nature constitutes a claim to legitimacy" (21).

8. Jarrett makes the same point in a more emphatic manner in "Second-Generation Realist; or, Dunbar the Naturalist," an earlier version of the argument he makes in *Deans and Truants*: "In this essay, I make a brief case that any scholarly discussion of the group of American naturalist writers that Howells was anticipating must account for Dunbar. . . . More specifically, literary contemporaries, such as Howells, failed to recognize that this novel, *The Uncalled* (1898), engages naturalism, and tailors it to accommodate ideas of human uplift and redemption. Not only is the novel deterministic on its face—thanks to the title, *The Uncalled*—but it also probes the issues of spirituality, heritage, destiny, and the environment to explain social marginality and moral turpitude" (290).

9. For example, in the recent *Oxford Handbook*, Jeanne Campbell Reesman observes, "London was thus the only one of the naturalists to write from a non-white perspective and to treat non-white characters with the required depth so that readers could identify with their perspective" (285), and that "Not until London's dozens of short stories with non-white protagonists do we see a future for naturalism's treatment of race relations" (288). These assertions ignore Dunbar's four collections of short fiction. To be fair, Reesman's essay does acknowledge Dunbar, albeit in the abstract, but his short fiction, the majority of which predates London's, falls through the cracks. Thus, in London's "The Chinago" (1911) "criminality is tied to race in 'The Chinago,' but it is eventually clear in the story that the 'raced' Chinese criminal is innocent

and his white European accusers guilty" (286). Dunbar's "The Lynching of Jube Benson" (1904) not only makes the same use of white assumptions regarding black criminality several years earlier, but the story is set within the boundaries of the United States. As this example indicates, the notion of family resemblance has limitations when it comes to incorporating categories like race, or even gender and class, specifically when it is applied literally.

10. Long also argues that "more rigorous interrogations of genre are necessary to make texts by African-American authors (and other authors of color) integral to literary histories, rather than relegated to the proverbial margins when they are added on to the end of literary histories" (172). Langston Hughes's "I, Too" offers an excellent example of the problem of familial resemblance when examining the inequality of race the "darker brother" faces at the hands of white notions of respectability: "I am the darker brother. / They send me to eat in the kitchen / When company comes" (lines 2-4). While the narrative voice includes himself in the larger human family, the actions of the implied white family members do not, at least initially, see this connection.

11. In an interesting play upon these types of expectations, Dunbar describes the white reaction to Colonel Saunders's questioning of Hamilton's guilt in *Sport*, as "They turned upon him as if he had been some strange, unnatural animal" (31).

12. These are by no means the only two elements of Dunbar's naturalist strategies. I could just as easily focus on the competing strategies reflected in the awareness (or not) of black characters in relation to overarching white power governing their lives. Thus, in a stories like "One Man's Fortunes" or "Mr. Cornelius Johnson, Office-Seeker" from *The Strength of Gideon and Other Stories* (1900), I could trace the relationship between black characters who are aware of the limitations they face in white society—Webb Davis and Col. Mason—in relation to those who do not or refuse to acknowledge them until it is too late, like Bertram Halliday and Cornelius Johnson. I could also productively balance and compare these perspectives with the conscious and intentional one of Nelse Hatton in "Nelse Hatton's Vengeance" from *Folks from Dixie* (1898), which is complicated by Nelse's desires to live up to his religious beliefs, or the awareness of Robinson Asbury in "The Scapegoat" from *The Heart of Happy Hollow* (1904), whose deft maneuverings in the face of white political manipulation reflects a clear understanding of how to survive the exploitative practices of white determinism. The political effects of white determinism are also examined in "A Mess of Pottage" and "A Council of State" in *Gideon* and "The Wisdom of Silence" in *Happy*. In "The Mission of Mr. Scatters" in *Happy*, Scatters uses his knowledge of the logic of white determinism against other African Americans when he is brought to trial for swindling the black citizens of Miltonville out of their money by pandering to white paternalistic belief. Besides the representations of the press in the essay, there are numerous other examples throughout Dunbar's short fiction, including "A Defender of the Faith" in *Happy* that focuses on a newspaper reporter looking for a local color Christmas Story. There are also other stories incorporating the religious, economic, environmental, and cultural threads of white determinism, as well as many that combine multiple elements of these strategies within individual stories. As this note hopefully indicates, there are numerous fruitful directions still open for scholars interested

in examining the naturalist strategies in Dunbar's short fiction; for now, I am going to focus on just the two mentioned in the essay.

13. As Dudley relates, "the relationship between journalism and literary naturalism has been widely explored. In the late nineteenth century, as Christopher Wilson explains, 'American audiences adopted the reporter not only as a social and political pathfinder but indeed as a symbol of a burgeoning cultural aesthetic'" ("African American" 261). And Reesman quotes Stephanie Bower, who argues that "Norris racializes the language of disease and degeneration by locating the source of the 'decline' so characteristic of naturalism in contact between Anglo-Saxons and racial 'inferiors'" (qtd. in Reesman 276). These two quotes identify the normative generic conventions of naturalism that Dunbar was intentionally revising. And as Dunbar's naturalist strategies indicate, black naturalism is "an unusually syncretic form, adopting and adapting a wide range of historical traditions" (Dudley, "African American" 258).

14. This moment prefaces a similar gesture in the opening paragraph of *Sport*, when Dunbar again engages the stock language used to represent African Americans, albeit ironically in this case: "Fiction has said so much in regret of the old days when there were plantations and overseers and masters and slaves, that it was good to come upon such a household as Berry Hamilton's, if for no other reason than it afforded a relief from the monotony of tiresome iteration" (1).

15. In "Recession Never," an essay in response to the Wilmington NC riots—the same ones represented in Charles Chesnutt's *The Marrow of Tradition*—Dunbar makes a similar point in more explicit language: "The African is told that he is not yet ready to participate in government, because he has not yet learned to govern himself, and the race which preaches this proves its own right to political domination by the rioting, the rapine and the slaughter, with which for weeks past the civilized world has been scandalized" (37). Dunbar continues later: "[t]he murderers in Wilmington are congratulated upon the effort they have made toward civilization and purer government" (38). He also excoriates the church for its role in sanctioning inequality: "And yet, what else could we expect from the pulpit, when we remember that less than forty years ago with the same smug complacency, it was finding excuses for slavery in tracing out the divine intention?" (38).

16. In an earlier story, "The Ordeal at Mt. Hope," Dunbar makes a similar point, having the narrative voice observe "After a while this bantering interchange would grow more keen and personal, a free-for-all friendly fight would follow, and the newspaper correspondent in that section would write it up as a 'race war'" (12). Here, the newspaper reporter manufactures false news intended to play upon white fears, similar to the correspondent in "The Tragedy at Three Forks." Both indicate "the ways in which press representations exacerbated the tensions between whites and blacks in ways that disproportionately affected blacks" by reinforcing negative stereotypes (Jarrett and Morgan, "Introduction" to *Complete Stories*, xxiii).

17. I would argue that "racism is a disease" functions as an important conceptual metaphor in Dunbar's fiction, one where references to disease operate as his mapping of ideas regarding racism. Thus, the use of "sickness" and "contagion" both have particular valences that help reveal Dunbar's understanding of the way in which racism operates in American life. Dunbar uses this conceptual metaphor in *Sport*, which I

will turn to shortly. For now, two other examples: in “The Interference of Patsy Ann,” another story from the same collection, the narrative voice observes, “Mrs. Gibson’s poison had worked well and rapidly. She had thoroughly inoculated the child’s mind with the step-mother virus” (386). While the focus here is on the social function of disease (as opposed to the racial), it still operates in the same manner for how disease carries an incorrect logic regarding others. As well, in “Buss Jinkins Up Nawth,” an early dialect story (1897), the white reaction to black theft is described: “It was a great blow to Mrs. Morton—she had trusted Mat so. It was as if a terrible disease had suddenly manifested itself in a perfectly healthy child” (402). The description of this moment as a sudden but unstoppable “terrible disease” makes Mat’s actions both pathological and biological. This transformation also mirrors Maurice Oakley’s reaction to the theft of Berry Hamilton; while Mat does actually steal, it is not the product of the biological assumptions Morton applies in this description. Moreover, Ann Petry’s *The Street* shares many naturalist strategies with Dunbar, including the automatic connection between disease and blackness by whites. The narrative voice describes the reactions of Miss Rinner, Bub Johnson’s white teacher, to blacks as follows: “The few people on the street in cold weather had a desperate, hungry look, and she shuddered at the sight of them, thinking they were probably diseased as well; for these blacks were a people without restraint, without decency, with no moral code. She refused to tell even her closest friends that she worked in a school in Harlem, for she regarded it as a stigma; when she referred to the school, she said vaguely that it was uptown near the Bronx” (332).

18. For example, Houston Baker refers to Skaggs as a “blues detective” (134–35).

19. The adherence of certain segments of the African Americans population to white expectations regarding black criminality is also seen when the narrative voice describes the reaction of Berry Hamilton’s lodge: “The first act of his lodge, ‘The Tribe of Benjamin,’ whose treasurer [Hamilton] was, was to have his accounts audited, when they should have been visiting him with comfort, and they seemed personally grieved when his books were found to be straight” (27).

20. While Maurice Oakley is white, he is also southern; here, southern whiteness is subordinated to northern whiteness. And this subordination is not in the service of blackness, represented by Berry Hamilton, but to white northern corporate yellow journalism.

21. Skaggs also describes his affinity for African Americans and the Banner Club as “natural” (69), offering his childhood on his father’s plantation as justification. As the narrative voice indicates, Skaggs’s fictional conceit is merely “the same old story that the white who associates with negroes from volition usually tells to explain his taste.” This “same old story” links to “the usual phrase” and “the popular sentiment” seen in Dunbar’s short fiction. In this sense, this story provides Skaggs the access needed to financially exploit African Americans for his own benefit.

22. This moment is eerily reminiscent of the ending of Dunbar’s novel, although he is not nearly as explicit in connecting the effects of white determinism to black social mobility: “It was not a happy life, but it was all that was left to them, and they took it up without complaint, for they knew they were powerless against some Will infinitely stronger than their own” (148).

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