

**Paul Laurence Dunbar's *The Sport of the Gods*:  
Naturalism, Protest, and Performativity**

By

Caroline Williams

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Thesis Committee:

Dr. Maria Bachman, Chair

Dr. Mischa Renfroe

Dr. Patricia Bradley

I dedicate this research to my late Father, Fred Williams, and Stepmother, Billie Williams.

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## CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

In his introduction to Paul Laurence Dunbar's collection of poetry, *Lyrics of Lowly Life* (1898), critic William Dean Howells praises Dunbar as "the first instance of an American negro who had evinced innate distinction in literature." Emphasizing Dunbar's "pure African blood" throughout the introduction, Howells establishes Dunbar's position as a strong emerging poet but in a limited way:

There is a precious difference of temperament between the races which it would be great pity ever to lose, and . . . this is best preserved and most charmingly suggested by Mr. Dunbar in those pieces of his where he studies the moods and traits of his race in his own accent of our English. We call such pieces dialect pieces for want of some closer phrase, but they are really not dialect so much as delightful personal attempts and failures for the written and spoken language. (ix)

With his long career as an editor for prestigious periodicals such as *The Atlantic Monthly* and *Harper's Weekly*, Howells's praise certainly helped advance Dunbar's career. However, it also laid the foundation for Dunbar's work to be pigeonholed as dialect poetry and his other poetry and fiction to be neglected. Even today, with a little over two hundred entries in the MLA Bibliography on Dunbar's work, most focus on poetry, and only twenty-eight consider his fiction. This thesis will address this gap by contributing to an ongoing re-examination of Dunbar's *The Sport of the Gods* (1902) in the context of American literary naturalism and by suggesting that Dunbar's novel is an important progenitor of African American Protest fiction, a point often overlooked in traditional naturalist readings. Dunbar's naturalism is further complicated by his representation of gender and performativity. In this introductory chapter I will

begin with a general discussion of two schools of thought surrounding American naturalism through a close examination of modern critics Walter Benn Michaels and Donald Pizer. I will then provide a biographical background of Dunbar before reviewing the general scholarship surrounding his body of work. Finally, I will include a brief summary of his novel *The Sport of the Gods* and an overview of this project.

According to most early definitions, American naturalism is characterized by how it addresses environmental and biological determinism, survival and adaptability (often drawn from popularized versions of Darwin and Spencer), unconscious drives and desires (from Freud), and plots of degeneration and descent. This general definition draws on the foundational work of Donald Pizer, which I will discuss in more detail below. The problem with definition has also been complicated by the interchangeable use in Europe of the terms “realism” and “naturalism,” “while in America they have served to distinguish between the fiction of the generation of Howells and James (the 1870s and 1880s) [realism] and that of Norris and Dreiser (the 1890s) [naturalism]” (Pizer 4-5). Examples of two approaches to naturalism, the conclusions of modern critics Donald Pizer and Walter Benn Michaels offer opposing viewpoints of the definition of naturalism and the purpose of its canonical texts.

In his seminal 1987 text, *The Gold Standard and the Logic of Naturalism*, Michaels ushers in a wave of New Historicist scholarship and presents a radical approach to Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s short story “The Yellow Wallpaper” and Theodore Dreiser’s novel *Sister Carrie*, as well as naturalism itself, with an attention to production, consumerism, and consumption. Most notable is his indictment of the ability of naturalist texts to be venues of social critique. For Gilman and her story’s narrator, “the work of writing is the work

simultaneously of production and consumption, a work in which woman's body is rewritten as the utopian body of the market economy, imagined as a scene of circulation so efficient that exchange is instantaneous: products not only exist to be consumed, but coming into existence they are already consumed" (Michaels 13). His emphasis on production and consumption foregrounds the ideological implications of both realism and naturalism. Of "The Yellow Wallpaper" Michaels argues,

If, then, Charlotte Gilman plays a role in the emergence of consumer culture, that role seems to be critical. Her feminist critique of "masculinist" culture should thus be read as an exemplary act of "subversive resistance," repudiating the "dominant" consumer culture before it even had the chance to become dominant. In Gilman's proto-Progressive paean to production we find the roots of the current post-Progressive critique of consumption . . . From this perspective, it seems much more plausible to describe "The Yellow Wallpaper" as an endorsement of consumer capitalism than as a critique of it. (16-17)

The self, then, Michaels argues, becomes inextricably connected to the product: "exchange is the condition of its existence" (13). The question he then posits is how an individual, or a naturalistic text, can truly critique an environment he (or it) exists within: "Although transcending your origins in order to evaluate them has been the opening move in criticism at least since Jeremiah, it is surely a mistake to take this at face value: not so much because you can't really transcend your culture but because, if you could, you wouldn't have any terms of evaluation left—except, perhaps, theological ones" (Michaels 18). Thus, in turning to *Sister Carrie*, Michaels asserts "what was wrong with the project of assessing Dreiser's attitude toward capitalism: it depended

on imagining a Dreiser outside capitalism who could then have attitudes toward it” (19).

Michaels uses this new reading of Gilman and Dreiser to inform his definition of naturalism:

“the discourse of naturalism, as I characterize it, is above all obsessed with manifestations of internal difference or, what comes to the same thing, personhood” and for writers like Gilman and Dreiser (and Frank Norris, for that matter), “fetishism cannot consist in an extension of personhood to commodities, since the only way a person can get to be a person in the first place is by articulating in his or her nature the double nature of commodity” (22, 26). For Michaels, naturalist texts are imbricated in their cultural moment and cannot critique it. While attending to cultural context in new and interesting ways, this version of naturalism, as later scholars will note, eliminates writers who may be interested in social protest and reform.

Donald Pizer takes a decidedly different approach and believes that naturalistic fiction can offer social critique and is an understandable response to the social climate of the period, the late nineteenth century, thus necessitating that critics define the relationship between American naturalism and European, Zolaesque determinism. In his introduction to *The Cambridge Companion to American Realism and Naturalism*, Pizer states,

Since it was believed that American life at the turn of the century imprisoned the average American in a “moving box” of economic and social deprivation, naturalism (with its deterministic center) was a writer’s appropriate, indeed inevitable, response to this condition. Thus, while it might be acknowledged that Norris and Dreiser were often crude and formless and that their work appeared to be confined to the depiction of the man as a victim, it was

believed as well that naturalism of this kind was an apt expression of late-nineteenth-century American social reality. (10)

Although traditionally thought to be bookended by the Civil War and WWI, American naturalism extends into the twentieth century and beyond to authors such as William Faulkner, Ernest Hemingway, John Steinbeck, and more currently, Cormac McCarthy. It is because of American naturalism's characteristics and continued applicability, Pizer argues (and I concur), that the movement remains so useful and popular in its literary performance:

Indeed, one of the striking characteristics of the movement has been its adaptability to fresh currents of idea and expression in each generation while maintaining a core of naturalistic preoccupations. The nature of this core is not easy to describe, given the dynamic flexibility and amorphousness of naturalism as a whole in America, but it appears to rest on the relationship between a restrictive social and intellectual environment and the consequent impoverishment both of social opportunity and of the inner life. (13)

With these words in mind, and contrary to Michaels's narrow view, it is clear that naturalistic fiction can, in fact, perform a social critique of the society it exists within. As the parameters of the movement have expanded, each following generation of American authors utilizes the movement as a means of "dramatizing 'hard times' in America—hard times in the sense both of economic decline and of spiritual malaise, with each generation also incorporating into this continuing impulse or tradition of naturalism the social and intellectual concerns of that age" (Pizer 14). These observations suggest that naturalism can be usefully applied to the

continued plight of African Americans and authors who attempt to shed light on the social issues that are particular to them.

What is frequently left out of these critical discussions of American naturalism are the contributions made by African American writers to the movement. Both Michaels's and Pizer's views of naturalism tend to reinforce a white male canon of naturalist writers—Crane, Norris, Dreiser, and London—with an occasional nod to white women such as Wharton and Chopin. Analyzing the contributions of African American writers, John Dudley draws on Pizer's claim that “Naturalism in its own day was often viewed as a threat to the established order because it boldly and vividly depicted the inadequacies of the industrial system which was the foundation of that order” (Pizer 201). Pizer argues that “African American naturalists took on the added responsibility of addressing the racial distinctions--legal, scientific, and otherwise--upon which the political, economic, and industrial systems affecting black Americans relied (Dudley 258). Both Dudley's and Pizer's remarks can be productively applied to Dunbar's work. In a similar vein, Donna Campbell extends the discussion and suggests in her essay “Women Writers and Naturalism,”

If social critique does not disqualify works from being considered as naturalistic, the timeline of naturalism can be extended to include social-protest works . . . . Reconsidering the prohibition against overt social critique would also allow a reevaluation of novelists such as . . . . Paul Laurence Dunbar, whose strongly naturalistic *The Sport of the Gods* (1902) contains passages of authorial moralizing similar to Dreiser's. (235)

Given her focus on extending the genre to women writers, Campbell mentions Dunbar only in passing, but her comment suggests a productive direction for further exploration.

Before turning to *The Sport of the Gods*, it is important to understand Dunbar's background and general critical reception. Paul Laurence Dunbar was born in Dayton, Ohio, on June 27, 1872, to Matilda and Joshua Dunbar, both former slaves owned by separate masters in Kentucky. Ohio had become a particularly important locale for the anti-slavery movement and home to the Underground Railroad: "It has been estimated that more than 40,000 blacks took refuge from the South in Ohio during the period from 1830 to 1870" (Revell 38). Through the Underground Railroad, Joshua Dunbar was able to escape to Canada, but later returned to the United States at the brink of the Civil War to serve in the Massachusetts Regiment (Revell 39). After a brief five years of marriage, Matilda divorced Joshua and won sole custody of Paul. The education of her youngest son was of the utmost importance to Mrs. Dunbar, and Paul greatly succeeded in his academic pursuits despite frequently being one of the only African American students in predominantly white schools. According to Revell, "When he went to Central High School in Dayton in the fall of 1886, he was the only black student in his class, and for some time the only one in the school" (39). Dunbar was well-respected by his instructors and classmates as a gifted writer, and he took part in his high school's literary club and newspaper, both as a contributor and editor (Revell 41). Among his classmates and close friends were the Wright brothers, Orville and Wilbur, who would later gain fame as pioneers in flight. But it was Orville Wright who would become Dunbar's first literary champion when he attempted to start an African American newspaper, the *Dayton Tattler*, in the late 1890s.

Early in their careers, the Wright brothers ran their own printing press, and Orville Wright personally funded the first three issues of the *Dayton Tattler* before it was forced to fold due to economic circumstances (Revell 40). With this setback, Dunbar learned the success rate of an African American author attempting to write for a black audience. Dunbar then turned to a more common form of publication for novice writers of the time, periodicals for white audiences. Dunbar had been writing poetry since high school and published his first poems in 1888 in the *Dayton Herald*. As he struggled to find employment as a young, African American male, he continued to write poetry and short stories as well as make contributions to small, local newspapers. But it was not until a chance meeting with James Whitcomb Riley, who had gained popularity for his dialect poetry, that Dunbar began to gain more significant recognition in the literary world. In 1892, Dunbar was asked by a former instructor to perform a poetic address for the Western Association of Writers in Dayton, of which Riley was their most notable member (Revell 42). His eloquent reading of his poem was so well received that it prompted requests for more readings of Dunbar's other work, and gained the attention of Dr. James Newton Matthews, who praised Dunbar in a letter to a local newspaper in Illinois (Revell 43). The letter was then reprinted in publications across various states, gathering more attention for Dunbar. Riley responded to Matthews's review in a personal letter to Dunbar stating, "See how your name is traveling, my chirping friend. And it is a good, sound name, too, that seems to imply the brave, fine spirit of a singer who should command wide and serious attention" (Revell 43).

With Riley's influence and encouragement, Dunbar began to delve into the popular form of local color and dialect poetry. In late 1892, Dunbar gathered a group of his poems, in both dialect and standard literary English, to form a small collection entitled *Oak and Ivy* and

published the volume at his own expense. The following year, Dunbar would begin to circulate in far greater literary circles when Frederick Douglass hired him as a clerk at the World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago, Illinois, with Douglass personally paying Dunbar out of his own pocket (Revell 44). Douglass encouraged Dunbar's literary pursuits, and Dunbar later repaid him in two eulogistic poems. *Oak and Ivy* continued to do well, and after selling through its run, Dunbar garnered the patronage of Charles A. Thatcher and Henry A. Tobey, a white lawyer and psychiatrist, respectively, from his native Ohio (Revell 44-45). With their encouragement and financial backing, Dunbar was able to publish a larger second volume of poetry, *Majors and Minors*, in 1895. With his first professional publication also came the introduction of his race to his new, wider audience through an included portrait of the author within the volume. Through Tobey, *Majors and Minors* was passed along to the actor James Herne, who praised the volume and sent it to the well-renowned and influential novelist, literary critic, and editor of *The Atlantic Monthly*, William Dean Howells (Revell 45). Howells published a positive review of the volume in the June 27, 1896 issue of *Harper's Weekly*, gaining Dunbar national attention; a portion of the review would appear as an introduction to Dunbar's following collection of poetry, *Lyrics of Lowly Life* (Metcalf 7-8). In his introduction, Howells predominantly praised Dunbar for his dialect poetry:

In nothing is his essentially refined and delicate art so well shown as in these pieces, which, as I venture to say, described the range between appetite and emotion, with certain lifts far beyond and above it, which is the range of the race. He reveals in these a finely ironical perception of the negro's limitations, with a tenderness for them which I think so very rare as to be almost quite new. I should

say, perhaps, that it was this humorous quality which Mr. Dunbar had added to our literature, and it would be this which would most distinguish him, now and hereafter . . . I cannot undertake to prophesy concerning this; but if he should do nothing more than he has done, I should feel that he had made the strongest claim for the negro in English literature that the negro has yet made. He has at least produced something that, however we may critically disagree about it, we cannot well refuse to enjoy; in more than one piece he has produced a work of art. (ix-x)

Indeed, Howells was prophetic in his review, as *Lyrics of Lowly Life* remains Dunbar's most celebrated and well-known work, the poems contained within it frequently included in both American and African American anthologies. Included in the collection are his ode to Frederick Douglass, "When Malindy Sings," "When De Co'n Pone's Hot," and his racially-charged anthem "We Wear the Mask." *Lyrics of Lowly Life* also marked the beginning of Dunbar's life-long relationship with New York's Dodd, Mead, and Company publishing house. It was during the late 1890s in New York that Dunbar's newly-established fame gained the attention of other influential leaders in the black community; by the following year, Dunbar had met both W. E. B. DuBois and Booker T. Washington (Revell 46). In 1899, he would publish *Lyrics of the Hearthside*, which contained the poem on slavery, "Sympathy." Much later, poet Maya Angelou would pay tribute to Dunbar's influence on her writing by borrowing from *Lyrics of the Hearthside* and a line from the poem "Sympathy" for the title of her 1969 autobiography, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*:

I know why the caged bird sings,

ah me,

When his wing is bruised and  
     his bosom sore,—  
 When he beats his bars and he  
     would be free;  
 It is not a carol of joy or glee,  
     But a prayer that he sends from  
     his heart's deep core,  
 But a plea, that upward to Heaven  
     he flings—  
 I know why the caged bird sings! (Dunbar 102)

This poem and the imagery of the cage bird refers to chained slaves and their inextinguishable resilience.

As Revell notes in his biography, Dunbar began to garner international fame after visiting England and establishing publishing relationships there. Following his return, he married teacher and fellow poet, Alice Ruth Moore. Their pairing would turn tumultuous, and they would soon separate in 1902, but never divorce (Revell 53). It was during the turn of the century that Dunbar began to write more racially and politically driven work, as well as taking a step into novel writing, beginning with *The Uncalled* (1898) and ending with *The Sport of the Gods* (1902). Shortly before his separation from his wife, Dunbar was diagnosed with tuberculosis, a fatal disease for the time. He would succumb to the disease on February 9, 1906, at the young age of thirty-three. From his first published collection in 1892 until his untimely death, Dunbar wrote and published continuously and prophetically, producing numerous volumes of poetry (over four

hundred poems) and four short story collections, as well as essays, drama, and four novels.

Dunbar's total body of work remains one of the largest contributions by an African American writer, certainly exceeding any black author of his time. Writing in 1979, Peter Revell notes that, "[o]n a total wordcount that of James Baldwin might be the larger, but in range of style and form Dunbar has not yet been surpassed . . . The quality of this large body of work is certainly uneven, but to have produced so much, and so much that is of quality, in his short lifetime is one testimony to Dunbar's worth" (18).

Published in 1902, *The Sport of the Gods* is the last novel Dunbar wrote; it was originally published in *Lippincott's Monthly Magazine* in 1901 following a request from the popular magazine for another novel from Dunbar, and was published in England the following year under the title *The Jest of Fate*. After contracting tuberculosis in 1900, Dunbar was a dying man when he began writing his final novel. Although his health waned, Dunbar could not give up the main source of income that helped him to support his mother and estranged wife. Of the novel, Dunbar wrote in a letter, "I wrote fifty thousand words in thirty days, but I have never recovered from the strain of it" (William L. Andrews vii). *The Sport of the Gods* is the last of four novels written by Dunbar, following *The Uncalled*, *The Love of Landry*, and *The Fanatics*, all written and published within just five years from 1897 to 1901. Like his preceding novel *The Fanatics*, which was inspired by Dunbar's father's flight to freedom in Canada through the Underground Railroad, *The Sport of the Gods* is equally influenced by his parents' experience in migrating from the South to the North. While Dunbar toed the line with his previous work, pandering to white publishers and audiences, he threw literary caution to the wind with his final novel. For an author predominantly known for his uplifting, dialectal poetry and sense of humor, Dunbar composed *The Sport of the Gods* as the relentlessly bleak and unforgiving tale of an emancipated

African American family, and it was overall not well-received. Perhaps its crudeness is indicative of the darkness that surrounded Dunbar in the last years of his life as he struggled with a terminal illness, the ending of his marriage, a deepening depression, and an increasing dependency on alcohol (at the time, his doctors prescribed alcohol as a treatment for tuberculosis). What followed was an inherently naturalistic narrative, whether or not Dunbar intended it to be. It is reminiscent of other ground-breaking naturalist novels written at the time by contemporary white authors such as Steven Crane's *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets* (1893), Frank Norris' *McTeague* (1899), and Theodore Dreiser's *Sister Carrie* (1900).

In *The Sport of the Gods*, Dunbar tells the story of the post-Civil War, African American Hamilton family. Berry Hamilton, a former slave, is butler to Maurice Oakley and his family. Hamilton lives with his wife, Fannie, the Oakley's housekeeper, and their two children, Joe and Kit, in a small cottage on the Oakley's property. Aided by the white, wealthy Oakleys, the Hamiltons did well for an African American family of the time and were treated generously by their employers. During a farewell dinner in honor of Mr. Oakley's half-brother, Francis, Berry is wrongly accused by his employers of stealing money from them. Berry is convicted of theft, incarcerated, and his wife and children are evicted by the Oakleys. Outturned by the Oakleys, Mrs. Hamilton and her children turn to the black community for assistance, but are shunned as their community feels no sympathy for them given their connection to criminal activity and fears associating with a family accused by the influential, white Oakley family. Unable to find employment, the family decides to migrate north and settle in New York; "They had heard of New York as a place vague and far away, a city that, like Heaven, to them had existed by faith alone. All the days of their lives they had heard of it, and it seemed to them the center of all the

glory, all the wealth, and all the freedom of the world” (Dunbar 43). Upon their arrival in New York, a porter, Mr. Thomas, refers them to the lodgings of Mrs. Jones, who rents rooms. Mr. Thomas treats the Hamilton family to a night at the local theatre and soon befriends Joe. Joe begins to frequent The Banner Club with Mr. Thomas, “an institution for the lower education of negro youth . . . Parasites came there to find victims, politicians for votes, reporters for news, and artists for all kinds of color and inspiration” (Dunbar 65). It is through Mr. Thomas, the club, and its society that the Hamiltons are exposed to the seedy underbelly of New York tenement life. Thomas pitches Joe to his friends as someone who may have money, is young and naive, and could be easily taken advantage of. It is at The Banner Club that Thomas introduces Joe to Hattie, a singer and actress from the local theatre, with whom he becomes romantically involved.

Shortly after their arrival in New York, the Hamiltons are visited by Minty Brown, an ill-respected woman from their former southern neighborhood who claims to have connections in New York. When Mrs. Hamilton refuses to welcome her into their rooms, Minty retaliates by divulging the incarceration of Mr. Hamilton to Mrs. Jones, a secret that the Hamilton family had aimed to keep in order to assimilate into their new surroundings. With this newly found knowledge, Mrs. Jones evicts the Hamiltons and in anger Joe leaves the family. Mrs. Jones also reveals that Mr. Thomas, who has shown interest in Kit, is a married man. Because of Minty, Mrs. Hamilton and Kit also lose their housekeeping job. Hattie takes Kit under her wing and gets her a job as a showgirl at the theatre despite her mother’s disapproval of the profession. Feeling betrayed by her children and financially cornered, Mrs. Hamilton succumbs to the advances of Mr. Gibson, who had frequented Mrs. Jones’s home when the Hamiltons were tenants. He convinces Mrs. Hamilton that a prison sentence is the equivalent of a divorce, and she reluctantly

agrees to marry him. Meanwhile, the Oakleys receive a letter from Francis. He admits that on the evening of his farewell dinner, his money was not stolen, rather he had lost the sum due to gambling. He pleads with his brother to aid in the release of Berry, but Mr. Oakley refuses; “What is Berry to Frank? What is that nigger to my brother? . . . What are his sufferings to the honor of my family and name? . . . It must never be known, I say, if Berry has to rot in jail” (Dunbar 110). Mr. Oakley writes a letter to Francis and lies about their aid in Berry’s release. Oakley, afterward, keeps Francis’ letter of confession in his breast pocket at all times.

During an evening at the club, Joe in a moment of intoxication reveals his father’s story to his peers, including a white reporter, Skaggs. The reporter hatches a plan to gain profit through publishing a story on Berry and the Oakleys. A drunken Joe is left at the club by Hattie who refuses to see him any longer because of his drinking problem. Joe follows Hattie home, kills her, is arrested for her murder, and sentenced to life in prison. Skaggs journeys to the South, and pretending to have word from Francis, gains access to Mr. Oakley and steals the letter. Skaggs’s story is published and Berry is pardoned. Berry returns to his wife in New York only to find her married to the abusive Mr. Gibson. He plans to kill Gibson, but is saved from the possibility of another crime when Gibson is killed in an accident. The Hamiltons, their children estranged from them, return to the South where Mrs. Oakley attempts to make amends by asking them to live in their former cottage on the Oakley’s property. The novel ends with a haunting description of the Hamiltons listening to Mr. Oakley’s screams. This brief plot points to several important naturalistic preoccupations—the Hamiltons seem caught in a deterministic plot beyond their control and fated simply to survive in the South.

Despite this fascinating contribution to late nineteenth-century naturalist fiction, Dunbar was, and remains, first and foremost a poet, as the overwhelming majority of Dunbar scholarship reflects. Particular attention is paid to his dialectal poetry, for which he remains most popular, and his blues influence. The critical attention to dialect and plantation themes in his poetry and short stories reflects the nature of the characteristics of Dunbar's work that most appealed to white audiences. Critical attention waned during the Harlem Renaissance as African American writers of the time, save for Zora Neale Hurston, panned Dunbar for perpetuating the plantation myth and negative stereotypes of African Americans through his use of black dialect. During the Civil Rights era, critical interest in Dunbar's work gained popularity. But despite Dunbar's influential legacy and prolific output, of his vast body of work, his novels were and remain the least regarded with very little scholarship written on them. Of this, Peter Revell writes that,

The lack of critical esteem is no doubt justified, since they [Dunbar's four novels] are very uneven in quality, both individually and as a group. None attains to first rank as an example of the novelist's art, and all have defects of conception and execution. They contain some of Dunbar's most pusillanimous concessions to the attitudes imposed by white publishers and the anticipated expectations of white readers. Yet they also contain, from the perspective of the later history of Afro-American writing, some of the most significant developments in all Dunbar's work. (139)

*The Sport of the Gods* gains the most critical attention of the novels, but remains neglected overall, with a current search of the novel in MLA's Bibliography database showing fewer than thirty results (many repeated as individual chapters to books). Perhaps this is due to the distinct difference in treatment of the plantation tradition and prose and narrative style that earns *The Sport of the Gods* more attention than Dunbar's other novels. Of *The Sport of the Gods*, Revell

notes that it “is truly a black novel and belongs with Chesnut’s *The House Behind the Cedars* (1900) and *The Marrow of Tradition* (1901) as one of the first significant contributions by Afro-American writers to the art of the novel. In it Dunbar comes near to breaking the mold of white-imposed culture” (140). Later in the same study, Revell notes “[i]t was clearly a work that Dunbar wrote to please himself rather than in the expectation that it would please his readers” (154).

Recent book-length studies of Dunbar are few and far between. There has been one biography of Dunbar published since Peter Revell’s 1979 text on the author. In 1996, Felton O. Best published *Crossing the Color Line: A Biography of Paul Laurence Dunbar 1872-1906*. But Best’s work did little (save for the added inclusion of pictures) to add to Revell’s already comprehensive study of both Dunbar’s life and work. Furthermore, Best fails to mention *The Sport of the Gods*, a glaring omission to the overall text, especially in his chapter on Dunbar’s protest literature from 1898-1906. In 2001, Eleanor Alexander published *Lyrics of Sunshine and Shadow*, detailing the tumultuous courtship and marriage of Dunbar to fellow African American poet, Alice Ruth Moore. Although Alexander’s intentions are not to study Dunbar’s work, she shares an interesting insight into their courtship, marriage, and separation with attention to race, class and gender: “While on one level it is a highly personal story shedding light on the character of the individuals, it also provides an analysis of a broader social pattern. The Dunbar tale is a means of probing the ideas, feelings, and behavior of people of color in the past” (180).

Dunbar receives limited attention from scholars working on Naturalism. Most notably, John Dudley published his book *A Man’s Game: Masculinity and the Anti-Aesthetics of American Literary Naturalism* in 2004. Dudley’s book is arranged into four chapters, ranging from a general discussion of masculinist aesthetic sensibility to its function within the naturalist

works of Stephen Crane, Frank Norris, and Edith Wharton, to a broader discussion of naturalist African American writers. It is the last chapter, “‘A Man Only in Form’: The Roots of Naturalism in African American Literature,” though, that I find useful for my thesis as Dudley not only discusses what the chapter is aptly named for, but delves deeply into Dunbar’s *Sport of the Gods*. Dudley’s chapter expands outside of a purely masculine treatment of the work. Dudley argues, “[i]n spite of the link between naturalism and overtly racist theory, several pivotal texts appropriate naturalist discourse in an effort to argue ideological positions opposed to the doctrine of Anglo-Saxon cultural and political supremacy” (139). Furthermore, while brief, Dudley also discusses how Richard Wright’s *Native Son* draws from previous African American naturalistic fiction, specifically from *Sport of the Gods*. Complimenting Dudley’s work, a collection of sixteen essays from various contributors on Dunbar’s poetry, short stories, and novels was recently published in 2010; *We Wear the Mask: Paul Laurence Dunbar and the Politics of Represented Reality*, edited by Willie J. Harrell, which includes four essays on *The Sport of the Gods* and identity and representation. Recent approaches in academic journals of *Sport of the Gods* since 2000 include fewer than twenty articles mainly surrounding migration and plantation themes (Jillmarie Murphy’s “Chains of Emancipation: Place Attachment and the Great Northern Migration in Paul Laurence Dunbar’s *The Sport of the Gods*), urban and tenement life (Thomas Alan Dichter’s “Paul Laurence Dunbar’s *The Sport of the Gods* and the Modern Discourse of Black Criminality”), vaudeville and minstrel entertainments (Jonathan Daigle’s “Paul Laurence Dunbar and the Marshall Circle: Racial Representation from Blackface to Black Naturalism”), as well as family relations and identity (Abigail J. Aldrich’s “The Hamilton Family and the Trials of Job: The Clash of Faith and Fate in Paul Laurence Dunbar’s *The Sport of the Gods*”). Articles

have also related the novel to the works of James Weldon Johnson, Charles W. Chesnutt, and Walter Dean Myers (Christopher C. De Santis' "The Dangerous Marrow of Southern Tradition: Charles W. Chesnutt, Paul Laurence Dunbar, and the Paternalist ethos at the turn of the Century").

Although *The Sport of the Gods* "has been hailed by critics as the first African-American 'great migration' novel, [and] the first foray into naturalism by an African-American writer," I propose that it may also be the first African American protest novel, predating the often-cited naturalistic novel of protest by Richard Wright, *Native Son* (Andrews vii). As the earlier discussion of Pizer and Michaels suggests in brief, some approaches to naturalism obscure the complicated intersection of naturalism and social protest. Defining the American protest novel has been a difficult task for literary critics. In 2006, John Stauffer offered a description of the genre as comprising texts of social critique and suggested "either implicitly or explicitly, a solution to society's ills" (Stauffer xii-xiii). Further describing protest literature, Stauffer discerns these texts utilize three rhetorical strategies: empathy, shock value, and symbolic action (xii-xiii). With this in mind, we can apply the genre to *The Sport of the Gods*. This project seeks to reclaim *The Sport of the Gods* as the first foray of an African American author into protest fiction. This thesis will complicate current readings of the novel by re-examining Dunbar's version of naturalism in light of social protest fiction in chapter two and gender and race performativity in chapter three.

## CHAPTER II: PROTEST AND SUBVERSION

### AMERICAN PROTEST LITERATURE

Defining the American protest novel has been a difficult task for literary critics. Many critics of protest poetry and literature have deemed it unsuccessful in its form and style, and not universal in its themes. As Zoe Trodd points out in her essay “The Civil Rights Movement and Literature of Social Protest,” “until recently, scholars used the label ‘protest’ to signal well-meaning but artistically limited writing” (19). Kimberly Drake continues in the same vein in her essay “On the Literature of Protest: Words as Weapons” and argues that it “is not to say that protest literature has not been considered valued by scholars, but its value has often been said to lie in its status as history or cultural artifact or as sociological examination of particular social groups” (12). Critics have also dismissed protest literature and poetry as strictly propaganda or outright lies, but one must notice in their terminology the bias at hand that seeks to delegitimize the genre as a whole. Drake seeks to define and differentiate forms of literary protest from their traditional counterparts in that protest literature

is not unconcerned with aesthetics. It is concerned rather with the creation of a style that reflects its subject matter, a style that sets it apart from the style and goals of “bourgeois” or even mainstream art and literature. The difference between protest literature and non protest literature is not in its quality, but in its use of tactics of form and contest in the service of its goal, which is ultimately to create social change. (8)

Drake continues by extending the overall goal of social change further to include various ways the protest novel may achieve this common goal, although not to claim that every work includes

each facet. Rather, she claims works of protest typically achieve more than one of the following goals:

to raise readers' consciousness about a particular social issue or to educate them on a deep level about an oppressive social situation; to challenge preconceived notions about a particular class of people; to provide readers with an ideological mirror of themselves and their society, one that is perhaps unflattering; to provide readers with tools—in terms of critical perspectives and theories, alternative ways of being, knowing, or thinking, role models and/or a community, and even survival strategies—to use for social analysis and political action. (Drake 9)

Trodd and Drake are not the only recent scholars to reexamine the literary protest form. In 2006, John Stauffer identified three rhetorical strategies the genre utilizes, “empathy, shock value, and symbolic action” (Stauffer xii-xiii). As these scholars suggest, protest fiction merits further attention.

African American protest work often had another purpose: to rewrite American history and to subvert the plantation myth: “In particular they [African American authors] re-narrated the history of slavery. Collapsing the white wall of amnesia and nostalgia, writers depicted segregation as slavery by a different name” (Trodd 20-21), or as James Baldwin expressed in his essay “My Dungeon Shook,” written on the one-hundredth anniversary of the emancipation, “the country is celebrating one hundred years of freedom one hundred years too soon” (295). Abolitionists and emancipation had only taken racial “freedom” to a point, and at continued costs to the black community; protest literature, then, strove to unmask slavery, Emancipation, and segregation. As Trodd points out, “[b]y reusing abolitionism, protestors wrote in that

Constitution's margins: *not yet free*. Then they wrote their own protest literature, with the ink of the original emancipation struggle" (32). In the use of the plantation trope and black dialect, though, many protest writers were accused of further perpetuating the plantation myth and negatively portraying African American stereotypes. The paradox, then, lay in attempting to create a new literary genre while incorporating literary forms created by and written for a predominantly white, female, middle to upper class audience while also negotiating both a white and black readership. Drake points to this "dilemma" in that to "the extent that they [African American writers] used new forms, they might deviate from prevailing standards for literary value. Relying on traditional forms might garner praise from the literary critical establishment, but the praise would be condescending and the ability to create a 'countermood' in readers would be diminished" (13). However, at the same time, Drake recognizes that "[i]nnovative forms and challenges to convention thus seem vital to the political goals of protest literature" (13). The possibility of publication also had to be considered by African American authors who could easily be denied, or if published, become victims of their own readership as in the case of Ida B. Wells's *Southern Horrors: Lynch Law in All Its Phases* who received death threats and personal property destruction after her 1892 publication. Drake elaborates on this interesting paradox of readership African American authors must navigate:

If the innovations are intended to penetrate the readerly defenses of mainstream readers or readers from the "oppressor" demographic, they must still avoid ignoring or alienating readers from the oppressed group, but they must also depart from convention to the extent that they create new ways of seeing for readers who tend to see conventionally. I would suggest that the most effective protest writing has typically taken on reader-

friendly experiments in form and in context—reader-friendly in terms of accessibility, not of emotional comfort. (14)

Indeed, the call of the protest writer is challenging with lofty but not unattainable goals. And as Drake points out, protest works innately to strive to make the reader “uncomfortable, outraged, or shocked” in order to achieve its ultimate goal of social change (15). Much of what makes the reader of protest literature and poetry uncomfortable is its use of violence, and in the realistic treatment of most racial issues, it would seem unavoidable.

Several prominent twentieth century African American writers comment on the role of violence in their work. In “The Novel as Social Criticism”, Ann Petry notes:

The arguments used to justify slavery still influence American attitudes toward the Negro. If I use the words intermarriage, mixed marriage, miscegenation, there are few Americans who would not react to those words emotionally. Part of that emotion can be traced directly to the days of slavery. If emotion is aroused merely by the use of certain words the emotion is violent, apoplectic, then it seems fairly logical that novels which deal with race relations should reflect some of this violence. (38)

But others, namely James Baldwin, would disagree. In his famous essay “Everybody’s Protest Novel,” Baldwin harshly criticizes the form and aim of American protest literature, bookending his indictment with Harriet Beecher Stowe’s 1852 novel *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* and Richard Wright’s 1940 novel *Native Son*. Of American protest literature Baldwin claimed,

They [Stowe and Wright] are forgiven, on the strength of these good intentions, whatever violence they do to the language, whatever excessive demands they make of credibility. . . . One is told to put first things first, the good of society coming before

niceties of style or characterization. Even if this were incontestable—for what exactly is the “good” of society?—it argues an insuperable confusion, since literature and sociology are not one and the same; it is impossible to discuss them as if they were . . . . The “protest” novel, so far from being disturbing, is an accepted and comforting aspect of the American scene. (15)

Baldwin goes on to claim that the “failure of the protest novel lies in its rejection of life, the human being, the denial of his beauty, dread, power, in its insistence that it is his categorization alone which is real and cannot be transcended” (18). Clearly, more recent critics would have to disagree, and much would be said later of how much Baldwin’s scathing indictment of an entire literary genre within a few brief pages had to do with his own personal vendetta against Wright, who had formerly been his mentor and literary idol. Henry Louis Gates Jr. would go on to praise and reclaim *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* in a 2006 annotated version of the text as a successful and early novel of racial protest. If brutal depictions of the harsh reality of racial violence angered Baldwin, it would seem he would definitely disagree with its use in Ann Petry’s 1946 novel *The Street*. But violence would continue to endure in African American protest literature from the nineteenth century on, and although the inclusion of violence may limit its favorability in the mainstream, critics are far less narrow in their view of the genre since its inception.

Perhaps, what Baldwin would have favored would be works that fall into the category of racial uplift or liberation. Drake defines these works as a

literature that does not stop at protest, but goes further to imagine a way that an oppressed group might liberate itself. Most slave narratives and a great deal of proletarian literature, for example, depict the protagonist successfully achieving

freedom or class consciousness, as the case may be, by relying on the critical tools or the actual aid of a relevant social movement such as abolitionism or the labor movement. On the other hand, poetry, fiction, and plays about lynching or military violence tend to involve gruesome death and the complete lack of social justice—an unhappy (and realistic) ending designed to push readers toward social action. (9)

African American works of naturalistic protest literature fall into the latter categories of being violent and “unhappy,” but as Drake points out, that is also what makes them all the more realistic. Furthermore, the form of naturalism is perfectly suited to the protest literature of African Americans, Wright and Petry included. One must only look back to the grandfathers of naturalism, Emile Zola and Frank Norris, and Norris’s essay “Zola as a Romantic Writer” to see just how suitable the naturalistic form is to the African American protest novel. Norris writes:

Terrible things must happen to the characters of the naturalistic tale. They must be twisted from the ordinary, wrenched out from the quiet, uneventful round of every-day life and flung into the throes of a vast and terrible drama that works itself out in unleashed passions, in blood, and in sudden death . . . These great, terrible dramas no longer happen among the personnel of a feudal and Renaissance nobility, those who are in the fore-front of the marching world, but among the lower--almost the lowest--classes; those who have been thrust or wrenched from the ranks, who are falling by the roadway. (274)

The everyday violence Norris saw among the lower classes and applied to his naturalistic fiction expanded beyond social class to race, as for African Americans, violence was and would remain part of their everyday society. But it was Dunbar who ushered in the first forays into African American, naturalistic, protest novels with his last novel, *The Sport of the Gods*.

#### DUNBAR AND PROTEST

Paul Laurence Dunbar was certainly no stranger to protest. In the most recent (1996) biography of Dunbar, Felton O. Best points to Dunbar's early protest attempts. In his youth, Dunbar actively fought injustice enacted on himself or other African Americans by white individuals or institutions. In Orville and Wilbur Wright's *Dayton Tattler*, Dunbar, a former editor of the newspaper, published an article "in which he encouraged the Dayton African-American population to demand well paying jobs and to vote. Likewise, Dunbar's forcefulness in reprimanding Mr. Faber, owner of the *Democratic Sheet*, for not delivering on his promise to grant him editorship of the paper demonstrates his refusal to be victimized" (Best 117). In an editorial from the first edition of the *Tattler* Dunbar addressed the race question directly, calling for less discussion and more action:

A great mistake has been made by editors of the race in that they only discuss one question, the race problem. This no doubt is important but a quarter century of discussion of one question has worn it threadbare . . . . We do not counsel you, debaters, writers and fellow editors, to throw away your opinions on this all important question; on the contrary we deem it one worthy of constant thought. But the time has come when you should act your opinions out, rather than write them down. (qtd. in Revell 48)

Dunbar would continue in the vein of protest through poetry, essays, short stories, novels, and drama, with the majority of his protest work published from 1898 until his death in 1906, although he had written forms of protest before the publication of his 1896 collection *Lyrics of Lowly Life* and its subsequent yet patronizing endorsement by William Dean Howells. As Best points out, Dunbar's "increased emphasis on race coincided with a wave of black migration to northern cities, the massive lynchings which were occurring throughout the South and the Midwest, and race riots in various communities" (117). But by 1898 Dunbar had also risen to a decidedly different role as an African American writer; lauded as the poet of his race with Howells's powerful endorsement behind him, he had not only the prestige but also international notoriety. Furthermore, the proceeds of his publications gave him more financial security. In this fiscal sense, Dunbar was able to take more personal, political, and professional risks with his writing. He also began to distance himself from the industrial educational expectations of African Americans voiced by Booker T. Washington at a time when W.E.B. DuBois had only just begun to publicly disagree with the influential figure. In an 1898 article featured in the *New York Independent*, Dunbar directly addressed his opposition of Washington stating, "I do not believe that the individual should bend his spirit in accordance with ideas, mistaken or otherwise, as to what his race should do. I do not believe that a young man, whose soul is turbulent with a message which should be given to the world at a pulpit or the press, should shut his mouth and shoe horses" (qtd. in Revell 49). In response to the racial turmoil of the 1890s, Dunbar wrote a white friend, a fellow writer and lawyer, Brand Whitlock: "Unless we live lives of protest and few of us are willing to do that, we are as guilty as the lynchers of the South—we are all tarred with the same stick" (qtd. in Revell 49).

Dunbar began to confront lynching in his poetry, short stories, and novels. After hearing a story of a lynching from a former slave, Dunbar quickly penned the poem “The Haunted Oak” in literary English drawing from the Border ballad form and the eighteenth-century form of direct address (Revell 67). The poem is told mainly from the point of view of the hanging tree, calling out the injustice of the lynching of an innocent black man as the judge, the doctor, and the pastor of the town witness the hanging and eschew their own involvement in the murder of an innocent man:

I feel the rope against my bark,  
 And the weight of him in my  
       grain,  
 I feel in the throe of his final woe  
 The touch of my own last pain. (*Complete Poems* 220)

This poem was a particularly brave form of protest, as Dunbar directly implicates the involvement of white, powerful town officials and prominent figures in the lynching of a man falsely accused of rape. The image of the hanging tree that is withered and dying among flourishing foliage would later influence another poet, Abel Meerpool. In 1937, after seeing a photo of a lynching, Meerpool was moved to pen the poem “Strange Fruit.” Like Dunbar, Meerpool put his poem to tune. It was later made famous by Billie Holiday’s haunting rendition of the poem turned song, which described a hanging tree in the “pastoral” South bearing the “strange fruit” of hanging and burnt African Americans.

Dunbar would continue to explore the lynching of innocent black men in his 1904 short story collection *The Heart of Happy Hollow* with “The Lynching of Jube Benson” and the even

more violent “Tragedy at Three Forks.” In these stories, Dunbar also confronts the popularity in the late nineteenth century of Spencer’s survival of the fittest and Darwin’s theories of evolution as a means to justify racist views that African Americans were animalistic and prone to criminal behavior: “In these terms the lowly social position of the black population could be ‘explained’ as the result of a basic racial inferiority, as something biologically inevitable rather than something historically imposed, while the continuance of its lowly position was assured by the same biological necessity” (Revell 155). According to Jonathan Daigle in his essay “Paul Laurence Dunbar and the Marshall Circle: Racial Representation from Blackface to Black Naturalism,” Dunbar had faced this kind of “scientifically” backed racism early in his career when he was asked in 1892 to read one of his dialect poems at Toledo’s West End Club only to follow a speaker who presented a paper labeling Dunbar a biological freak and his dialectal poetry proof that African Americans were too intellectually inferior to be benefitted by education (Daigle 636). In response, Dunbar instead recited his poem “Ode to Ethiopia” on African American resilience and pride written in literary English from memory (Daigle 636).

Although Dunbar clearly protested in various forms both personally and professionally, he did not strike with such an unwavering, ruthless voice as he did in his final novel, *The Sport of the Gods*. Dunbar composed the novel shortly after the New York theatre district riots in which mobs of hundreds attacked theater institutions known for black entertainment. According to Daigle, “[c]onflicting accounts of the violence listed Dunbar, [Bert] Williams, [George] Walker, and [Ernest] Hogan as victims” (641). An August 1900 edition of the New York *Sun* also mentions the mugging of Dunbar, with attention to his appearance, a type of racial victim blaming, as he was wearing an expensive suit, a watch, and diamond ring—“another coon who

suffers a humorous comeuppance” (Daigle 641). Dunbar would comment on racial violence, legal injustices, and the ill effects of segregation and northern migration with an unforgiving eye in his final novel.

#### PROTEST AND THE SUBVERSION OF TRADITION IN *THE SPORT OF THE GODS*

However, to address these racial issues, Dunbar also had to consider the plantation tradition and his reader’s expectations. As noted in the new introduction to the 2006 release of his collected novels, by the time Dunbar wrote *The Sport of the Gods*, he cared little for pandering to white audiences as he had done in the past:

In this pivotal work, Dunbar is still experimenting with a variety of literary conventions new to him. Typically, he masters those conventions quickly, stretches them in new directions, and modifies or even undermines likely expectations. Paramount in his accomplishments completed over a short career was his propensity to experiment, his degree of success with little experience, and the way he managed to walk a very fine line between what might be accepted or even liked and the full range of his penetrating analysis and satiric wit. He used many conventions of literature in his time, only to subvert them to his own ends. (308)

Originally published in periodical form, his publisher wanted just one more novel from Dunbar; what he gave them did not serve their purpose (or their audience’s), but his own. With his gift for social critique and irony, and with his prior experience of operating within the confines of dialect poetry and plantation fiction, Dunbar was able to subvert several literary conventions including the plantation, new South, and northern migration myths to create his naturalistic novel of protest, *The Sport of the Gods*.

Darden A. Pyron defines the plantation myth as “a body of tales, legends, and folklore defining the antebellum plantation; the myth is frequently extended to explain the social order of the entire South” (129). Pyron goes on to define major sources of the myth: “the pre-Civil War southern impulse to differentiate itself ideologically from the North . . . [and] the southern need to romanticize its past as a means of comprehending its defeat and its radically altered situation after Appomattox” (141). For the North, “[r]ooted partially in guilt and ambivalence about the war, especially its racial implications, Yankee celebration of the plantation myth derived a powerful dynamic from a bourgeois impulse to fantasize an alternative to the North’s egalitarian, commercial, materialistic social order” (Pyron 142).

Dunbar begins *The Sport of the Gods* with a wink and a nod to the plantation tradition and plantation myth, a trope that will persist throughout the novel in his subversive use of it: “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 reason than that it afforded a relief from the monotony of tiresome iteration” (1). It has been twenty years since the Emancipation, and the Hamilton family has chosen to stay on as house servants to the Oakley family. They live in a small cabin on the property, but “unlike the cabin of the elder day, it was a neatly furnished, modern house, the home of a typical, good-living negro” (*Sport* 1). Berry is described as “one of the many slaves who upon their accession to freedom had not left the South, but had wandered from place to place in their own beloved section, waiting, working, and struggling to rise with its rehabilitated fortunes” (*Sport* 1). As the Oakleys’s wealth increased, so did the Hamiltons’s. In these passages, we see Dunbar’s expert use of irony and a slight humor that he had been praised for in his poetry by Howells early in his

career. We can also see a slight dig at Washington's idea of the new Negro "[l]ike the thrifty Negro advocated by Booker T. Washington, he [Berry] saves to build a better future for himself" (Revell 157). The Hamiltons, with the aid of the Oakleys, model their behavior and appearance after their white employers. Mrs. Oakley passes down clothing to Kittie and Joe learns the trade of a barber, and refuses to cut the hair of his fellow blacks; instead, "from scraping the chins of aristocrats [he] came to imbibe some of their ideas, and rather too early in life bid fair to be a dandy. But his father encouraged him, for, said he, 'It's de p'opah thing fu' a man what waits on quality to have quality manna's an' to waih quality clothes'" (*Sport* 3). In this, the Hamiltons begin to accept the values of the Oakleys and mimic them to the point that they begin to lose their own racial identity and connection to their own racial community: "[w]hat the less fortunate negroes of the community said of them and their offspring is really not worth while. Envy has a sharp tongue, and when has not the aristocrat been the target for the plebeian's sneers?" (*Sport* 3-4). While Oakley reluctantly accepts the political and social shifts surrounding the freedom of blacks, he believes, in a Booker T. Washington or Horatio Alger sense, "there must be some good in every system, and it was the duty of the citizen to find that good and make it pay. He had done this. His house, his reputation, his satisfaction, were all evidence that he had succeeded" (*Sport* 5). In this, Oakley reveals his ignorance and privilege as he views the Hamiltons and any hardworking African American capable of achieving the same successes in life. As Revell notes, "[b]y all the standards of honor implicit in the old Southern code, their life of service should bring its reward, but the code plays them false, or rather is revealed in its true nature" (156). Indeed, all the Hamiltons had worked for would be lost, and the money they had saved used against them as evidence of theft.

When Francis's supposed funds appear to be missing, Berry's once doting employers are quick to accuse Berry with slim evidence and no immediate trial, saying "Hamilton must be made an example of when the time came" (*Sport* 18), echoing Dunbar's earlier portrayals of innocent black men at the hands of white men with high social standing. In this section of the novel, Dunbar uses Berry's trial and conviction to expose the lack of social justice, both in and out of the legal system itself; in this sense, Dunbar uses a key plot point to raise his audience's consciousness, to paraphrase Drake, about racism in the legal system. One may also notice that Oakley alone drives the case forward, dismissing the advice of detectives to the point of coercion, and ignoring both Mrs. Oakley's and Francis's vain attempts to not seek such harsh measures for their trusted servant when little guilt could be proven. When the guilty Francis tries to save face by insisting on Berry's trustworthiness, Oakley justifies his change of heart saying, "[t]hat's noble of you, Frank, and I would have done the same, but we must remember that we are not in old days now. The negroes are becoming less faithful and less contented, and more's the pity, and a deal more ambitious, although I have never had any unfaithfulness on the part of Hamilton to complain of before" (*Sport* 15). Here, Dunbar foregrounds his audience's ideas about race relations and attempts, again following Drake's discussion of protest elements, to hold a mirror to their preconceptions.

Further, if we posit Berry as aspiring to be the black image of Oakley, and Joe of the dandyish Francis, we can begin to see the dangers that Dunbar implies are inherent in losing one's identity—the dangers of wearing the white mask. This parallelism used by Dunbar between the Oakleys and the Hamiltons can be traced back to the beginning of the novel:

It was somewhat in the manner of the old cabin in the quarters, with which usage as well as tradition had made both master and servant familiar . . . . When, having married, Oakley bought the great house in which he now lived, he left the little servant's cottage in the yard, for, as he said laughingly, "There is no telling when Berry will be following my example and be taking a wife unto himself." (*Sport* 1-2)

The first page of the novel claims that when Berry came to the Oakleys, "the first faint signs of recovery were being seen" but recovery for whom? The Hamiltons's comfort and status is not due to their own recovery as a black family; rather, it is due to the assistance of the Oakleys who pass down furniture and clothing as if the Hamiltons were their own family. In this, the Hamiltons adopt the Oakleys's white concepts of value and begin to see themselves as quite above the other house servants and their own community. Because they adopt white ideals and place themselves so far above their race, leaving their life's security in the Oakleys's hands, Dunbar foreshadows how far they will fall and how ill-prepared they will be to pick themselves back up without assistance. Through the Oakleys, Dunbar introduces his audience to their own ideas about race relations, providing the "unflattering mirror" image that Drake associates with protest. As noted in the new 2006 introduction to the novel,

In line with many postbellum writers who were encouraged to see daily life progressing in accord with what they saw to be good on the plantations, *The Sport of the Gods* presents Maurice Oakley as caring and supportive of his former slave, Berry Hamilton, and his family. To suggest the alleged benefits of life on the plantation, Dunbar uses the literary device of mirroring: Maurice and Berry are not only on good terms but apparently alike in many of their ways of thinking and acting. (308)

We will continue to see this “mirroring” later in the novel as Joe shifts from modeling the Oakleys and the aristocrats (Dunbar refers to Joe “aping” the mannerisms of Francis and his friends) to mimicking Mr. Thomas, and Kit shifts from donning the clothes and temperment of Mrs. Oakley to embracing Hattie and the life of a stage performer.

Dunbar also critiques attitudes within the African American community. When Fannie and her two children are evicted from the Oakleys’s property, they are denied assistance and shelter by their own community who now no longer view them as one of their own:

In the black people of the town the strong influence of slavery was still operative, and with one accord they turned away from one of their own kind upon whom had been set the ban of the white people’s displeasure. If they had sympathy, they dared not show it. Their own interests, the safety of their own positions and firesides, demanded that they stand aloof from the criminal . . . . They have brought down as a heritage from the days of their bondage both fear and disloyalty. (*Sport* 28)

The Hamiltons’s mirroring the Oakleys has provided a divide between themselves and their black community. Dunbar’s use of satire in this section illustrates both the community’s jealousy of the Hamiltons and their fear of associating with them in light of Berry’s conviction. In a sense, the black community revels in the Hamiltons’s misfortunes. Again, Dunbar subverts the plantation tradition by undermining the characteristic, mutual trust and loyalty between the master and servant, and between African Americans and their own community. Horace Talbot, a white man “known for his kindness towards people of color” (*Sport* 29) displays the social Darwinist approach of the place of the blacks in their society:

It's just like this: 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.

*(Sport 30.)*

Playing into the plantation myth of the kind master and grateful slave, Talbot continues, “[w]hy gentlemen, 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.’ Old Horace was nothing if not logical” *(Sport 31)*. In a sense, with Berry’s incarceration he does experience another form of slavery, as white society and law enforcement have failed to provide justice for an innocent, black man. To return to Trodd, Dunbar is depicting segregation and the failed justice within to illustrate that slavery still exists, albeit by a different name. Again, we see Drake’s “unflattering mirror” as Horace believes he understands the black community and is “kind” to blacks; yet his views of their community are clear: African Americans, in his opinion, still do not deserve freedom, as in their core they are not “fit” to assimilate and survive—a return is needed to the paternalistic arms of the plantation.

Following the trial and Berry’s conviction of ten years of hard labor, Mr. Oakley turns the Hamilton family out with a reminder that they are not only a different race, but a different species: “[y]ou can’t stay here any longer. I want none of your breed about me” *(Sport 35)*. In this, we see the atavistic view of African Americans being biologically inferior to the point of being animalistic. Among the white men of the community taking part in the conversation surrounding the case, only Colonel Saunders proposes that Berry may not be guilty and he may

have saved his meager earnings, but he neglects to share that the Hamilton family were hard workers seeking to better their positions honestly:

And he did not answer what he might have answered, that Berry had no rent or board to pay. His clothes came from his master, and Kitty and Fannie looked to their mistress for the larger number of their supplies. He did not call to their minds that Fannie herself made fifteen dollars a month, and that for two years Joe had been supporting himself. These things did not come up, and as far as the opinion of the gentlemen assembled in the Continental bar went, Berry was already proven guilty. (*Sport* 32)

As mentioned in the novel's new introduction, "[w]hile critical interpretation of the novel emphasizes the harsh and uncaring city, the Hamiltons's fate is sealed long before they migrate North in this undermining of trust and mutual interdependence that is so often claimed as the characteristic of plantation tradition" (308). According to the plantation myth, the Hamiltons should never have had to leave the protecting, trusting comfort of the South, and should have been able to depend on both the Oakleys and the black community in times of need.

As the novel progresses, we see the Hamiltons fare no better as they migrate North and continue to don the white mask, seeking a reestablishment of wealth and social respect. And one must remember that Dunbar's subversive protest lies in its naturalistic form: "[t]he indifference of the naturalistic condition is found in both the opportunism that bludgeons the Hamiltons in New York and the total violation of values perpetrated by Oakley" (Jarrett, Martin, and Primeau 308). Drake speaks to the immorality of characters like the Oakleys in protest literature in that the "author might include portrayals of the moral corruption of the oppressors to supplement the

protagonist's struggle to overcome oppression or might create 'positive stereotypes' [such as the character of Sadness] of socially marginalized characters in order to change narrow-minded readers' negative views of such types of people" (6). Moral corruption is a continuous theme in the characters of *The Sport of the Gods*, as we see not only in the Oakleys, their southern community, and law enforcement, but also in the characters the Hamiltons encounter in the North at the Banner Club who only seek to take advantage of them (mainly Joe, who is frequently referred to as a "lamb"): "the place was a social cesspool, generating a poisonous miasma and reeking with the stench of decayed and rotten moralities. There is no defense to be made for it. But what do you expect when false idealism and fevered ambition come face to face with catering cupidity?" (*Sport* 66). Here, Dunbar extends his critique to the barroom as a social institution that helps perpetuate Joe's and Kitty's decline. Much like Crane's Maggie, Kit is taken by the glamour of the theatre, and Joe is encouraged like George by the supposed fraternal friendship the Banner Club provides.

Aside from Sadness, there are few characters the Hamiltons encounter that are not opportunistic, but even Sadness cannot keep Joe from the corruption of the club and Mr. Thomas's influence. By the end of the novel, Joe has turned to murder. Upon Mr. Hamilton's release, he is a changed man, as well. Having lost his faith, he considers killing Fannie's new husband. This change, or a complex duality present in these characters, is not uncommon in protest literature as Drake notes,

Creating protagonists who are both victims and perpetrators of violence, as does Richard Wright in most of his fiction, can shock and even traumatize readers, giving them a new perspective on their society; conversely, presenting admirable protagonists who are

destroyed physically, emotionally, or even ideologically by their oppressive social systems can create anguish in empathetic readers. (6)

As Drake points out, other African American writers of protest literature would adopt the same approach: Wright, as mentioned, as well as Ann Petry and Ralph Ellison. Drake's comments also echo Frank Norris's remarks on the characteristics of a naturalistic novel. But the degeneration of the Hamiltons in New York, and the violence of the second half of the novel, can also be discussed through the lens of gender theory, as will be explained in the following chapter.

Dunbar lays a final blow to both the plantation myth and the promise of northern migration by the novel's end. Dunbar's use of naturalism displays the harsh realities blacks were still facing despite emancipation, and turned an unforgiving mirror back to the South and its comforting denial of race relations and the continued effect of slavery. There is no solace to be found for the Hamiltons anywhere in America, as segregation has not provided justice or freedom for the African American community, something that Baldwin was still seeking for America to realize five decades later during the Civil Rights Movement. Instead, as their former position, wealth, and comfort were only obtainable through the Oakleys, without other assistance, they must take Mrs. Oakley's offer to return to their former, now drastically changed home, as a damaged, diminished, and fractured family.

### CHAPTER III: RACE AND GENDER PERFORMATIVITY

Paul Laurence Dunbar had contributed to black theatre in New York through the Marshall Circle, turning dialect poetry into song, and short stories into drama. He would bring his knowledge to the Tenderloin district setting of New York in *The Sport of the Gods*. With the plot shift to New York and a different community and social codes, Dunbar explores a new set of identities as possibilities for the Hamiltons, and here the tension between naturalism and social protest emerges most clearly. As he had been critically panned by African American writers of the Harlem Renaissance (and later by key players in the Black Power Movement) for his contributions to the plantation tradition and dialectal work, so would he be criticized for his use of minstrel material in *Sport*. But what critics failed to recognize was Dunbar's subversion of minstrel themes through his honed use of irony and sarcastic wit. Just as Dunbar subverted plantation and northern migration themes in his poetry, drama, and fiction, so did he exploit minstrel material to his own devices, expertly moving within and against the expectations of his white readership to protest racial inequality. Of this, Jonathan Daigle notes in his essay "Paul Laurence Dunbar and the Marshall Circle: Racial Representation from Blackface to Black Naturalism,"

Understanding these expectations was *de rigueur* for black writers and performers who sought a substantial audience. Dunbar knew that stereotypes transcended generic distinctions, but he also recognized that poetry and minstrelsy held radically divergent orientations toward the reigning politics of black respectability. Whereas securing white commendation in poetry—even so-called "darky" dialect—held political value, theatrical success in the "coon"-show era was politically ambiguous. With its minstrel roots, the

emerging black theatre could not easily convince racist white audiences of black humanity. (637)

Dunbar's inclusion of the theatre, and the Hamilton's relation to it, has to do with racial performativity. Daigle continues, "[b]lack performers could not lay claim to whiteness, but they could claim the *de facto* white privilege of performing race" as African Americans "reconstituted the white dandy as a vehicle for self-assertive urban blackness" (638). We see this racial performativity in Joe and Kit as they attempt to assimilate to their New York surroundings through relationships with Mr. Thomas and Hattie. Much as they did in the South, they mirror their counterparts in the North. But although they are not donning the white mask as they did in the South, mimicking the black community of the North proves to be just as dangerous. Both Joe and Kit perform identities that reflect race and gender codes; performing a white identity in the South leads to social and legal sanctions from both communities, and performing an urban black identity in the North contributes to both characters' naturalistic decline.

Dunbar introduces minstrel tropes early in the novel. As Daigle's work suggests, the minstrel tradition opens up a complicated space for performing race, and I would add, gender identities. Mr. Thomas, a northern dandy interested in Kit, introduces the Hamiltons to the Tenderloin district. Thomas boasts to the Hamiltons that they "git the best shows here, we git the best concerts," making the area seem much more respectable than its true nature suggests (*Sport* 50). In this scene, as Daigle points out, Dunbar "exploits the minstrel theatre's unique perspective on the politics of respectability" (640). When Thomas introduces the Hamiltons to Mrs. Jones and their new lodgings, he urges Kitty to sing a tune at the piano saying, "an' after while we'll have that fellah down that plays 'Rag-time,'" before promising to take the family to a

“coon” show containing a performance of “I bin huntin’ fu’ wo’k” (*Sport* 52). As Daigle suggests, “Dunbar used minstrelsy to explore the mutually constitutive relationship between white self-fashioning and artificial blackness” (639). Although Joe is seemingly the only family member impressed, Kitty will later find herself participating in the same racially-debasing performances. Mrs. Hamilton, however, has a keener observation: “Thomas was not the provincial who puts every one [sic] on par with himself, nor was he the metropolitan who complacently patronises [sic] the whole world. He was trained out of the one and not up to the other. The intermediate only succeeded in being offensive” (*Sport* 55). But, if the white population saw the “coon” as an ethnological, realistic representation of the black community, Dunbar “[d]espite [being] entrenched [in] political realities, . . . worked toward a productive synthesis of respectable and upstart black cultures” (Daigle 640) regardless of criticism.

An important part of this complicated synthesis is Dunbar’s treatment of gender as it intersects with race in identity formation. Both Kit and Joe perform the identities that seem available to them, yet none provide a productive space in which to protest social injustice or to perform a viable alternative identity. In Judith Butler’s definitive text on gender performativity *Gender Trouble*, she concludes,

Gender ought not to be conceived merely as the cultural inscription of meaning on a pregiven sex (a juridical conception); gender must also designate the very apparatus of production whereby the sexes themselves are established. As a result, gender is not to culture as sex is to nature; gender is also the discursive/cultural means by which “sexed nature” or “a natural sex” is produced and established as “prediscursive,” prior to culture, a politically neutral surface on which culture acts. (81)

Arthur Brittan expounds on Butler's views and the relation of culture to gender in *Masculinity and Power* in that "any account of masculinity must begin with its place in the general discussion of gender. Since gender does not exist outside history and culture, this means that both masculinity and femininity are continuously subject to a process of reinterpretation" (113). Because gender, history, and culture are inextricably tied, the way gender is represented in various texts will depend on the context surrounding where and when a text was produced. Brittan continues in this vein writing, "how men behave will depend upon the existing social relations of gender. By this I mean the way in which men and women confront each other ideologically and politically. . . . At any given moment, gender will reflect the material interests of those who have power and those who do not" (113). With this in mind, when approaching a text like *The Sport of the Gods* one must consider the politics of power at play in the Emancipated South and in the discourse of naturalism in the work of Dunbar's white male contemporaries. The characters in *Sport*, then, are not only performing gender, but also performing race, many aspects of which are based upon the expectations of their communities in both the North and South.

Before turning to gender, performativity, and violence in *The Sport of the Gods*, we must revisit Norris's and Pizer's views of naturalism. In his essay "Late Nineteenth-Century American Naturalism," Pizer expounds on Norris's previously included characteristics of the naturalistic tale in that, "the naturalist discovers in this world those qualities of man usually associated with the heroic or adventurous, such as acts of violence and passion which involve sexual adventure and or bodily strength and which culminate in desperate moments and violent death" (307). In the second section of his essay, Pizer turns to Norris's *McTeague* stating,

Norris believed that the source of this violence beneath the surface placidity of life is the presence in all men of animal qualities which have played a major role in man's evolutionary development but which are now frequently atavistic and destructive.

Norris's theme is that man's racial atavism (particularly his brute sexual desires) and man's individual family heritage . . . can combine as a force toward reversion, toward a return to the emotions and instincts of man's animal past. (309)

In a similar vein, Donna M. Campbell in her essay "Women Writers and Naturalism" suggests the plot of Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* "echoes the familiar naturalistic plot of the awakening of the 'human beast' beneath a veneer of civilization, a process that may mean the making or breaking of a character—the restoration of masculinity, in London's *The Sea-Wolf* (1904), or the devolution of the human being, in Norris's *Vandover and the Brute* (1914)" (227).

In several ways we can compare *McTeague* to *Sport*, and the character of *McTeague* to Joe, as will later be discussed. But one must consider, much as Butler and Brittan suggest, that Norris's view of masculinity and men is tied to views surrounding gender and race at the time of its publication in 1899 in the development of which Spencer, Darwin, and Freud heavily influenced naturalist writers. Dunbar, as well as later African American naturalist writers, would subvert the assumptions surrounding biological determinism by employing naturalistic tropes. As John Dudley posits in "A Man Only in Form," the "development of American literary naturalism, as practiced by Stephen Crane, Frank Norris, Jack London, among others, reflected the racialized discourse of the day, and the pseudoscientific understanding of race plays a central role in the explicit celebration of Anglo-Saxon destiny found in such works as Norris's *The Octopus* and London's *The Sea-Wolf*" (139). For naturalist African American writers, the treatment of gender

took on a different purpose than that of their naturalist, white peers, especially for Dunbar who began the African American exploration of naturalism with *Sport* at the turn of the century.

Dudley discusses the distinct difference:

Although the dynamics of gender and ideology are not identical across the racial divide of Jim Crow America, the parallels invite further investigation and suggest a more complex relationship between canonical naturalist authors and their African American counterparts than traditional criticism of the genre has explored. This apparently simultaneous repudiation and embrace of biological determinism highlights the complexities and contradictions at the heart of naturalism as a literary form in general, and its use by African American authors at the beginning of the twentieth century in particular. (140)

Because of this, texts like *McTeague* and *Sport* (published serially only two years after) must not be approached through a strictly gendered lens—attention must also be paid to the naturalist tradition the texts are a part of and the context surrounding the works.

Well before he turns a critical eye to the Hamiltons's experiences in New York, Dunbar begins his exploration of gender by describing and demoralizing Francis Oakley as an unmanly, untalented, spoiled dandy and unsuccessful artist who is either ineffectual with or uninterested in women. Maurice Oakley dotes on his younger brother in a paternalistic fashion, placing him under the "best masters in America" to hone his artistic persuasions, and later sending him to Paris for further immersion in artistic pursuits demanding a "sacrifice which might have been the ruin of Maurice's own career" (*Sport* 6). Dunbar describes Francis's nature as "always trembling" and "delicate." When Francis decides to return to Paris to finish his studies, Maurice

prays, “[a]t last he was going to apply himself steadily and try to be less the dilettante” (*Sport* 6). Francis’s physical appearance is feminine in form: “He was a handsome man, tall, slender, and graceful. He had the face and brow of a poet, a pallid face framed in a mass of dark hair. There was a touch of weakness in his mouth, but this was shaded by a full mustache that made much forgivable to beauty-loving eyes” (*Sport* 6-7). As Dudley points out,

Dunbar characterizes Frank as a perfect example of the aesthetically inclined, insufficiently masculine specimen so derided by Progressive Era observers, from Theodore Roosevelt to G. Stanley Hall . . . . The language used to describe Frank’s decidedly unmanly demeanor . . . not only calls into question his normative sexuality but offers a physiological indication of the moral weakness that the novel later reveals, with the framing of Berry for the theft of money actually lost to gambling debts. (148)

And it is Joe who Berry has already described as a “dandy,” that seeks to join the likes of Francis and the Oakleys’s other guests at his farewell dinner. As the Hamiltons awake early the next morning, discussing the highlights of the previous evening, Joe “did not condescend to join in the conversation, but contented himself with devouring the good things and aping the manners of the young men whom he knew had been among last night’s guests” (*Sport* 20). Here, we see at play Dunbar’s particular word choice in “aping,” an ironic nod to racial atavism and biological determinism. As Dudley points out, “[o]ne way that Dunbar and Chesnutt capture and portray Anglo-Saxon fear is through dissipated characters whose absence of manliness prefigures their roles as both villains and corruptors” (147). We see this in both Francis and Joe. Francis, too weak to own up to his gambling debts, is more willing to save face and reestablish his pride and

masculinity through framing Berry. Later, Joe will attempt to reestablish both his pride and masculinity through murdering Hattie.

With his interest in social protest, Dunbar uses Berry's arrest as the initial catalyst for Joe's decline. When Berry is arrested, we see Joe beginning to take a turn, the brute beginning to emerge from within in response to injustice:

Dandy as he was, he was loyal, and when he saw his mother's tears and his sister's shame, something rose within him that had it been given play might have made a man of him, but, being crushed, died and rotted, and in the compost it made, all the evil of his nature flourished . . . . He was not heartless; but the citadel of his long-desired and much vaunted manhood trembled before the sight of his father's abject misery. (*Sport* 33-34)

Here, Dunbar gives a subtle nod to atavism in the "evil nature" of Joe. In another direct address, Dunbar notes that observing his family's pain does not make Joe a man, as his masculinity had long since been diminished, reducing Joe to a mere brute. Berry, stripped of his freedom, faints in the courtroom as an observer jokes, "It's five dollars' fine every time a nigger faints" to a silent, more forgiving audience, as "[t]here was something too portentous, too tragic in the degradation of this man" (*Sport* 34). But, Maurice is unmoved by the display, "relentless" as he evicts the Hamiltons post-conviction stating, "I want none of your breed about me" (*Sport* 34-35). Here, we see both Hamiltons reduced as as black men, Joe giving way to his underlying wicked "nature" and the entire family reduced to an animalistic "breed" as Fannie is left lost with "her natural protector gone." Joe loses his income, as well, as the barber shop he had worked for will no longer employ him in the wake of his father's conviction, and the black community gleefully shuns him by labeling him a "white man's bahbah" (38). Turned out by the Oakleys,

their community, and even their religious congregation, the demoralized Hamiltons see a northern migration to a promising New York as their only solution.

Dunbar uses the New York setting to explore a new set of identities for the Hamiltons. Upon arrival in New York, Mrs. Hamilton and Kit are apprehensive and wary of their surroundings, less entranced by the big city and more concerned with its immoral underbelly and their own disadvantaged state. But Joe is quite taken, desirous of everything he sees to the point of envious anger and resentment as he watches well-dressed black men stroll by and,

a revelation came to him,--the knowledge that his horizon had been very narrow, and he felt angry that it was so. Why should those fellows be different from him? Why should they walk the street so knowingly, so independently when he knew not whither to turn his steps? Well, he was in New York, and now he would learn. Some day some greenhorn from the South should stand at a window envying him as he passed. (48)

Passages like this are reminiscent of McTeague's envy of his fellow dentist's higher social standing and deserved location, despite McTeague's own inferiority in the field, as well as of his unwavering pursuit of the golden tooth to reestablish his undeserved pride. Much the same could be said for Francis's lack of talent and effort in his pursuits as an artist. At this point in the novel Dunbar offers an eloquent foreshadowing of what is to become of the ignorant yet arrogant Joe if he continues on his brutish path:

Whom the Gods wish to destroy they first make mad. The first sign of the demoralization of the provincial who comes to New York is his pride at his insensibility to certain impressions which used to influence him at home. First, he begins to scoff, and there is

no truth in his views nor depth in his laugh. But by and by, from mere pretending, it becomes real. He grows callous. After that he goes to the devil very cheerfully. (49)

Much like McTeague, Joe is more concerned with his selfish pride and want of an outward appearance of achievement and wealth. Leaving the South behind, he now looks to Thomas as a model of social respect and black masculinity.

Thomas exudes confidence, and although not a wealthy individual, he knows how to appear so through his social standing at the Club and ability to play weaker men like Joe. When Mr. Thomas escorts the family to an evening show, though, Joe is snubbed by Thomas in favor of his sister. The formerly cool Kit begins to finally be taken in by the city once in the theatre, but not by Thomas. Joe, though, once again finds himself above his surroundings, unfazed by the “mystery and glamour” Kit has become susceptible to, his masculinity budding, and a sense of power over his surroundings flourishing:

He had suddenly raised himself in his own estimation. He had gazed steadily at a girl across the aisle until she had smiled in response. Of course, he went hot and cold by turns, and the sweat broke out on his brow, but instantly he began to swell. He had made a decided advance in knowledge, and he swelled with the consciousness that already he was coming to be a man of the world. He looked with a new feeling at the swaggering, sporty young negroes. His attitude towards them was not one of humble self-deprecation any more. Since last night he had grown, and felt that he might, that he would, be like them. (56)

Joe in his “knowledge” attempts to acquire the same level of respect and control over social surroundings (including those with women) that Thomas and other young black men seem to

have obtained. Dunbar pauses again here for an aside and a shift in tone, lest the reader begin to garner any sympathy for Joe's fresh perspective and sudden confidence: "One might find it in him to feel sorry for this small-souled, warped being, for he was so evidently the jest of Fate, if it were not that he was so blissfully, so conceitedly, unconscious of his own nastiness" (56).

Dunbar's narrative intrusion, which also provided the title for the British release of the novel, *The Jest of Fate*, employs a familiar trope of protest fiction, but his interest in naturalism complicates its use in the novel. Unlike Harriet Beecher Stowe's uses of direct address in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, Dunbar does not encourage empathy with his characters but anger about the environment that helped produce them. As Dunbar continues, Joe "had started out with false ideals as to what was fine and manly. He was afflicted by a sort of moral and mental astigmatism that made him see everything wrong. As he sat there tonight, he gave to all he saw a wrong value and upon it based his ignorant desires" (56). In Dunbar's use of the terms "warped" and "mental astigmatism," Joe is described abnormal to the point of perhaps being at least temporarily disabled as he seeks to reestablish his manhood.

In her discussion of gender performativity, Campbell notes the Darwinian and Spencerian tendency of naturalism to rely on the physical strength, or lack thereof, of its characters in their survival, but "strength is at best on one end of the continuum with age, disability, and death at the other, a fact that some naturalistic novels keep firmly in focus either through the insights of major characters or through the presence of a person with disabilities" (234). Joe, as he embraces his inner brute, and as the novel progresses, loses his mental grasp on reality and his sense of control, much as do McTeague or Wright's Bigger Thomas in *Native Son*. Campbell also notes that the "figure of the disabled body also evokes issues of social justice and thus enables the

chronological extension of naturalism from the industrial novel of the mid-nineteenth century to the Progressive Era social-problem novel early in the twentieth century” (234). If we can extend the “disabled body” to the mentally disabled, or individuals who have a mental break, Campbell’s suggestion can be applied to all three characters in Norris’s, Dunbar’s, and Wright’s texts. McTeague, Bigger Thomas, and Joe all experience a mental break causing them to seek to reestablish their pride and masculinity through controlling and violently harming women whom they had been romantically involved.

Although Kit differs greatly from Joe, she performs race and gender to her own needs and in the venue available to her, the theatre. But Kit is not immune to wanting to advance her position: “The quick poison of the unreal life about her had already begun to affect her character” (73). After both she and her mother are let go from their housekeeping positions, Kit attains her dream of taking the stage with the help of Hattie. Much like Theodore Dreiser’s *Carrie*, Stephen Crane’s *Maggie*, and Edith Wharton’s *Lily*, Kit becomes the object of the male gaze. As Campbell notes of predominant female roles in naturalistic novels, “the protagonist performs for an audience of male spectators, speaking someone else’s words or remaining mute, a stance that permits her to serve as a focal point of the male gaze without disrupting the audience’s fantasies by the expression of her own personality” (232). Kit does not remain mute, rather she uses her skill in singing, excelling in the performance of dialect and Rag-time songs and “dropp[ing] the simple old songs she knew to practise [sic] the detestable coon ditties which the stage demanded” (73). With practice, she learns needed steps and becomes a dancer, as well. She is also able to advance due to her appearance, much like Hattie, as Kit is described as having an “olive” complexion and Hattie a “yellow” tone. Thus, they gain preference over their darker-

skinned peers. Campbell draws further comparisons between race and gender performativity in that the “concept of the spectacle of desire also provides an additional means of examining race as signifiers of value” (233). Kit as a spectacle of the male gaze continues even after she leaves the family to tour with the theatre, but her attractiveness begins to wane due to her lifestyle. Nineteenth century readers familiar with Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* would be familiar with the trope of the breakup of an African American family.

Dunbar makes Kit’s decline far less grim than her family’s in that we do not find out what happens to her after her flight, but one may read Hattie’s demise as the likely model for Kit’s eventual end. When Joe leaves the family, though, he fares far worse, and his arrogance and dependence on Hattie only assist in further dismantling his manhood:

It had taken barely five years to accomplish an entire metamorphosis of their characters. In Joe’s case, an even shorter time was needed. He was so ready to go down that it needed but a gentle push to start him, and once started, there was nothing in him to hold him back from his depths. For his will was as flabby as his conscience, and his pride, which stands to some men for conscience, had no definite aim or direction. (111)

As Maurice could not effect a change in Francis through his mentorship and support, Joe had learned nothing from Berry’s integrity and strength. When Hattie finds Joe once again drunk at the Banner Club, she reminds him of her threat to kick him out of her rooms: “The very inanity of the man disgusted her, and on a sudden impulse, she sprang up and struck him full in the face. He was too weak to resist the blow” (113). Bested physically and socially by a woman, he threatens to kill Hattie as he is kicked out of the club. Returning to the club the following evening, he tells both Sadness and Skaggs that he is going to kill Hattie and also divulges the

truth that his father was innocent, having never stole Francis's money, leaving Skaggs with the idea to publish Berry's story, not out of altruism but opportunism. Joe makes good on his intentions and drunkenly confronts Hattie, who sees Joe as no longer human, but a monster. Joe's claim that, "you made me what I am" and his full realization of his changed persona and degradation, explains the chapter's title "Frankenstein" (117). In a brutish, violent effort to reestablish his pride, Joe strangles Hattie to death. Dunbar describes Joe as an insane, broken creature in the aftermath:

There was no spirit or feeling left in him. He moved mechanically, as if without sense or volition. The first impression he gave was that of a man over-acting insanity. But this was soon removed by the very indifference with which he met everything concerned with his crime. From the very first he made no effort to exonerate or vindicate himself. He talked little and only in a dry, stupefied way. He was as one whose soul is dead, and perhaps it was; for all the little soul of him had been wrapped up in the body of this one woman, and the stroke that took her life had killed him too. (119)

Again, Joe's disposition and acceptance is eerily similar to Bigger Thomas's as he is arrested of numb dumbness. As Bigger reflects in *Native Son*, "after he murdered, he accepted the crime . . . It was the first full act of his life; it was the most meaningful, exciting and stirring thing that had ever happened to him. He accepted it because it made him free, gave him the possibility of choice, of action, the opportunity to act and to feel that his actions carried weight" (396). From his life in the club, Sadness is the only member to see Joe after the murder, and is terrified by him. Others in the community feel he is the victim of the South having ill-prepared its blacks for assimilation in the North, but "even as they exclaimed they knew there was no way, and that the

stream of young negro life would continue to flow up from the South . . . that, until the gods grew tired of their cruel sport, there must still be sacrifices to false ideals and unreal ambitions” (120). If Berry’s arrest presented the catalyst for Joe, Hattie became his sacrifice, purpose, and end.

Joe is sentenced to life in prison, and Skaggs’s story gets Berry pardoned. Upon his release, Berry travels North to find Fannie remarried to Gibson. When Fannie urges Berry to leave her alone as his presence will only provoke more physical abuse from Gibson, Berry suggests that he can physically best Gibson, and the two will solve the issue of the legitimacy of their marriage as men. When Hattie persists, Berry loses his faith entirely. Demoralized, he vows to kill Gibson, as at the very least he would share the title of murderer with his own son. When Berry later finds that Gibson has been killed in an accident, though, he remains outwardly calm, “with clasped hands, and no words passed his lips. But his heart was crying, ‘Thank God! Thank God! This man’s blood is not on my hands’” (143). In this, Berry separates himself from his vengeful son, and in leaving New York, Berry cannot face Joe again. Without their children, Fannie and Berry return to the South, hoping that the community will be kinder to them in light of Berry’s innocence. Mrs. Oakley offers their cottage back to them in a sign of remorse. Some critics have seen the Hamiltons’s return to the South and Mrs. Oakley’s paternal reception of them as Dunbar’s playing into the traditional plantation theme of the slave faring far better under the protection of their masters. However, Dunbar again subverts the tradition as Maurice has been reduced to insanity, his shrieks heard from the cottage nightly (144). Dunbar ends the novel on an ambiguous, though probably hopeless note fitting to the fatalism of the naturalistic genre: “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” (144).

## CONCLUSION

In this project, I argue that Paul Laurence Dunbar perhaps published one of the first, true African American novels of social protest with *Sport of the Gods*. Having been predominantly known for his dialect poetry, Dunbar gained little recognition for his contribution to the art of the novel. Much of his initial success was due to William Dean Howells's 1896 positive review in *Harper's Weekly* of Dunbar's second poetry collection, *Majors and Minors*. Howells's review would be adapted into an introduction of Dunbar's third collection, *Lyrics of Lowly Life*, published the same year. Although Howells helped to spearhead Dunbar's success in gaining him more attention, Dunbar felt Howells had done irrecoverable damage in his review by limiting Dunbar's talent to dialect poetry. In his review, Howells is patronizing to the point of insulting not only Dunbar but also black artists in general by suggesting that they are entirely incapable of producing high-quality work outside of their own dialect. Furthermore, Dunbar believed Howells had not fully understood his use of the dialect form. Howells did notice Dunbar's use of irony and humor, although he failed to grasp Dunbar's goals. But Dunbar proved to excel greatly in various forms of poetry as well as drama, songwriting, short stories, and novels, publishing an astounding amount in various genres from 1893 until his death in 1906. Dunbar had studied diverse forms of literature and prose, and with a satiric wit was able to experiment and subvert traditional forms to his own purpose. Most often, his work centered on race, although he had to be cognizant of his predominantly white readership. This did not prevent Dunbar from tackling issues of racial injustice from early on in his career. Indeed, injustice fueled him as a writer and social activist, gaining him the attention of predominant African American leaders.

As he continued to move in higher circles and his popularity grew, he increased his experimentation in literary forms and grew braver in his discussion of racial injustices. But as he progressed in the last years of his life into novel writing, a new form for the author, his popularity diminished. He published four novels in four years, and one can see a budding novelist beginning to grow. But they are inconsistent and not his best work overall. At this point in his career, he had to publish as much as possible to support his wife and mother. It is perhaps due to these personal concerns that his novels seem uneven and lacking in quality. Furthermore, his health was waning, and after separating from his wife he suffered from severe depression, alcoholism, and poor health.

Of his four novels, *The Sport of the Gods* remains the strongest, and we see Dunbar at the height of his experimentation in form. With its publication, he produced not only one of the first forays into African American naturalism, but also social protest fiction. In this important work, he laid the groundwork for African American writers who followed in the same tradition. His influence can be seen in Richard Wright's *Native Son* (1940) and Ann Petry's *The Street* (1946), both naturalistic works of social protest. But the novel was not well received for decades after its release, limiting scholarship on and awareness of Dunbar's fiction. The novel gained popularity in the sixties during the Civil Rights Movement, and critical attention increased. While Dunbar's first three novels remain in print within collections, *Sport* is still currently printed individually.

In the past decade, scholarship and book publications on Dunbar have increased, with a growing attention to *The Sport of the Gods*. But scholarship continues to center on its urban and blues qualities. Very little is written of the novel in light of social protest literature. Much of this gap in scholarship may be due to the lack of scholarship surrounding protest literature as a genre,

in general. Protest literature as a genre, though, is gaining more and more critical interest, perhaps due to the current racial climate of the United States. The concerns of racial inequality and social injustice that Dunbar explored in his work continue to resonate in a country still experiencing racial unrest, making Dunbar's contribution to social protest and influence on the genre all the more meaningful.

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