

# Race, Region, and the Black Midwest in the Dunbar Decades

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In September 1899 the *Kansas Agitator*, a newspaper closely aligned with the Midwestern Populist movement, reprinted Paul Laurence Dunbar's "Sympathy." With its famous line "I know why the caged bird sings," the poem has long epitomized Dunbar's position in the African American literary tradition. What is it doing in rural Kansas? One wouldn't have expected the *Kansas Agitator* to sympathize with Dunbar, whose plantation poetry and fiction were appearing regularly in the period's most widely read and critically esteemed literary magazines by 1899. There, Dunbar's name was synonymous with Black gentility and achievement to a degree exceeded only by W. E. B. Du Bois and Booker T. Washington. But "Sympathy" is not plantation poetry, the genre of ostensible nostalgia for life under slavery to which scholars have typically attributed Dunbar's national popularity, and the *Kansas Agitator* reprinted it in a column devoted to labor news. The predominantly white Kansas farmers who encountered "Sympathy" alongside calls for cooperative production and accounts of rural poverty likely read Dunbar as a regional writer sympathizing with the hopes and hardships of Midwestern life at a time of pronounced social tension between regions.

The capacity of "Sympathy" to circulate as both a Black poem and a Midwestern poem reflects broader patterns in Dunbar's reception that require us to rethink the interplay between popular conceptions of race and region at the turn of the century. From his breakthrough volume *Lyrics of Lowly Life* in 1896 through his

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tragically early 1906 death and into the 1910s, Ohio-born Dunbar was one of the most famous writers in the US—as a Black poet *and* as a Midwestern poet. In these decades, the idea of regions as units of cultural geography—as alignments of aesthetic, social, economic, and political practices in a particular though ambiguously bounded geographic space—was one of the most important frameworks by which Americans understood cultural production and belonging. More than just the basis of the institutionalized literary aesthetic that scholars have since termed regionalism, this framework fueled profuse differences in what people in different parts of the country read and how they read. At the same time, Jim Crow-era codifications of Blackness and growing non-Western European immigration had already made race one of the most pervasive concepts for interpreting, policing, and organizing cultural difference. We often think of race in the period as defined by the Jim Crow “one-drop rule” binary, whereby nonwhiteness functions as excluding other forms of representation and identification—as indeed publishers and politicians alike often deployed it. Writing in what was considered the Midwestern style at the height of its popularity, however, allowed Dunbar to engage regionally distinctive circulation networks and reading practices despite racial prejudice, even as he concurrently sustained another reputation for writing in forms, dialects, and types marked as Black.

Race and region were already intertwined in the cultural imagination. To be Black in the US, Dunbar complained in 1899, was to be a “quasi Southerner” (268). So he wrote in “The Hapless Southern Negro,” one of several articles in which he diagnosed the nation’s much-discussed “race problem” as at heart a regional one. Dunbar was born after emancipation and lived most of his life in Dayton, Ohio; his experience of race and racism was shaped by the relative lack of racial discord resulting from a combination of local economic prosperity and a well-established Black community. Dunbar recognized, however, that the dominant accounts of Black life and culture—whether Du Bois’s anthropology, Washington’s politics, the Fisk Singers’ spirituals, or the minstrel stages’ jokes, Joel Chandler Harris’ folklore, and Thomas Nelson Page’s fiction—all located authentic Black experience in the South. Dunbar chafed against this elision, one which primarily defined his race through the exaggeration and essentialization of regional practices with which he had little in common. Newspapers reprinted his objections to “those who would hold the negro down to a certain kind of poetry—dialect and concerning only scenes on plantations in the south” (“Paul L. Dunbar in Denver”).<sup>1</sup> In these pieces, Dunbar targets the nefarious regionalization of race that confined Blacks to the South representationally much as other forms of policing confined them

there physically. “The Hapless Southern Negro” concludes that the only solution to this intertwined representational and political “question of the South” is “the widening of the Negro’s field, [the] spreading out of their district”: Blacks must exchange the South not for the cities of the Northeast but for the “great and generous” Midwest and West (269). The Great Migration, during which millions would do just that, was still two decades off. Yet, as Dunbar was at pains to point out, there was already a growing Black population in the Midwest and, with it, a growing Black Midwestern reading public and periodical press.<sup>2</sup>

The South nonetheless continues to be the focal point of most scholarship on postbellum Black literature even when tracing material and imaginative transits into and out of it. Scholars of postbellum literary regionalism have similarly shown that the genre’s institutionalization offered opportunity for Black authors to publish as Southern while assuaging white anxiety by transmuted racial difference into less-threatening geographic difference.<sup>3</sup> But such was not necessarily the case. A growing body of new work on the circulation of Black print by scholars including Eric Gardner and Elizabeth McHenry has directed our attention to sites of reading and writing outside the South, sites otherwise obscured by our misplaced focus on that region.<sup>4</sup> Dunbar didn’t just write in or about non-Southern locations: he was able to become widely understood as representing the Midwest, Black and white, by interfacing the expanding geography of Black experience with the period’s framework of regional representation. Conversely, a recent formal turn in African American literary scholarship, bolstered by seminal work on Dunbar by Gene Jarrett and Margaret Ronda, has shifted attention from longstanding questions of authenticity to the political implications of literary form.<sup>5</sup> Still, scholars have largely dismissed Dunbar’s use of Midwestern conventions because we haven’t pursued the alternative publishing venues and extensive newspaper reception that registered this writing’s meaningfulness for interpreting and defining the region.<sup>6</sup> Increasingly, this function mattered not only to white Midwesterners but Black ones too, among whom Dunbar sparked a wave of regionally inflected writing and the sensation of Dunbar Literary Clubs. In this light Dunbar is not exception but exemplar, not a dead-end before the Harlem Renaissance but a watershed point in alternative trajectories of both Black and regional literature.

By refocusing on his work’s participation in regional literary style and reception, I argue that Dunbar deployed his Midwestern identity, successfully, as an alternative site for Black expression and cultural identification. In doing so, I use his career to illuminate a more dynamic relationship between popular conceptions of race and

of region at the fin de siècle, one that facilitated widespread practices of writing and reading that combine and blur their respective modes of representation. Dunbar expertly activates these latent cultural resources in his poetry and prose. Moreover, interacting with Dunbar's work entangled readers in the very question of the relation between race and region. In the first two sections of this essay, I show that Dunbar's use of Midwestern conventions, along with a good dose of publishing savvy, enabled his Midwestern poetry and prose to circulate widely without necessarily being racially marked. Under such circumstances, I contend, it was possible for regional identity to take precedence over racial alterity as a framework for classifying and interpreting cultural difference. This move from aesthetic innovation to material circulation foregrounds the power of literary form to do cultural work in the world. In the third and fourth sections, I show that a second group of Dunbar's writings combined commonplace regional conventions with racial ones, synchronizing commonalities between them and his double reputation to highlight affinities between Black life and a Midwestern one. Interacting with these works compelled readers to use region to blur racial lines. For white readers in the Midwest, this meant considering that regional identity could be multiracial; for the region's Black writers and reading communities like the literary clubs that bore his name, it made Dunbar a model of the cultural possibilities of the Black Midwest.

*[T]he wide-reaching success of Dunbar's [Midwestern writing] shows that. . . [u]nder the right print conditions, regional belonging could take precedence over racial alterity.*

## 1

In the 1890s, a new literary Midwest was emerging in the generation of writers that included Dunbar, Henry Blake Fuller, Hamlin Garland, Booth Tarkington, and Octave Thanet. As Dunbar's critiques of Southern Black dialect poetry circulated in newspapers across the country, he positioned his Midwestern poetry as part of this group. Dunbar's early tribute to "James Whitcomb Riley" for example, one of his many poems in Midwestern dialect, is subtitled "From a Westerner's Point of View" to emphasize regional affirmation. "The Spellin'-Bee"—a long poem in which a young man purposely loses a spelling bee to a young woman he loves—refashions a famous episode from *The Hoosier Schoolmaster* (1871), the best-seller by Edward Eggleston that spawned a series of popular "Hoosier novels" and spelling bee poems (including one by Riley).<sup>7</sup> Readers may have recognized these acts of poetic citation to some of the country's most popular authors. From New York's *Harper's Monthly* to San Francisco's *Overland* to Chicago's *Dial*, commentators remarked on the groundswell of interest in Midwestern literature.<sup>8</sup> The phrase "Middle West" itself entered common use at this

time, gradually superseding other monikers for roughly the same geographic space including “the Old Northwest,” “the Upper Mississippi,” and an antiquated sense of “the West.”<sup>9</sup> This rearticulation shifted the geographic distribution of the nation’s literary attention, and in so doing offered new aesthetic and publishing opportunities. The leading monthly magazines included writing about the Midwest as regular content, Midwestern magazines advocated expression of a distinctive heritage for the region, and newspapers reprinted Midwestern literature or literary news apropos to social commentary. Dunbar was no mere beneficiary of this process; his contributions played a significant role in the burgeoning Midwestern literary movement.

While Dunbar was circulated and read as a Black writer, we shouldn’t conclude that his writing wasn’t also circulated as a regional literature: one did not preclude the other. Maintaining a regional reputation, however, required careful and constant maneuvering within a fin de siècle literary field in which critical gatekeepers and publishers were more comfortable with Black authors writing within familiar Southern stereotypes. By 1900, Dunbar was increasingly compelled to publish Southern Black dialect poems to be reprinted in illustrated gift volumes, though these went through fewer editions than his larger collections of new work in a variety of styles, such as *Lyrics of Lowly Life* (1896).<sup>10</sup> Far from acquiescing, Dunbar countered the racist pressures of editors and publishers by expanding his prose output and the number of print venues in which it appeared.<sup>11</sup> In addition to his now better known *The Sport of the Gods* (1902), he published the Midwestern novels *The Uncalled* (1898) and *The Fanatics* (1901) as well as an extended series of short stories called “Ohio Pastorals” in *Lippincott’s Magazine* starting in 1901. Tracing the movements of Dunbar’s Midwestern prose in the literary marketplace helps elucidate the literary techniques by which he bolstered his regional reputation across genres as well as the publishing strategies by which he kept a step ahead of critics who might try to keep him a quasi-Southerner.

The “Ohio Pastorals” exhibit all the hallmarks of Midwestern style as understood at the fin de siècle. Akin to the local color writing by contemporaries Garland and Thanet, Dunbar’s stories are set in a fictionalized small city named Dorbury that is generalizable enough to stand for the region.<sup>12</sup> Narrative tone hovers between light-hearted humor and endearing sympathy; characters, who all speak in Midwestern dialect, are well-meaning but inclined to near-sighted judgment. The affinity between character and narrative voices, in the idioms they use and the morals they draw, underscores the egalitarianism central to the Ohio Pastorals. Many of the stories concern familial love or religious faith and how these virtues can

slip into jealousy or repression. In “The White Counterpane” a mother learns that she will not lose her son by letting him marry, and in “The Minority Committee” elder parishioners agree to adopt some new ways. Almost all of the Ohio Pastorals are fables of compromise or practicality, trading on the proverbial middleness of the “Middle West.” Of course, parallels exist in local color short stories set in other regions, but these themes and tropes worked in tandem with more explicit markers—dialect, landscape, or lifestyle—through which they became identified as Midwestern.

The result was a distinctive balance of hope amid hardship and egalitarianism through hard work that contemporaneous critics in every strata of the periodical press associated with the Midwest.<sup>13</sup> As William Dean Howells wrote in the *North American Review*, “[p]oetry in the Middle West . . . is deeply rooted in the life of the region. . . . [i]n a certain tenderness of light and coloring” in contrast with “the New England school, where conscience dwells almost rebukingly with beauty” (128). The influential Midwestern editor and critic Johnson Brigham, writing of “Characteristics and Possibilities of Middle Western Literature” in the *Review of Reviews*, made equivalent claims of the region’s prose. The “heterogeneous elements of the population of the middle West”—in which Brigham includes Irish, Germans, Scandinavians, and “negroes” (330)—promoted an egalitarian sympathy in fiction that inspired “new courage for life’s humdrum duties as well as for its crises” and highlighted the “compensations for [life’s] inevitable woes” (333). An article in the *Washington Times*, “Poets of the Middle West,” similarly asserted that the region’s writers emphasized “the heroism of the common man, who is patient, brave, [and] unselfish”: Midwestern literature had a “democratic quality” and “downright and practical” philosophy stemming from a pioneer ethos that set it apart from the aristocratic virtues and sense of social hierarchy in Southern literature (18). As both Brigham and Howells also argued, Midwestern writing offered particular representational opportunities that distinguished it from other regional literatures (which were themselves subject to ongoing definition). For its examples “Poets of the Middle West” quotes none other than Dunbar, presenting him along with Eugene Field and Riley as the region’s defining poets.

Dunbar links these regional conventions to place-based accounts of personal development and literary meaning-making in “The Vindication of Jared Hargot,” one of the later Ohio Pastorals. This story follows Dorbury’s excitement over the publication of town poet Jared Hargot’s first collection. Like Dunbar, many of Hargot’s poems are about Midwestern manners and mores; like Dunbar, Hargot’s work had hitherto appeared in newspapers and at

events in the surrounding area. The intimate bonds of community map onto those of publication to such a degree that Hargot's poems are treated as collaboratively authored. The narrative voice itself joins in on the camaraderie, professing that "[o]ne cannot help . . . absorbing some of the author's creative enthusiasm and delegating to one's self a partnership in the work. The amanuensis who copies the page for the press speaks with pride of 'our book,' while it is 'our book' to the boy who carries it to the post office" (*Complete Stories* 488). Unlike the outside-observer narrator common in local color fiction by contemporaries like Sarah Orne Jewett, Dunbar's narrator is part of the community and invites readers to join this "our." Dunbar's use of communal characters and intimate narrative voice marks an advancement from Eggleston and Riley that prefigured important Midwestern fiction of the next decade like Sherwood Anderson's *Winesburg, Ohio* (1919) and Edgar Lee Masters' *Spoon River Anthology* (1915). The Ohio Pastorals reenact this logic to coordinate Dunbar's regional affiliation, first across individual stories and then across literary formats. The stories constellate recurring characters and concerns to reinforce the importance of their shared setting. Interlinking ties also helped readers connect new stories with preceding ones and associate the series' style with Dunbar himself. Hargot's status as Dunbar's delegate becomes even more apparent when we learn that the former's poems capture in the same tone some of the same events as previous Ohio Pastorals. Protagonist echoes author again: many of the stories in the series, itself named for a poetic genre, riff on characters or scenarios Dunbar had already explored in poetry. The figure of Hargot signifies the stylistic and thematic continuities of Dunbar's Midwestern writing, inviting us to read for region across literary genres and formats.

Dunbar used this focus on region and Midwestern style in particular to make the characters in "The Vindication of Jared Hargot" racially unmarked. In this respect, the story is consistent with the characters and speakers of his Midwestern prose and poetry in general. These works belong to what Jarrett has called "anomalous" African American literature, Black writing that opposes "minstrel realism" by avoiding "racial realism" entirely (2). Writing in a regional style could resist Black stereotypes even more effectively by emphasizing an alternative identity marker and appealing to another interpretive framework. Here Dunbar channeled the conventional wisdom of the period, which understood regional styles, through the lens of the ballad and the local color sketch, as expressions of identity encompassing if not anterior to other aesthetic categories.<sup>14</sup> Unlike the writing set in the South however, where speech or social position immediately indicated race, Dunbar's Midwest characters could be regionalized without necessarily being racialized. In poetry

this required using dialect or, especially in nonlyric genres, stacking other Midwestern conventions; in prose it further necessitated an ambiguity of physiological description. In “The Vindication of Jared Hargot” as elsewhere, Dunbar leverages the equivocality of Midwestern dialect with regard to the region’s (albeit primarily European) racial heterogeneity as well as the Midwest’s image as agrarian and egalitarian. Dunbar adeptly negotiated conventions between genres, maintaining continuity while deploying the particular associations of different forms. Midwestern writing allowed Dunbar to explore affects and themes without them being immediately read as representative of an essentialized Black experience—the very thing he protested in overdetermined Southern styles. These could include good humor, in narrative poems like “The Spellin’-Bee,” without implying that Blacks were satisfied with their socioeconomic state, or nostalgia, as in ballads like “The Old Apple Tree,” without implying that Blacks wished for a return to Southern antebellum social and economic relations. If Dunbar’s Southern Georgics, as Ronda argues, protest the disjunction of “effort [and] achievement” (868) under Jim Crow, his Midwestern poems like “Home Longings” were free to portray labor as fulfilling without impugning that protest. Midwestern style offered a representational space in which region could operate as the primary form of cultural significance independently of race.

In “The Vindication of Jared Hargot,” through the self-reflexivity afforded by local color as a genre, Dunbar makes this case most directly. The story’s conflict arises when a young newspaper editor mocks the conventionality of Hargot’s verse. The despairing poet is given counsel that, as we will see, sounds remarkably like Midwestern biographical pieces on Dunbar himself: no one has “any right to judge whether yore poetry is poetry or not, ‘ceptin’ yore friends” (*Complete Stories* 491), whose work, land, and cares the poet has versified. The point of art is to do good, not merely be good: that any theory of literary value must also be a theory of utility. The story endorses this sentiment by concluding with a town poetry reading to honor Hargot. This resolution lies in the vindication not of Hargot’s poetry—the narrative all but confirms the editor’s opinion that it simply isn’t very good—but of its mode of circulation. Dunbar is making the case for reading regionally: that is, reading in accord with the local practices whose spatial aggregation constitutes a region in the first place. In this respect he anticipates what scholars have called the “relational” sense of cultural geography.<sup>15</sup> Regions are not static districts with fixed conditions but rather the unfolding space of the collective circulatory practices that generate particular conventions or priorities. In giving an account of literary production and cultural belonging grounded in geographic



proximity that rejects universalizing extrapolations whether based on race, class, or taste, “The Vindication of Jared Hargot” draws on this dynamic quality and the Midwestern thematics underlying the Ohio Pastorals’ running investment in communities’ ability to grow in likeness through compromise.

## 2

Dunbar’s vindication, like Hargot’s, lay in disseminating his work to readerships sensitive to the significance of place. All eight Ohio Pastorals were published in *Lippincott’s*, which at the time enjoyed a renaissance as one of the more widely read elite literary monthly magazines. Regularity of print appearance strengthened the associations thematized in the Ohio Pastorals among Dunbar, local color, and the Midwest. *Lippincott’s* long-running commitment to Dunbar’s Midwestern fiction—it had earlier published his novel *The Uncalled*—indicates that the stories succeeded in their own right and not merely a ploy to land Dunbar’s fame. After the initial series of five monthly entries, the magazine published three more before Dunbar’s untimely death intervened. As Jarrett and Thomas Morgan observe, the magazine “represented one of the few and last places where he could write on his own terms” (xxxviii). But it is important also to observe that in *Lippincott’s* pages, this publishing arrangement took the form of a specific authorial persona based in Midwestern regional affiliation. Whereas the Dunbar of the *Century* was a Southern Black dialect poet and the Dunbar of the *Saturday Evening Post* was a plantation fiction writer, the Dunbar of *Lippincott’s* was a Midwestern local colorist.

From this position in the literary field Dunbar’s regional affiliation was readily publicized by editors and critics across the hierarchy of periodical print formats. In the postbellum decades, newspapers relied on the entertainment value of poetry, serialized or excerpted prose, and literary news to cultivate domestic readership as their source of revenue shifted from political subsidies and subscriptions to advertisement.<sup>16</sup> Magazines and newspapers enjoyed a symbiotic relationship of reprinting in which the latter obtained quality content in exchange for giving the former free publicity. Thus, newspapers were the primary source of literature and literary information for most Americans. While most elite Northeastern magazines other than *Lippincott’s* were unwilling to print Dunbar’s writing if it was not Southern Black dialect, editors of newspapers (and mid-tier periodical formats like farm papers or urban weeklies) had other sources of literature: they drew on published volumes, fellow periodicals, and syndication services, in addition to original

contributions. Amid growing dependence on regional economies and pressure from the accelerating distribution of metropolitan periodicals, editors made judicious selections based on the preferences of their geographic constituency, as they saw them; they did so even when relying on syndicates, which were themselves regional in scope and advertised as such.<sup>17</sup> In the Midwest over the 1880s this growing place-based understanding of newspapers' market niche led to the development of what became known as "Western Journalism," an approach characterized by more news from the surrounding communities and more local contributors.<sup>18</sup> Newspapers weren't just supposed to inform a particular geographic area: in doing so, they were also supposed to represent it.

Dunbar's Midwestern writing was well suited to traversing this print ecosystem. In yet another mark of their success with readers, the Ohio Pastorals received top billing in the standard notices that most newspapers across the country gave of the contents of major literary magazines each month. The purpose of such notices was to promote magazines to potential library patrons, single-issue news depot purchasers, and individuals who exchanged copies with friends or neighbors.<sup>19</sup> In this way, they directed readers outside *Lippincott's* regular subscribers toward the Ohio Pastorals. Dunbar took advantage of the fact that promotion at this scale was typically only available to prose. The ubiquity of these monthly notices publicized Dunbar's association with the Midwest, and vice versa, even for those who didn't actually read him. Indeed, newspaper commentary on the Ohio Pastorals often testified to a general awareness of Dunbar's Midwestern writings. The *Chicago Post*, for example, wrote that "Paul Laurence Dunbar has two veins in story-telling. The one deals with the negro, and is mostly pathetic or tragic. The other depicts humorously the Ohio farmer and his domestic belongings. This is the vein of the 'Ohio Pastorals,' now appearing in *Lippincott's*" ("Literary News"). The presence of similar commentary in newspapers across the Midwest evinces the success of Dunbar's publication strategy in *Lippincott's*, which bolstered his Midwestern reputation even while enabling him to continue publishing plantation tradition stories and verse in other venues.<sup>20</sup> Like "Poets of the Middle West," these notices treat Dunbar's Midwestern output and persona as common knowledge, uncontroversial and foundational for understanding the author.

Even though the constant press coverage that made Dunbar a household name almost always identified him as Black, Midwestern critics frequently professed that his race was not antithetical to his region. When a *Boston Transcript* article mischaracterized Dunbar's relation to the South, a correspondent in the *Indianapolis Journal* rebutted with a typical retelling of Dunbar's biography. Dunbar is

Midwestern not simply because he was raised there but because that is where people read and cared about him most: “It will be sad news to many people in the central states of the West to learn that Paul Laurence Dunbar is seriously ill in New York, for he has attracted friends among the thinking people of many cities, towns and country localities” (Parker 9). Northeastern readers may misidentify Dunbar, but Midwesterners are more discerning of their own. The *Indianapolis Journal* frames Dunbar’s race differently on the basis of this attachment. Whereas the *Boston Transcript* article dwelled on Dunbar’s “very dark color,” the *Journal* correspondent counters that Dunbar is a “star . . . risen in the firmament of the American negro” who Midwesterners nonetheless embraced “without much thought or care as to his race or color” (“Paul Laurence Dunbar” 6, Parker 9). Without ignoring the risk of erasure inevitable in professions of “color-blindness,” the letter emphasizes regional inclusion over racial othering. Dunbar was Black but he was also Midwestern, and to Midwesterners, that mattered. That correspondents like the *Indianapolis Journal*’s, articles like “Poets of the Middle West,” and notices like the *Chicago Post*’s could discuss one of the most famous Black men of the day without making race the sole defining feature of his work reveals how Dunbar’s reputation as a Midwestern writer became widespread without being overridden by his reputation as a Black writer.

In accord with these more capacious assessments of his work, Midwestern newspapers reprinted Dunbar in a manner that more closely reflected the diversity of style and theme in his major collections than the fad of plantation poetry that scholars, following the interpretive trends set by Howells in *Harper’s Weekly* and Richard Watson Gilder in the *Century*, have assumed was the exclusive basis of Dunbar’s popularity. Some Dunbar poems reprinted in the region’s newspapers, like “October” and “Merry Autumn,” mark the rhythms of the seasons. Other favorites, such as “The Farm Child’s Lullaby,” sentimentalize homestead life; *Lippincott’s* first published this poem and William Jennings Bryan’s own widely distributed newspaper, the *Commoner* of Lincoln, Nebraska, reprinted it.<sup>21</sup> Newspapers also reprinted brief prose morals or jokes just as they did poetry, and the Ohio Pastorals abound in short self-contained passages ripe for excerption. A selection from “The Mortification of the Flesh” usually entitled “How Nathan Proposed” and a paragraph from “The White Counterpane” usually entitled “What Ages a Woman,” both containing Midwest dialect, circulated as much as any of Dunbar’s dialect poems.<sup>22</sup> Ample precedent pointed to the Midwestern appetite for these forms of Midwestern writing, as Dunbar knew well from his own painstaking efforts to track his reception.<sup>23</sup> Dunbar’s gambit in publishing such work was to test

whether a famously Black Midwesterner could circulate as part of newspapers' representative function too; editors' selections showed that he could. On the pages of Midwestern newspapers an alternative canon of Dunbar's writings emerges from among his hitherto overlooked poetry and prose.

The sheer volume of print material associating Dunbar with the Midwest—commentary classifying Dunbar or his work as Midwestern, Midwestern writing by other authors that made the style readily identifiable, Dunbar's own Midwestern poetry and prose—encouraged readers to do so as well. Under these circumstances, we can recognize the Midwestern valences even in a seemingly nondescript poem like "Life," one of Dunbar's most popular and one that, records suggest, was disproportionately so in the Midwest.<sup>24</sup>

A crust of bread and a corner to sleep in,  
 A minute to smile and an hour to weep in,  
 A pint of joy to a peck of trouble,  
 And never a laugh but the moans come double;  
 And that is life!

A crust and a corner that love makes precious,  
 With a smile to warm and the tears to refresh us;  
 And joy seems sweeter when cares come after,  
 And a moan is the finest of foils for laughter;  
 And that is life! (*Collected Poetry* 8)

With a cleanly encapsulated moral and no identifiable speaker, setting, or occasion, "Life" was well tailored for general newspapers. Yet it contains many of the attributes that Brigham, Howells, and others insisted were Midwestern. "Life" frankly asserts emotional and physical hardships of living hand-to-mouth. Rather than dispelling these "inevitable woes," the second stanza revises them in light of the "compensations" of the quotidian, its small joys and silver linings (Brigham 333). This is a celebration of "the heroism of the common man" ("Poets" 18), treated with sympathetic "tenderness" but without patronizing or moralizing (Howells 128). The poem accentuates the "downright and practical" ("Poets" 18) nature of its moral with a "direct, straightforward" standard English that eschews the archaic spellings ("thou," "wast") and syntactic affectations then common in newspaper poetry—though "peck" also signals an agrarian inflection (Brigham 333). "Life" expresses a universal sentiment, then, in the sense Garland advanced in his manifesto *Crumbling Idols* (1894), that artists convey higher "truth" by voicing the distinctive "talent of their region." (161). The poem's sentiment and

formal qualities were considered uniquely expressive of a particular region at the turn of the century. Much as scholars have shown how Dunbar's nondialect poems allow themselves to be read as Black, Midwestern editorial practices framed nondialect poems like "Life" alongside local matter in ways that opened them up to regional readings. Within this context, the popularity of Dunbar's Midwestern writings was inseparable from what marked them as Midwestern.

The degree to which Dunbar and his work could be read as Midwestern provides fundamental insight into the relationship between postbellum conceptions of race and region. That Dunbar, famous as a Black writer during a particularly brutal era of segregation in US history, could be also—even equally—famous as a Midwestern writer attests to the power of region as an organizing concept for cultural production and identity. His absence from scholarship on regionalism indicates that our application of that classification still has much to gain from thematic and material-historical expansion. Regional association—as well as the aesthetic capacities and readership access that came with it—was of course difficult to attain for many authors of color. That Dunbar's work did manage to achieve a regional reputation depended on a fortunate combination of his own literary skill and publication savvy as well as local contingencies. Nonetheless, the wide-reaching success of Dunbar's efforts shows that, though race was a powerful vehicle for imagining and policing cultural practice, it did not necessarily foreclose the significance of region in the postbellum US. Under the right print conditions, regional belonging could take precedence over racial alterity. Dunbar did not simply present as Midwestern; his work and its consumption contributed to the social process of regional definition.

### 3

The rising literary Midwest of Dunbar's generation also coincided with the emergence of a Black Midwestern reading public. Dunbar had already thought much about reaching and representing this demographic, his own. In 1890 he launched a short-lived newspaper, the *Tattler*, which aspired to give voice to Dayton's Black community for a multiracial readership. Then, merely 18 years old, Dunbar could not sustain the enterprise, but he continued grappling with this representational question in prescriptive articles like "The Hapless Southern Negro" as well as in poetry and fiction. Dunbar's proficiency in the specifically-Southern modes of depicting Black life that was then dominant, as in the multigeneric plantation tradition, proved useful. His writing combined and blurred the

conventions of Midwestern and Black writing by drawing on latent commonalities between them as well as his reputations for each. In this way, Dunbar represented the Black Midwest not by mimetic or otherwise ethnographic realist representation but rather by experimenting formally with various combinations of conventions.

“After A Visit,” a poem in *Lyrics of Lowly Life* that fluctuates between Midwestern dialect and Southern Black dialect, exemplifies Dunbar’s approach. The speaker begins by saying that he has just returned from having “be’n down in ole Kentucky / Fur a week er two,” indicating that he is from one of the Midwestern states, like Ohio, to the immediate north. At the level of subject, the poem is mostly a lighthearted reflection on good hospitality; at the lexical level, however, this focus on the locatedness of manners becomes an exploration of the locatedness of language. Spellings typical of schematizations of Black vernacular, like “wuz,” “ez,” and “nuthin’,” appear interspersed throughout the poem alongside spellings typical of schematizations of Midwestern vernacular, like “allus,” “be’n,” and “yore.”<sup>25</sup> Most of these words had a standard spelling in the other dialect: the poem’s fluctuation between dialects signals Dunbar’s refusal to fit the expectations of either one exclusively. “After a Visit” also lacks some of the most commonplace and telltale dialect spellings, most notably by using “they” instead of the ubiquitous “dey” of Black dialect, while including several spellings that consistently appeared in both dialects, like “fur,” “roun’,” “yer,” “git,” and “lows.” Finally, the poem includes a number of spellings that lack clear precedence in either dialect, such as “argerin’,” “pleg-gone,” and “cain’t” (*Collected Poetry* 42). “After a Visit” is not merely a mixture of dialects but a distinct hybrid not expressed before Dunbar: Black Midwestern dialect, a representation of the confluence of racial and regional vernaculars.

When Joseph S. Cotter, a Black poet from Louisville, published a genial “Answer to Dunbar’s ‘After a Visit’” two years later in his collection *Links of Friendship* (1898), he responded in the same hybrid dialect (42). Dunbar’s poems, according to Gavin Jones, highlight the artificiality of dialect by deploying “ambiguous, composite languages that are neither really black nor white” (204). As Cotter’s attuned “Answer” demonstrates, however, the opposite could also be true: rather than denaturalize the relation between dialect and community, composite language could make linguistic communities tangible. This is the specifying function of dialect, which can be recomposed or recombined to call “new” regional or ethnic groups into recognition. Plantation tradition writers professed that discrepancies in dialect reflected variations in Black vernacular speech within the South; Dunbar extended this logic by expanding it to another region.<sup>26</sup> Drawing on the recognizability of formal

conventions, the dialect of “After a Visit” and Cotter’s “Answer” is a specific hybrid that represents the idea of Black Midwestern speech independent of quibbles over ethnographic accuracy. In doing so it portrays the Midwest as a site of cultural identity that cuts across racial polarities and thereby necessarily blurs (or slurs) them with tokens of their overlap and compatibility. Equally importantly, it attests to and speaks for the growing demographic of Black Midwesterners, prefiguring the new accents in which they would perform poems like these. Cotter’s *Links of Friendship*, true to its title, joins Dunbar in linking up this network via poems to educators, editors, and writers in the surrounding towns and states. Indeed, immediately following “Answer to Dunbar’s ‘After a Visit’” Cotter includes a panegyric to Riley in the same style as Dunbar’s.

Dunbar continually experimented with new ways of integrating Black and Midwestern conventions. Indeed, his corpus proves the rich intersection of these representational lexicons. Dunbar applied this approach to tropes in the nondialect poem “Dinah Kneading Dough,” which opens by playfully prefiguring its multivalent subject with a list of descriptive stereotypes she exceeds:

I have seen full many a sight  
 Born of day or drawn by night:  
 Sunlight on a silver stream,  
 Golden lilies all a-dream,  
 Lofty mountains, bold and proud,  
 Veiled beneath the lacelike cloud[.] (*Collected Poetry* 188)

“Dinah Kneading Dough” relishes in the complementarity of hues. As the poem proceeds, this doubleness shifts to Dinah herself. Although the name “Dinah” was associated with stereotypes of Black women at the time, it was also a common name in the West. At the least, the point of the piece—which we learn in the final stanza is a love poem for a hardworking farm girl—depends on revising the typical Black “Dinah” stereotype, someone often middle-aged and bumbling. While the poem describes Dinah’s arms as “brown,” this too is a point of potential double association. Brown skin was used as a broad descriptor for nonwhites, but Midwestern writings by Garland, Riley, and James Hall before them also described hands, foreheads, and legs as brown to denote hard-working farmers.<sup>27</sup> Selective use of these overlapping tropes points to their conjunction. Rather than a question of Dinah’s being either Black and implicitly Southern or Midwestern and implicitly white, the poem implies that she is a Black Midwesterner.

Much as with the combination of dialects in “After a Visit,” the combination of Midwestern and Black tropes in “Dinah

Kneading Dough” draws attention to their compatibility and thus to the compatibility of their referents. These poems play on the dialectic between literary representation and cultural practice—between the referentiality of conventions and the conventionality of everyday life—without either conflating the two or dismissing the generativity of their relation.<sup>28</sup> Here Dunbar again channels a relational understanding of cultural geography. Both poems figure how imagery and vernaculars transform as they travel, and both poems demonstrate that this process takes place through pre-existing affinities. The resulting commonalities between race and region are quotidian, which is precisely what enables them to evoke so adeptly the associations of both representational paradigms. The promise of young lovers in “Dinah Kneading Dough” maps onto that of the new region and corresponds to the new life that the poem breathes into tropes that might otherwise appear trivial or even restrictive.

Here too Dunbar had compatriots. James D. Corrothers, another Black Midwesterner who published in national magazines in the 1900s and 1910s, took up these experiments with hybridity in literary style. In Corrothers’ sequence of episodic sketches, *The Black Cat Club: Negro Humor and Folk-lore* (1902), Black Chicagoans collect snippets of heavily stereotyped Southern Black folklore in an attitude that parodies the detached yet self-implicating posture of postbellum ethnography. In doing so the club members, paradoxically, embrace their ties to the South as a cultural heritage to be cultivated while estranging those ties with exaggerated, tongue-in-cheek performances. Between exchanging these anecdotes, however, the members make excursions into the Indiana countryside, become guests of honor at a German bar, and share knowing jokes about Chicago politics. This at times dizzying mix of racial and regional tropes highlights continuities and throws incongruities into sharp relief; *The Black Cat Club* evokes a Black Midwest in all its turbulent emergence. Infusing his own touch of Chicago’s avant-garde iconography and unruly parody, Corrothers pushes the limits of Dunbar’s strategy while maintaining its end. Both authors rewire the postbellum lexicon of tropes to reimagine cultural relations figuratively. Neither polite acquiescence nor subversive resistance, these pieces model positions—provisional, imaginative, even pleasurable—that combine racial and regional cultures.

Besides Corrothers and Cotter, dozens of new Black Midwestern authors built upon Dunbar’s work in the two decades following his rise to fame. Priscilla Jane Thompson deployed similar circuits of South-to-Midwest migration and Midwest-to-South memory in her poetry collection *Gleanings of Quiet Hours* (1907). Oscar Micheaux’s autobiographical novel *The Conquest: The Story of a Negro Pioneer* (1913), like Dunbar’s major volumes of poetry,



interleaves witty episodes of farm life in characteristic Midwestern style with stinging passages of Washingtonian racial critique. Micheaux dramatized what Dunbar asserted in “The Hapless Southern Negro”: that Midwestern independence was uniquely equipped to ameliorate a history of forced Southern dependence. Similar intermixings of racial and regional dialects, tropes, or allusions can be found in volumes published from Michigan to Nebraska by authors like James Edwin Campbell, Charles Henry Shoeman, and Aaron Belford Thompson, not to mention the yet-untold many more who wrote in the swelling ranks of Black Midwestern newspapers.<sup>29</sup> Though Charles Chesnutt did not emphasize regional conventions in his non-Southern fiction, even his turn to Midwestern settings followed Dunbar’s breakthrough.<sup>30</sup> Most of these authors had personal and artistic histories like Dunbar’s in that they were raised under Reconstruction, often in Black communities, that were becoming a part of everyday life throughout Midwestern towns and cities. Like Dunbar, they wrote in various forms primarily for newspapers (both Black and white). Many lived or recited their work in places with Dunbar Literary Clubs. Dunbar’s success helped to open new ways of writing and new venues for publishing for this growing body of Black authors, providing a touchstone for affiliation and representation. Individually, these authors with their intraregional circulation have seemed isolated and inconsequential; together and in light of Dunbar’s more recognizable success, the broader constellation of their aesthetics and significance comes into focus.

#### 4

Dunbar’s and his peers’ formal experiments at the intersection of race and region bore social fruit almost from the start. To identify the blends of dialects and tropes in their work requires a threshold of cultural literacy in late nineteenth-century conventions, yet the immense popularity of Midwestern literature and the plantation tradition made this knowledge readily available. Dunbar’s simultaneous reputations in each of these “two veins” (in the words of the *Chicago Post*) primed readers to approach his work with both sets of expectations and to locate instances in which they connected. By drawing the seemingly stable categories of Black and Midwestern into new configurations, Dunbar entangled readers in questions of the relation between race and region. In doing so, his work disrupted the presumed whiteness of the Midwest and animated a groundswell of Black Midwestern reading communities, named Dunbar Literary Clubs, that aimed to carry on the spirit of this work through the

1910s. Underlying these strains of reception was the growing recognition of what inspired Dunbar's work itself, the conviction that Black communities were no longer merely in the Midwest but were part of its literary and cultural texture.

The reception of Dunbar's widely read first novel, *The Uncalled*, revolved around the very difficulty of siloing racial markers when aligned with a predominantly regional representative framework. *The Uncalled* is the story of a young man pressured into the ministry in another fictional Dayton. The novel patently uses Midwestern themes and conventions and explicitly avoids assigning race to its characters. Critics were divided on what to make of this fact, some declaring it a Black novel and others a white novel.<sup>31</sup> While some readers would have assumed that the novel's characters were white by default, other critics acknowledged both possibilities. In the *Book Buyer*, then one of the most influential trade journals, Arthur Reed Kimball easily classified *The Uncalled* as an Ohio novel, but he failed to pinpoint race by dialect or facial expression and concluded that "the doubt thus raised at the outset of the story, as to whether the people one is to meet in it are white or more or less black, baffles one to the end" (64). A *Chicago Tribune* review, "Novel by Dunbar," claimed the novel was "an interesting study of certain aspects of life among the lowly" but confessed an inability to determine "whether it is the story of whites or blacks" (51). In this respect, the review anticipates Jarrett's argument that the "racialism [of the novel] lies in its historical depictions of class hierarchy and regional culture," analysis which draws on "African American histories of racial unrest and inequity" (53). Both of the historical critics locate a racial reading in the novel's portrayal of the "lowly," but "Novel by Dunbar" deems a regional reading equally available on the same basis. The two reviews recognized that the characters' region is what makes ruling out either race impossible: its narrative conventions in representing the Midwest uniquely bridge those distinguishing Blackness from whiteness. These speculations depict *The Uncalled* as a novel about the potential indeterminacy of textual representations of race amid representations of region, a text that cannot be encountered without raising questions of their connection or overlap. Midwesternness and Blackness seem to blur together, first on the pages of *The Uncalled* and then in the reviewers' own interpretations.

These reviews belonged to a broader phenomenon. Public discourse about Dunbar similarly grappled to articulate the conjunction of race and region so clearly vital to the establishment of his career. Whereas Southern commentators in the influential *Sunny South* and elsewhere averred contradiction, commentators in Illinois, Indiana, and Ohio in particular saw concurrence.<sup>32</sup> Dunbar was remarkably

popular in these states, where newspapers regularly followed his movements, opinions, and publications. Race and region jostle for prominence and intermingle in these articles: Dunbar was a “full-blooded negro” and a denizen of Ohio, loved by Black readers and “home people,” raised as he was on his emancipated mother’s stories of slavery and in the otherwise white Dayton High School. Midwest newspapers that refer to Dunbar as a “colored poet” in one paragraph just as easily refer to him as a “Buckeye Boy” in the next. An article titled “Dayton’s Dunbar,” prioritizing geographic affiliation as its frame, is just as readily subtitled “The Negro Poet Tells About His Early Efforts.” Just as often, this order is flipped or distilled into compound phrases like “Ohio’s Colored Poet.”<sup>33</sup> While Dunbar’s reception was the most extensive, Corrothers’ regular presence in Midwestern newspapers or Cotter’s stature as an artistic and educational leader in the area reflect similar sentiments. The interchangeability of the order of race and region in news articles reveals the degree to which Dunbar provoked uncertainty over which was more important for defining his career and by extension for interpreting cultural production.

Attempting to synthesize the regional and racial facets of Dunbar’s career pressed white readers to consider that regional belonging was not contingent on race. A 1900 article in the *Dayton News* suggests how these reflections unfolded beyond strictly literary considerations:

[T]he colored race has been making rapid strides in an educational way for the past ten years. Paul Laurence Dunbar’s rise in life and in fame seemed to act as a stimulant and since he has climbed the ladder others of his race have gone through the High school and college until now the colored people have right here in this midst doctors, lawyers and preachers. While there are scores of them qualified in every respect to discharge the duties of a deputyship, still none have ever been appointed by the party whose candidates they have elected to the offices at the polls year after year.

This article is striking not because it rightly blames whites for unwarranted racial exclusion from local governance but because Dunbar catalyzes this recognition. Dunbar is presented as a trailblazer whose success offered new inspiration and opportunity for Blacks in a biracial local community. In recognizing his role in this process, the article implies that Dunbar functions as a “stimulant” to local whites as well, drawing their attention—and that of the *Dayton News*—to Black fellow Ohioans. The article’s perspective remains, of course, limited: it calls for Black deputies, not Black office

holders, and it relies on a Du Boisian ideology that exceptional “race men” fuel uplift. Even for Dunbar the postbellum conception of region could not fully integrate race. Yet the confluence of race and region that Dunbar embodied and that he explored in his writing nonetheless encouraged white Midwestern readers in meaningful ways to reconsider region’s capacity, as a cultural framework, for racial inclusion.

Dunbar’s career appears to have exerted an even more profound influence on Black Midwesterners’ understanding of what it meant to belong to both a race and a region at the turn of the century. As the *Dayton News* attests, Dunbar was a model for Black participation within local communities in the Midwest. Commentators frequently remarked upon his exceptional success with Black audiences and readers there, during Dunbar’s frequent speaking tours when he performed a mix of nondialect, Midwestern dialect, and Southern Black dialect poems.<sup>34</sup> Corrothers, for his part, reported in the *Chicago Journal* that “Dunbar is exceedingly popular among colored Chicagoans.” This acclaim coalesced into the previously mentioned Dunbar Literary Clubs, local Black literary societies operating across the country from the late 1890s through the 1910s, and which especially flourished in the Midwest.

Such clubs in the Northeast and the South seem to have been primarily debating societies, while those in the Midwest were more likely to “devote themselves to the study of literature,” as a Minneapolis club professed in its state’s leading Black newspaper (“Minneapolis” 4).<sup>35</sup> Members performed music, practiced literary criticism, and recited literary selections, sometimes of their own composition. The *Broad Ax*, a Black newspaper of Chicago, described an especially well-established Cincinnati club in an article titled “Dunbar Literary Club an Ideal Enterprise”: “The clubhouse on Central avenue contains spacious rooms elegantly fitted up. It has a well stocked library of choice books, magazines and papers for the benefit of its members. . . . ‘Are you a Dunbar?’ has become the usual and popular greeting among the more aggressive element of young folks” (2). Even when not so grandly outfitted, these clubs were hubs of cultural formation, and they constituted the most active readers and disseminators of Dunbar’s work.

Dunbar Literary Clubs in the Midwest promoted a bold vision for the cultural geography of race. McHenry has argued that “middle-class Black Americans saw their literary work as a means of instilling pride in their own community” and of constituting community (149). This was especially vital for Midwestern Dunbar Literary Clubs, where Black communities were smaller and newer than in the South and Northeast. Whereas clubs elsewhere were largely attached to Black colleges (like the Hampton Institute) or

located in urban centers, clubs in the Midwest and West often cropped up in towns and small cities: one Black newspaper, the Des Moines *Iowa State Bystander*, printed notices for clubs in Monmouth, IL and Clinton, Davenport, Ft. Madison, and Sioux City, Iowa in addition to Des Moines.<sup>36</sup> Much like Black newspapers in the Midwest, which cultivated regional subscription bases in order to reach a dispersed Black population, Dunbar Literary Clubs linked together a loose regional network of geographic proximity, citation, and shared ethos.<sup>37</sup> Chicago's *Broad Ax* points to Cincinnati's club as its ideal, not New York City's. According to McHenry, Black literary societies were motivated by the belief that "African Americans could themselves make public specific information about the diversity of black life in the United States" and combat stereotypes through literature (191). Dunbar Literary Clubs applied this belief to geographic diversity. Under the aegis of Dunbar, they imagined a more racially integrated Midwest. As the *Iowa State Bystander* boasted, the Des Moines club "promises to be [sic] of the leading literary societies of the state" ("A Brief History" 8). Club activities often included a major public event, and white papers sometimes reported on their meetings.<sup>38</sup> Dunbar Literary Clubs developed a sense of community belonging that was both Black and Midwestern, taking inspiration from the ways that their namesake's writing and career modeled the same.

Dunbar Literary Clubs used literature to mediate between racial and regional self-expression, social affiliation, and cultural understanding. Like Dunbar's work itself, they became a vehicle by which Black interests took on the inflection of Midwestern demographic circumstances and by which the fact of Black populations challenged white Midwesterners' regional imagination. In this respect, they can be understood as a manifestation of the literary environment that facilitated Dunbar's career and of the forces that helped shape his enduring legacy in the decades after his death. Dunbar's writing was only the most prominent embodiment of the alternative alignments between conceptions of race and region made possible by the growing Black population in the Midwest during the period. Taking this approach yields a more holistic view of his career—one that is so often truncated to a handful of unique texts—and of the role of cultural geography in print circulation that made such a corpus available to future generations. It also illuminates trajectories of African American literary history that point as much to the Chicago Black Renaissance as to its predecessor in Harlem. By then the Great Migration Dunbar had envisioned was well underway, driven by some of the same Black Midwestern newspapers that

had championed him. The identification of a poet like Gwendolyn Brooks with Chicago, to give but one example, extends the regional and racial reconfigurations that had started to take shape during Dunbar's lifetime. It is hardly surprising that Brooks' mother had encouraged her to become "the female Paul Laurence Dunbar" (169): her identification as not only a Black poet but a Midwestern Black poet followed a course anticipated by Dunbar's reception at the turn of the century.

### Notes

1. For examples of reprints, see "Literary Notes," *Sioux City Journal*, 16 Oct. 1899, p. 6; and "Negro in Literature," *New York Commercial Advertiser*, 14 Feb. 1899, PLD Collection, reel 4. Dunbar subscribed to the Henry Romeike, Inc. newspaper clipping service throughout his career and meticulously saved clippings in scrapbooks that are now part of the Ohio Historical Society's Paul Laurence Dunbar Collection. Unfortunately, Romeike's service did not record page numbers. Yet even in our era of mass digitization, this nineteenth-century equivalent to googling oneself remains an unsurpassed record. On clipping services see Richard K. Popp, "Information, Industrialization, and the Business of Press Clippings, 1880-1925," *The Journal of American History*, vol. 101, no. 2, 2014, pp. 427-53.
2. With few exceptions, Black newspapers in the Midwest were unable to secure enough readers to sustain stable print runs until the 1890s, when scores began to flourish across the region. See Suggs.
3. See Amy Kaplan, "Nation, Region and Empire," *The Columbia History of the American Novel: New Views*, edited by Emory Elliott, 1991, p. 251; Richard Brodhead, *Cultures of Letters: Scenes of Reading and Writing in Nineteenth-Century America* (1993), p. 177; and Jennifer Rae Greeson, *Our South: Geographic Fantasy and the Rise of National Literature* (2010), p. 272.
4. See Gardner; McHenry. See also Suggs; Frances Smith Foster, "A Narrative of the Interesting Origins and (Somewhat) Surprising Development of African-American Print Culture," *American Literary History*, vol. 17, no. 4, 2005, pp. 714-40; McHenry, "Toward a History of Access: The Case of Mary Church Terrell," *American Literary History*, vol. 19, no. 2, 2007, pp. 381-401; Edlie Wong, "Comparative Racialization, Immigration Law, and James Williams's *Life and Adventures*," *American Literature*, vol. 84, no. 4, 2012, pp. 797-826; and Lara Langer Cohen and Jordan Alexander Stein, editors, *Early African American Print Culture* (2014).
5. Jarrett; and Ronda. See also Cohen; James Smethurst, *The African American Roots of Modernism: From Reconstruction to the Harlem Renaissance* (2011); Nurhussein; Judith Madera, *Black Atlas: Geography and Flow in Nineteenth-Century African American Literature* (2015); and Virginia Jackson, "Specters of the Ballad," *Nineteenth-Century Literature*, vol. 71, no. 2, 2016, pp. 176-96.
6. Jarrett discusses some of Dunbar's Midwestern prose as "anomalous" African American literature: literature that challenges the notion of a unified linguistic standard of black "race realism." For Jarrett, Dunbar challenged "traditional Anglo-

American literature, which tends to overlook the racial politics of local color” but didn’t participate in a Midwestern literary mode (53). Nurhussein asserts that Dunbar was “[b]oth a black writer and a local color writer” but goes on to argue that, as such, “Dunbar belongs to categories that are treated as practically mutually exclusive, treated so in part because of Dunbar’s original reception by both black and white readers” (93–94). Gavin Jones mentions Dunbar’s Midwestern dialect poetry to show that “Dunbar acts to disrupt the notion of a unified linguistic standard of white English,” but for Jones Dunbar neither participated in a Midwestern literary mode nor was he read as such (196).

7. On the “Spelling Bee Poem,” see Nurhussein (82–89).

8. See, for example, William Dean Howells, “Editor’s Study,” *Harper’s New Monthly Magazine*, vol. 84, no. 2, Jan. 1892, pp. 317–18; Milicent Washburn Shinn, “Some Conditions in the Eighties,” *Overland Monthly*, vol. 32, July 1898, p. 70; and Martin W. Sampson, “Literature in Indiana,” *The Dial*, vol. 30, 1 Mar. 1901, pp. 188–9.

9. Timothy Flint used “Middle West” in the 1820s to refer to the latitudinal middle states of what was then the West, that is, the Ohio River Valley. As the nation continued displacing Native peoples and expanded westward, the phrase shifted to describe the longitudinal middle states. See Timothy Flint, *A Condensed Geography and History of the Western States, or the Mississippi Valley* (1828).

10. *Lyrics of Lowly Life* went through at least seven editions by 1913 (1896, 1897, 1898, 1901, 1907, 1908, 1909), more than any of Dunbar’s illustrated gift books. Ray Sapirostein found that *Poems of Cabin and Field*, the first and most successful of these volumes, went through five editions in this time (1899, 1902, 1904, 1908, 1913), the same number as the larger, multigeneric collection of new verse Dunbar published that year, *Lyrics of the Hearthside* (two editions in 1899 and one each in 1903, 1904, 1913) (336). Subsequently, however, Dunbar’s collections of new verse outpaced his illustrated ones: *Lyrics of Love and Laughter* went through four editions (1903, 1906, 1908, 1913) while his gift books for that year (*When Malindy Sings*) and each of the following years only went through one each. This is not to dismiss the influence of this facet of Dunbar’s corpus, which Sapirostein and others have shown to be aesthetically significant in its own right. Rather, it is to point out that Dunbar’s reputation was less tethered to Southern styles than often assumed and to resist the idea that Dunbar’s career followed a strict trajectory. See “Picturing Dunbar’s Lyrics,” *African American Review*, vol. 41, no. 2, 2007, pp. 327–39.

11. For another account of how Dunbar maneuvered between genres to work within and against racist expectations in the literary marketplace, see Jonathan Daigle, “Paul Laurence Dunbar and the Marshall Circle: Racial Representation from Blackface to Black Naturalism,” *African American Review*, vol. 43, no. 4, 2009, pp. 633–54.

12. See Hamlin Garland, *Prairie Folks* (1892); and Octave Thanet, *Stories of a Western Town* (1893).

13. Though critical essays define Midwestern literature more explicitly, the classification was invoked more frequently in passing in advertisements, notices, and reviews like those quoted in the next section. Newspapers and regional periodicals often excerpted articles from the leading reviews; Brigham’s, for example, appeared

as “Middle Western Literature. Opportunities for Delineating Every-Day Life,” *St. Louis Republic*, 5 Mar. 1899, p. 2.

14. Garland, drawing on Hippolyte Taine’s theory of literature as a product of its author’s milieu, gave in *Crumbling Idols* the most forceful contemporary articulation of the idea that geographic identity preceded literary form. More recently, scholars have shown how broader practices of writing and reading that traded on this discourse (without necessarily subscribing to it) in fact grew out of assumptions surrounding particular ascendant genres. Michael Cohen argues that “the centralization of the ballad in the generic hierarchy of the nineteenth century” led to the broader proliferation of “ballad reading,” a mode of use by which “poems could be identified with the popular spirit, with regional and national histories” (187). Brad Evans argues that the local color craze resulted from that genre’s ability to focalize what made ethnography, folklore, and the aesthetic arts movements popular: a “primal connection to a locale from which they might be displaced” as an aesthetic commodity (151).

15. The relational approach informs much of the most compelling work on region in literary and cultural studies in the last fifteen years. See Greeson; June Howard, *The Center of the World: Regional Writing and the Puzzles of Place-Time* (2018); Madera, *Black Atlas*; and Douglas Reichert Powell, *Critical Regionalism: Connecting Politics and Culture in the American Landscape* (2007).

16. See Gerald J. Baldasty, *The Commercialization of News in the Nineteenth Century* (1992).

17. By Dunbar’s time, syndicates had shifted priorities from the early ready-print or “patent insides” system to much more flexible plate service (which could be sawed as desired) and galley proof offerings in order to meet editors’ demands for more control. See Charles Johanningsmeier, *Fiction and the American Literary Marketplace: The Role of Newspaper Syndicates in America, 1860-1900* (1997) and Elmo Scott Watson, *A History of Newspaper Syndicates in the United States 1865-1935* (1936). On newspapers growing embeddedness in local commodity and labor markets, see Baldasty, Chapter 4 and David Paul Nord, *Communities of Journalism: A History of American Newspapers and Their Readers* (2001), p. 146.

18. On the distinctive “multivocality” of the postbellum press in general, see Kevin G. Barnhurst and John Nerone, *The Form of News: A History* (2001), Chapter 4. On “Western Journalism” in particular, see Ted Curtis Smythe, *The Gilded Age Press* (2003), Chapter 5.

19. We can assume readers regularly consulted magazine notices both because of the amount of space newspapers devoted to them and because library and news depot records show that patrons consumed magazines voraciously yet not necessarily consecutively. See Frank Felsenstein and James J. Connolly, *What Middletown Read: Print Culture in an American Small City* (2015).

20. For example, see [Untitled], *St. Louis Republican Leader*, 1 Aug. 1901, PLD Collection, reel 5; [Untitled], *Rockville Tribune* [IN], 30 Oct. 1901, PLD Collection, reel 4; and “Literary News,” *Alma Record* [MI], 9 Aug. 1901, p. 8.

21. “The Farm Child’s Lullaby,” *The Commoner*, [Lincoln, NE], 30 Dec. 1904, p. 9. Other avowedly Midwestern Populist newspapers reprinted it over the next year,



including *The Kansas Agitator* [Garnet], 3 Mar. 1905, p. 8; *The Dakota Farmers' Leader* [Canton, SD], 15 Dec. 1905, p. 6; *Willmar Tribune* [MN], 17 Jan. 1906, p. 7.

22. This is true of major digitized newspaper collections like *Chronicling America* and Dunbar's press clippings scrapbooks (PLD Collection, reels 4 and 5).

23. Dunbar's contemporaries Madison Cawein and Ironquill (Eugene Ware), for example, were prominent Midwestern writers with regional followings who nonetheless failed to sustain consistent national publishers; see William Dean Howells, "Editor's Study"; on Dunbar's efforts to track his own reputation, see note 1.

24. Using several digitized newspaper collections and Dunbar's press clippings scrapbooks (PLD Collection, reels 4 and 5), I have located 160 reprints of "Life" between 1896 and 1910, of which half were from the Midwest.

25. Besides Dunbar, this analysis of dialect in "After A Visit" draws on plantation fiction by Chesnutt, Harris, and Page, as well as Midwestern writing by Eggleston, Garland, and Riley. I prioritize spellings consistent across multiple works of multiple authors.

26. See the introductory "Note" in Thomas Nelson Page, *In Ole Virginia; or, Marse Chan and Other Stories* (1887).

27. See, for example, Garland's "Sam Burn's Wife" and Riley's "That Other Maud Muller."

28. In this respect Dunbar also participated in what Elizabeth Renker has usefully re-identified as "realist poetics" in *Realist Poetics in American Culture, 1866–1900* (2018).

29. Campbell's *Echoes—from the Cabin and Elsewhere* (1895) projects a line from the plantation South to elsewhere that include Ohio fields and the Bohemia of Chicago, which he knew as a staff writer at the *Chicago Times Herald*. Shoeman's *A Dream and Other Poems* (1899) intersperses Southern Black dialect with an acrostic to the University of Michigan, where he was a student, and poems like "Despairing" in the style of Dunbar's "Life." Thompson's *Harvest of Thoughts* (1907), published with an introductory note from Riley, includes poems in Black Midwestern dialect such as "After the Honeymoon" and "Out Among Um."

30. Though Chesnutt used Midwestern setting in published short fiction as a space productively outside the confines of Southern styles and stereotypes, he tended to retain the North/South dichotomy in doing so.

31. For an observation of this disagreement, see [Untitled], *Chicago Times-Herald*, 26 Dec. 1898, PLD Collection, reel 4. *The Uncalled* received mixed yet generally sympathetic reviews that, if anything, skewed more positive in the Midwest; for a survey, see E. W. Metcalf, Jr., *Paul Laurence Dunbar: A Bibliography*, 1975, pp. 130–1.

32. Southern critics could be quick to accuse Dunbar of inaccuracies based on his Midwestern affiliation. A critic in the *Sunny South*, which hit 50,000 subscribers during Dunbar's career and proclaimed itself the region's leading literary periodical, pointedly remarked that Dunbar's black characters were "entirely different from anything with which we are familiar in this section" ("Literature" 8). As another

Southern critic elaborated: “Whoever heard of a colored mammy using such an expression as ‘hadn’t oughter?’ That is a colloquialism that does not belong to the Southern part of the Union and that is never heard south of the Ohio river [sic] except as an importation . . . Dunbar should not allow association with white folks in another section of the country to make him forget the dialect he is trying to imitate” (“As to Negro Dialect”). We should read these articles as registering, if through a glass darkly, Dunbar’s integration of conventions.

33. See “Paul Dunbar at the Collingwood,” *Toledo Bee*, May 15 1900, PLD Collection, reel 5; “Dayton’s Dunbar,” *Dayton Daily Journal*, 11 June 1902, PLD Collection, reel 4; “Ohio’s Colored Poet,” [Unknown], 1893, PLD Collection, reel 4; and [Untitled], *Cincinnati Commercial Tribune*, Mar. 7 1900, PLD Collection, reel 5.

34. Two poems in Midwestern dialect, “The Corn-Stalk Fiddle” and “The Old Apple Tree,” were among Dunbar’s most performed. See pamphlets in PLD Collection, reels 4 and 5.

35. For a typical program, see “City News,” *Iowa State Bystander* [Des Moines], 29 Apr. 1898, p. 1. For a member reciting their own work, see “Minneapolis,” *The Appeal* [St. Paul], 17 Oct. 1903, p. 3. See also “City News,” *Iowa State Bystander* [Des Moines], 13 Oct. 1899, p. 1. In contrast, the Hampton Institute’s influential club was chiefly a debate society for engaging clubs from other Southern institutions. See “At Home and Afield: Hampton Incidents,” *Southern Workman*, vol. 42, no. 10, 1913, pp. 572–6.

36. “Monmouth, IL., Items,” *Iowa State Bystander* [Des Moines], 22 Feb. 1907, pp. 1; “Clinton Items,” *Iowa State Bystander* [Des Moines], 6 Nov. 1903, p. 1; “Davenport Report,” *Iowa State Bystander* [Des Moines] 27 April 1900, p. 5; “Ft. Madison Ripplets,” *Iowa State Bystander* [Des Moines], 17 Nov. 1899, p. 2; “Sioux City Items,” *Iowa State Bystander* [Des Moines], 17 Mar. 1911, p. 4.

37. The *Iowa Bystander*, for example, reached readers in Iowa, Illinois, Kansas, and Missouri. See *The Black Press in the Middle West*.

38. For example, see “Niles, Mich.,” *South Bend News-Times*, 2 Feb. 1917, p. 16; and “Among the Colored People,” *Emporia Daily Gazette* [KS], 4 Nov. 1898, p. 4.

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