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“When Dey ‘Listed Colored Soldiers”: Paul Laurence Dunbar’s Poetic Engagement with the Civil War, Masculinity, and Violence

Paul Laurence Dunbar’s poetic treatment of the Civil War and its legacies explores heroism, patriotism, citizenship, death, mourning, and trauma. In reflecting on the war, considered a worthy and elevated national theme, the author found an acceptable yet powerful way to set black suffering alongside white, to testify to African American contributions and sacrifices, to figure a form of haunting bound up with the sin of racial slavery, and to pass comment on the disappointments and abuses of the post-Reconstruction era. Through readings of the poems, “When Dey ‘Listed Colored Soldiers,” “The Colored Soldiers,” “The Unsung Heroes,” “Robert Gould Shaw,” and “The Haunted Oak,” with particular attention to gender construction and imagery of violence, this analysis will demonstrate how Dunbar gives extraordinary voice to African American experiences, positions, and protests.¹

The preoccupation of the Civil War may seem a strange one for an African American poet writing in the North in the 1890s and early 1900s. Yet, this topic enables Dunbar to enter into dialogue with prior literary representations and, with varying degrees of success, to form a critique of contemporary racial injustices. Composed against a backdrop of rising anti-black violence and the widespread collapse and reversal of political and legal gains made by African Americans during the post-war period, Dunbar’s poetry might be considered alongside the turn of the century prose interventions of Frances E. W. Harper, Pauline Hopkins, and W. E. B. Du Bois.² In different ways, these works address questions of black identity, uplift, and self-determination in light of the legacies of slavery and the Civil War. Yet in his revisitation of the national conflict, Dunbar, too, looks to earlier European American poetic engagements with war to shape his own voicing.³ Whether in dialect or standard English, the verse under consideration here works to reaffirm the Civil War as inextricably tied up with racial oppression, thus distancing itself from nostalgic reflections on the Lost Cause of the South, and to build a case for the equal claim of African Americans to belonging and liberty in the here and now.

The subjects of slavery and the Civil War are treated explicitly in the dialect poem “When Dey ‘Listed Colored Soldiers” (Dunbar, *Collected* 182-84). Here Dunbar creates the powerful first-person voice of an enslaved black woman whose beloved, ‘Lias, joins the Union army to fight for freedom. The poem parallels white and black experiences of war, in large part, through an exploration of racial identity and fitness to fulfil dominant gender roles. Indeed, in this instance, gendered behaviors and codes are key to the claim to African American citizenship and full personhood. While the form of “When Dey ‘Listed Colored Soldiers”

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consists of regular long lines and rhyming couplets, it also relies on a familiar and black vernacular voicing that lends to the crafting of the warmth and humanity of the speaker.

The poem's narrative sequence takes us from 'Lias's enlistment and departure to battle, through the experiences of the women left behind—both black and white—and to their responses to loss and mourning. The repeated line "W'en dey 'listed colo'ed sojers" (ll. 16, 24, 40) centers our attention on the decision to let blacks join the Union ranks during the Civil War. Simultaneously, it makes us aware of their previous exclusion from the fighting forces, the white perception of their unreliability both with arms and in the face of danger, and also the non-admittance of African American men into a particular mode of masculinity. 'Lias's enlistment hence signals both a pressing desire to obtain liberty for his people and entry into a male military sphere bound up with ideals of honor, duty (it is the slave's "conscience" that calls him), strength, valor, and sacrifice for a noble cause. 'Lias wishes to fight "For de freedom dey had gin him an' de glory of de right" (l. 12), but his pride, and the speaker's, is tied up with his uniformed and parading appearance: "so strong an' mighty in his coat o' sojer blue" (l. 22). This pride is indicative of newly marshalled masculine attributes including bravery and physical power as well as efficient participation in a disciplined and regulatory order perceived as very different from that of slavery. The significance of this induction is reinforced by the speaking persona's emotional and bolstering cry of "Step up, manny." Her later drawing of an equivalence between the departure of her Confederate master and that of 'Lias dismantles the racial hierarchy of the time which, in conjunction with dominant gender constructions, opposed the emasculation and animalization of black men to a model of white male control, honor, and patriarchal potency. The fate of 'Lias, laid to rest in southern soil "wid de flag dat he had fit for shinin' daih acrost his breast" (l. 38), confirms his place as war hero, his alignment with a suitable form of US nationalism and, perhaps most importantly for Dunbar here, his rightful claim to full citizenship, if before doubted or unrecognized, now proven by his sacrifice.

Another key focus of the poem is the speaker's own position and identity as a black female, which is explored in relation to white womanhood as represented by the Mistress and her daughter. Dunbar juxtaposes their respective experiences of loss when male partners or relatives leave to fight in the war. In women of both races, we find a mixture of pride and grief at their men's enlistment and an emphasis on the capacity for true feeling. When the Master and his son first leave, despite her expression of sympathy, the slave woman is denied understanding of her white superiors' distress. She herself can only speculate on the women's emotions: "dey only *seemed* mo' proudah" (l. 28; emphasis mine) and she is informed that, as a slave, she cannot fully empathize: "I didn't know dey feelin's is de ve'y wo'ds dey say" (l. 26).⁴ When 'Lias enters into a masculinized role as combatant and hero, however, the black woman, too, enacts conventionally gendered behaviors, promising to be true in a sentimental farewell, enduring his absence as a kind of martyrdom with a stricken heart and eventually weeping and mourning at the passing of her "loved un." Now the loss of the dead, whether Confederate or Union, is felt "thoo an' thoo" (l. 35)

If here we witness the speaker gaining access to a sphere of feminine empathy, right feeling, and suffering that contests the view of slaves as lacking human sensitivity or fully realized interpersonal bonds, Dunbar perhaps goes further, positioning her as possessing a more comprehensive and refined capacity for understanding than the featured representatives of white womanhood. Her simple and sincere voice contributes to the heartfelt nature of the poetic enunciation just as the persona's cry to her soldier is all the more choked and charged with emotion as it comes from a throat "so' an' raw" (l. 23).⁵ The poem concludes

with the black woman's compassion for her Mistress's loss, an apparently unreciprocated response, and this subversive ascendancy to a contemporary feminine ideal is furthered by a gracious grief that can accommodate, even take solace in, renunciation of a beloved in the service of a greater cause framed as both patriotic and religious: "whut Gawd had called him for" (l. 39). While the burial of 'Lias with the respect due a military hero stands in favorable contrast to the roadside abandonment of young Ned's body and the shameful return of the Master, "broke for life," the speaker's closing empathy and ennobled feeling elevates her above the limited sensitivity of the mourning white women.

We thus find the subject of the Civil War enabling Dunbar to validate and assert black American identity, albeit through rather narrowly defined gender codes. This recourse to the masculine and feminine qualities privileged within the patriarchy of the time can be seen as a powerful, if for today's readership compromised, strategy. Not only do such compositions as "When Dey 'Listed Colored Soldiers" prompt a re-evaluation of the writer's work in the light of western traditions of war poetry, but they also express a register of discontent at injustice, forming an important part of his wider, and increasingly recognised, legacy as a protest poet.

The preoccupation with the participation of ex-slaves in the Civil War and the concomitant celebration of black male bravery can be further witnessed in the two longer poems "The Colored Soldiers" and "The Unsung Heroes" (Dunbar, *Collected* 50-52, 196-98). In both, Dunbar rejects dialect for a more standard voicing on the need for song to commemorate hitherto unacknowledged heroic deeds and selfless sacrifice. The earlier poem, "The Colored Soldiers," employs a first person speaker suggestive of Dunbar himself. While this speaker is aligned with African American identity, his use of direct address throughout implies a white audience being held to account, for example, of black volunteers commenting, "In the early days *you* scorned them" (l. 9; emphasis mine). Recounting the initial dismissal of a black role in "the white man's [battles]," the subsequent "distress" of "the nation," the vigorous response of "the colored soldiers" to the eventual Union call and "the life blood of their thousands" spent to obtain freedom, the poem can be read as a straightforward paean of praise. Yet Dunbar incorporates in the tribute a forceful cry for contemporary recognition and equality as well as subtle constructions of color and masculinity.

"The Colored Soldiers" appears to establish a familiar symbolic opposition between darkness and light, that is between polluting dust, the "funeral pall" of war and "the depths of slavery's night," and the illumination of day and freedom: "Their muskets flashed the dawning, / And they fought their way to light" (ll. 55-56). Yet the poem's imagery proves more complex and invokes a second somewhat different opposition between color, here associated with African American identity, and whiteness. The actual word "white" is used only in the second stanza in the context of blindness to the potential of black troops. Color, in contrast, is implicitly present in the flags, banners, and standards under threat of being dulled by dust and defeat, in the skin of the African American forces themselves and in the fiery imagery of battle ("blazing breach," "hot wrought spirits," and so on). In addition, the use of "unblanched" in the fourth stanza to describe the black soldiers' bravery works powerfully in the poem, linking color with male valor and paleness, even white identity, with fading, fear and perhaps also a rather feminized form of weakness.⁶ This association inverts, if only temporarily, dominant codifications of manhood and race and the final flushed color imagery of blood that has "cleansed completely / Every blot of Slavery's shame" (ll. 73-74) further disrupts expectations as bloodshed causes not a dark stain but rather washes away the mark of the oppressive white institution. Dunbar's call for racial equality gains force also from an unusual invocation of the "commin-

gling" of blood, perhaps more commonly associated with the taint and threat of miscegenation, yet here forming a part of a patriotic vision of interracial brotherhood on the battlefield.⁷ Indeed, the speaker argues that having shared ordeals and losses during the war, having once ranked as "citizens and soldiers," surely blacks have earned civil rights and recognition in the post-war period.⁸ He pointedly asks, presumably of a white northern audience, "They were comrades then and brothers, / Are they more or less today?" (ll. 57-58) thus rendering this "song heroic" of unequivocal and provocative contemporary relevance.⁹

**Dunbar calls for racial equality by invoking a
"commingling" of blood, not the "tainted" blood of
miscegenation, but the patriotic blood of an interracial
brotherhood on the battlefield.**

"The Unsung Heroes" from the outset poses itself as a revisionary voicing for the unacknowledged "who rose in the country's need" (l. 1). Like "The Colored Soldiers," this poem foregrounds black agency, courage, and blood sacrifice during the war, in particular focusing on the proof of previously doubted manhood. Indeed, observing combatants' actions and "might," God is said to have pronounced, "I have made them men." Racial pride is found in mention of the soldiers' "sinews brown" and in the rekindling of "the old free fires of their savage sires," an image that suggests the rediscovery of the spirit and bravery of their unenslaved African ancestors.¹⁰ Such affirmation and the wishing of "hate of race . . . obsolete" keep injustices against black Americans to the front of this engagement with the Civil War. This poem, however, lacks the more radical gesture regarding contemporary inequality located in "The Colored Soldiers." Here the leap from the bygone conflict to Dunbar's own day is not as effectively achieved as the past tense predominates and it is left to the following war poem to contest, through bitter condemnation, continuing prejudice.

Dunbar's sonnet "Robert Gould Shaw" can be fruitfully read alongside a wider body of American poetry that pays tribute to the heroic dead of the Civil War and sometimes to Shaw himself (Dunbar, *Collected* 221).¹¹ For the purposes of this essay, however, I will focus on Dunbar's movement from the past conflict to contemporary disappointments. As already observed, with its direct address and shift from "then" to "today," "The Colored Soldiers" offers a more forceful critique than "The Unsung Heroes." "Robert Gould Shaw" initially presents a rather oblique approach, at length asking of Shaw himself why he left "the classic groves" of academia "To lead th' unlettered and despised droves / To manhood's home and thunder at the gate?" (ll. 7-8). Such formulations obviously return us to issues of degradation and of race and gender. In the second stanza, however, war is figured in a less allegorical and more violently disturbing manner as the "hot terror of a hopeless fight" (l. 11). The efforts and sacrifices of the Union soldiers "for right" were, "the Present teaches, but in vain!" (l. 14). The poem thus articulates a bitter sense of failure that undercuts previous evocations of glory. This bleak vision parallels that of the speaker of Melville's earlier "Lee in the Capitol," who considers a post-war "desolting land" and "harvest large of doubt and dread" (ll. 114, 119): "A voice comes out from these charnel-fields, / A plaintive yet unheeded one: / 'Died all in vain? both sides undone' " (ll. 133-35). However, while here the tragedy is ongoing division and "rancor" between North and South, in Dunbar's work the disappointment lies in continuing racial oppression, even after the devastating sacrifices of the conflict. In "Robert Gould Shaw" we also find an elliptical timeframe as the "hopeless fight" of the war is

described as “*this* hot terror,” “*This* . . . endurance” (ll. 11, 12; emphasis mine), so eroding the distance between the struggles of the earlier national strife and those of the here and now. Such an effect is reinforced by the use of the formulation “Have died” rather than died; Shaw and his men, Dunbar suggests, have given their lives in an ongoing and seemingly futile war. This construction marks out somewhat different territory to previously discussed celebrations of black service, offering a bleaker portrait of waste and a lack of victorious resolution or social change.¹² The address to a deceased white soldier rather than contemporary communities is perhaps of significance in this, Dunbar feeling compelled neither to present a message of hope and pride nor to rebuff charges of African American inferiority. The expressed continuity between the antebellum and postbellum situations is picked up by my final poetic selection.

In “The Haunted Oak,” Dunbar employs the ballad form to treat the theme of lynching (Dunbar, *Collected* 219-20). It is my contention that, through imagery of suffering and rift originating from the Civil War, the issue of anti-black violence, painfully significant to African Americans in the 1890s, is tied up with a shameful *national* heritage and responsibility. Here we find the racial tensions and abuses of the post-Reconstruction era explored through the powerful figure of a damaged roadside oak tree. The poem’s construction involves a complex layering of voicings and addresses that renders a movement from the particular to a more widely shared form of trauma and haunting. In spite of not explicitly confronting civil conflict, “The Haunted Oak” hence does handle the legacies of slavery and of aggressive division within US society.

The central image of the poem is that of the withered bough from which an innocent man was strung up by vigilantes. Although the text employs few overt racial markers, we are told that the “guiltless victim” was “charged . . . with the old, old crime” (ll. 8, 13), a phrase which, within the loaded lexicon of race relations in America, implies his alleged rape, as a black man, of a white woman. The persecutory nature of the hanging is reinforced by the perpetrators’ circumvention of the law and heartless laughter. Even more provocative perhaps on Dunbar’s part is the exposure of the lynchers as figures of authority and responsibility within the white community, as “the judge,” “the doctor,” and “the minister” (who, in bringing along “his oldest son,” completes the image of the masked riders as the four horsemen of the apocalypse).

The forceful effect of “The Haunted Oak” is achieved through several mechanisms, including recourse to notions of the uncanny and the evocation of physical sensation and bodily disruption. The oak is a gothic site bearing the ongoing “curse” of a past atrocity, a marker of violence and death still imbued with the power to trouble and disturb. Indeed, the tree itself is encoded with history as it bears witness to the final terror and pain experienced by the wronged man. This witness is wrought through a kind of substitution or equation of corporeal forms as the oak, and in particular the bough used in the hanging, not only “feel[s]” the abrasion of the rope against its “bark” as if against skin, but also shudders with the victim’s “gurgling moan” and last “thro” as “The touch of [its] own last pain” (ll. 53, 14, 55, 56). With such sensitivity, the branch becomes “bare,” “burned with dread . . . dried and dead” (ll. 1, 59). The figure of the tree thus does not merely stand as a haunted gallows site, but actually speaks to the physical sensation and damage suffered, so emblemizing a more broadly shared wound. Indeed, the withered bough offers an analogy for the cleft and injured post-Civil War nation, most famously envisioned in Lincoln’s second inaugural address.¹³ The death on the oak of an innocent black man loosely refigures the Crucifixion and perhaps also echoes Melville’s suggestive poem about the execution of anti-slavery campaigner and insurrectionist John Brown, “The Portent”: “Hanging from the beam, / . . . Gaunt the shadow on your green, / . . . The meteor of the war” (ll. 1, 3, 14). The central image of the tree itself feeling

and remembering, too, echoes Melville's "Malvern Hill," in which the local elms recall the violence and losses of this Civil War engagement.¹⁴

Key to the movement from an individual tragedy to a shared curse or affliction in "The Haunted Oak" is the question of voice. For most of the poem, the oak tree itself speaks in the first person, relating the incident and consequences of the lynching. Within this voicing is the reported speech of the lynchers, who use "lying words" to poach the victim from jail. This example of deception through language throws into relief the oak tree's own unusual but presumably more reliable telling; its account, unlike those of the judge, doctor and minister, can be trusted and, through shared feeling, a process of substitution, can give voice to the experiences of the now silenced. The tree's enunciation, however, is first prompted by the enquiry of yet another speaker in the opening stanza. This persona is a passer-by who, having addressed the tree about its damaged bough, becomes the tree's addressee in the telling of the tale. In the final stanza, the poem returns to this speaker, who has himself been affected by the story of the blighted oak; this time, however, he addresses not the tree, but an implied wider audience that includes the reader. This voicing constitutes a rhetorical device that renders complicit and haunted an entire nation and is backed up by further bodily equation.

As established, the tree feels the suffering of the lynched man, but his "weight," surely representative of the burden of the crime, is also borne by the oak and, in addition, the perpetrators. In an image that calls up distinctly black diasporic belief systems such as voodoo or candomblé, we are told of the judge "ever another *rides* his soul / In the guise of a mortal fear" (ll. 55-56; emphasis mine). The judge is possessed, dragged down by the spirit of his victim, the verb "to ride" also referring back to the aforementioned vengeful four horsemen. The significance of this reference becomes yet clearer when the framing persona, he who has heard the tree's story, in conclusion says that "ever the man he rides *me* hard / . . . I *feel* his curse as a haunted bough, / On the trunk of a haunted tree" (ll. 57, 59-60; emphasis mine). Here the listener takes on the rider of the lyncher, the burden of the oak; he, too, shares in the "curse," becoming a substitute body in bearing such a load. The gesture is completed when readers realize that as fellow listeners to the poem, like the tree's addressee, they may have to assume the weight of past wrongs.¹⁵ This device alone implies wider complicity, but the suggestion is reinforced by the extended metaphor of the damaged oak, presenting an image of the wounded nation riven by the blight of slavery and war and still feeling, still "burned" by the painful and haunting effects.¹⁶

The subject of the Civil War is a recurring one for Dunbar and one that opens up a significant space for black voicing and critique shaping. Some of the poems I have considered are based on the drawing out of parallels, whether that be how the bravery, sacrifice, and masculine aggression of black soldiers, although often unacknowledged, equalled that of whites or, in the case of "When Dey 'Listed Colored Soldiers," how keenly felt loss elevates the humble speaker to a dominant feminine ideal. Such sharing of experience, then, often provides a foundation for the call for contemporary equality, recognition, and citizenship. In the case of "The Colored Soldiers" and "Robert Gould Shaw," this call is reinforced by the clever use of address and shifts in tense. "The Haunted Oak," while exploring the theme of postbellum violence, involves the reader in past injustice, through corporeal substitution and layered articulations that recall national strife and imply a form of shared haunting and guilt. Dunbar's poetic engagements revisit earlier literary representations of the Civil War, pointedly keeping to the fore African American experience and enabling concomitant celebration, affirmation, mourning, and bitter recrimination. As Shelley Fisher Fishkin has observed, "Slavery was being erased from the story being told about why the Civil War was fought" and Dunbar's writing, and indeed this reading, works to counter such silences (284).

1. Further study might also encompass "Ode for Memorial Day," "Dirge for a Soldier," "Black Samson of Brandywine," "The Conquerors: The Black Troops in Cuba," and "Lincoln."
2. I am thinking of the politically aware romance novels *Iola Leroy* (1893) and *Contending Forces* (1900), by Harper and Hopkins, respectively, and Du Bois's provocative cultural and sociological study *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903).
3. The handling of division and loss in the poetry of Walt Whitman and Herman Melville provides an illuminating point of reference here.
4. This is reinforced by the lines, "But I t'ought dat I could sorrer for de losin' of 'em too, / But I couldn't, for I didn't know de ha'f o' whut I saw" (ll. 30-31)
5. The individualized depiction of black womanhood found here provides a counterpoint to that within, for example, Whitman's "Ethiopia Saluting the Colors" from his 1865 volume of war poetry, *Drum-Taps* (Whitman 343).
6. The ferocity of the troops is also reinforced by a metaphor of, in this case apparently positively weighted, animality: "like hounds unleashed and eager." This image recalls "the dogs of war" of Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* (III.I).
7. The "life blood" of both blacks and whites has soaked into and enriched the soil of the South.
8. Dunbar here establishes a very different perspective from that found in Melville's *Battle Pieces* (1866). In "A Meditation," for example, in pleading for the reconciliation of white kinsmen from the North and South, Melville has them together ask: "Can Africa pay back this blood / Spilt on Potomac's shore?" (ll. 21-22).
9. For further readings of "The Colored Soldiers," see Braxton xix-xx and Leonard 71-75.
10. Such "sinews brown" might recall Whitman's lines from "Eighteen Sixty-One": "Saw I your gait and saw I your sinewy limbs clothed in blue, bearing / weapons, robust year" (ll. 19-20).
11. Most obviously, "Ode to the Union Dead," by James Russell Lowell (1865), "Ode to the Confederate Dead," by Allen Tate (1928), and, more recently, "For the Union Dead," by Robert Lowell (1960). It has been examined with other black authored poems dedicated to Shaw, the white commander of the first black regiment, the 54th Massachusetts, who died with his men in 1863 (see Flint).
12. A similar sentiment can be found in parts of "To the South On Its New Slavery": "What, was it all for naught, those awful years / That drenched a groaning land with blood and tears?" (ll. 61-62).
13. "Let us strive on to finish the work we are in, to bind up the nation's wounds, to care for him who shall have borne the battle" (Lincoln 1580).
14. For example, "Does the elm wood / Recall the haggard beards of blood?" (Melville ll. 19-20).
15. The tree's witness is here aligned with white identity in taking on the guilt of the lyncher. The device might be intended to implicate European American readers in a similar way while for African Americans the burden might rather be one of an inescapable history of trauma.
16. Parallel imagery is presented in "Lincoln": "Hurt was the nation with a mighty wound" (l. 1).

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