

“Entirely *Black Verse*  
from Him Would  
Succeed”:  
Minstrel Realism and  
William Dean Howells

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**I**N the early months of 1896, James A. Herne returned to his hotel in Toledo, Ohio, the city where he was directing and performing in his most popular play to date, *Shore Acres*. The hotel clerk informed the preeminent actor and playwright that one Paul Laurence Dunbar had left him a gift. Indeed, after attending and enjoying *Shore Acres*, Dunbar decided to leave Herne a complimentary copy of his second and latest book, *Majors and Minors* (1896). Fortunately for the African American poet, Herne was well acquainted with the most authoritative literary reviewer, cultural critic, editor, and publisher at the time, the so-called Dean of American Letters, William Howells.<sup>1</sup> Howells was already a household name for mentoring and helping to publish the works of such well-known writers as George Wash-

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<sup>1</sup> For more information about *Shore Acres* in the context of James Herne's life and success, see Herbert J. Edwards and Julie A. Herne, *James A. Herne: The Rise of Realism in the American Drama* (Orono: Univ. of Maine Press, 1964), pp. 85–111.

ington Cable, Henry James, Sarah Orne Jewett, Joel Chandler Harris, and Mark Twain. Readers of *Harper's Weekly* in particular had come to know and appreciate Howells's columns, which for a decade had epitomized the magazine's long-standing identification and review of instructive and entertaining literature.<sup>2</sup> When Dunbar dropped off the book at Herne's hotel, the thought that Herne would hand *Majors and Minors* to Howells, who would then review the book for *Harper's Weekly* and thereby launch Dunbar's literary career, was far-fetched, to say the least.

Remarkably, these events occurred in this exact way. Herne did not respond to Dunbar while *Shore Acres* was playing in Toledo, but he did later in Detroit, where the play relocated and from which he sent the poet a letter: "While at Toledo a copy of your poems was left at my hotel by a Mr. Childs," Herne wrote; "I tried very hard to find Mr. Childs to learn more of you. Your poems are wonderful. I shall acquaint William Dean Howells and other literary people with them. They are new to me and may be to them."<sup>3</sup> Herne passed *Majors and Minors* on to Howells, who decided to review the book in the 27 June 1896 issue of *Harper's Weekly*.

*Majors and Minors* was "new" to both Herne and Howells not because of its two main genres, British Romantic and American local-color poetry: Herne was well read in American literature, while Howells specialized in classic and contemporaneous Western literature.<sup>4</sup> Actually, the frontispiece of *Majors*

<sup>2</sup> On Dunbar's experience securing a copy of *Harper's Weekly*, see Virginia Cunningham, *Paul Laurence Dunbar and His Song* (New York: Dodd, Mead, and Co., 1947), p. 144. William Dean Howells ascended the professional ranks as assistant editor (1866–71) and then editor (1871–81) of the *Atlantic Monthly*, and subsequently as a writer of columns entitled "Editor's Study" (1886–92), "Life and Letters" (1895–98), and "Editor's Easy Chair" (1899–1909) for *Harper's*. Howells's reputation as a gifted and prolific writer of fiction buttressed his critical reputation. For more information about Howells's columns, which began in 1886, and about the plantation tradition, see Elsa Nettels, *Language, Race, and Social Class in Howells's America* (Lexington: Univ. Press of Kentucky, 1988), pp. 3, 11–12; and see Peter Revell, *Paul Laurence Dunbar* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1979), p. 36.

<sup>3</sup> James A. Herne, letter to Paul Laurence Dunbar, quoted in Cunningham, *Paul Laurence Dunbar and His Song*, p. 142.

<sup>4</sup> Howells read Romantic poetry and poetics in his "Editor's Study" columns, which include Howells's readings of such British Romantic poets as Lord Byron, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, John Keats, Percy Bysshe Shelley, and William Wordsworth, as well as such American Romantic poets as Henry Wadsworth Longfellow and Edgar Allan Poe. See

and *Minors*, an image of Dunbar at age eighteen, made the poems “new” (see Figure 1). Howells found the image so compelling that, for the benefit of his readers, he decided to describe Dunbar’s phenotype and physiognomy, those biological traits that affirmed the poet as a “pure African type.”<sup>5</sup> So captivated was Howells by the frontispiece and its implications that, reportedly, he wrote a substantial portion of the review—the sections regarding the idea of someone like Dunbar—without yet reading all of the poems in the book.<sup>6</sup> For Howells the frontispiece verified Dunbar’s identity as an African descendant born in the postbellum New World. The image influenced Howells’s encounter with *Majors and Minors* in much the same way that a “paratext” influences a reader’s encounter with a text, although Dunbar’s book lacks a comprehensive paratextual frame.<sup>7</sup> Aside from the printer’s information (“Hadley & Hadley, Toledo, Ohio”) and the dedication to Dunbar’s mother,<sup>8</sup> *Majors and Minors*, as Howells puts it in the review, was “dateless, placeless, without a publisher.” Initially unable to “place” the work, Howells focused on the discernibly African physiognomy and dark phenotype in the frontispiece in order to “place” Dunbar and his work.

The frontispiece created certain expectations for Howells about the kind of writing that should exist in *Majors and Minors*.

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William Dean Howells, *Editor’s Study*, ed. James W. Simpson (Troy, N.Y.: Whitston Publishing Co., 1983). For insight into Howells’s understanding of dialect, see Nettels, *Language, Race, and Social Class*, pp. 62–86.

<sup>5</sup> William Dean Howells, “Life and Letters,” *Harper’s Weekly: A Journal of Civilization*, 40 (1896), 630. As Howells’s entire review of *Majors and Minors* sits on one page of *Harper’s Weekly*, I will hereafter no longer indicate the page number.

<sup>6</sup> See Thomas Millard Henry, “Old School of Negro ‘Critics’ Hard on Paul Laurence Dunbar” (1924), rpt. in *The “Messenger” Reader: Stories, Poetry, and Essays from “The Messenger” Magazine*, ed. Sondra Kathryn Wilson (New York: Modern Library, 2000), p. 278.

<sup>7</sup> More precisely, a paratext determines the reading, classifying, and publicizing of a literary text. Iconic (illustrative) or textual (linguistic), the paratext, according to Gérard Genette, “enables a text to become a book and to be offered as such to its readers and, more generally, to the public” (Genette, *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation* [Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1997], p. 1). The paratext defines the context of a text and thus determines how we engage that text.

<sup>8</sup> Dunbar’s dedication reads: “As my first faint pipings were inscribed to her, I deem it fitting, as a further recognition of my love and obligation, that I should also dedicate these later songs to . . . MY MOTHER. . . .” See Paul Laurence Dunbar, *Majors and Minors* (Toledo, Ohio: Hadley & Hadley Printers and Binders, 1896). Further references are to this edition and are included in the text.

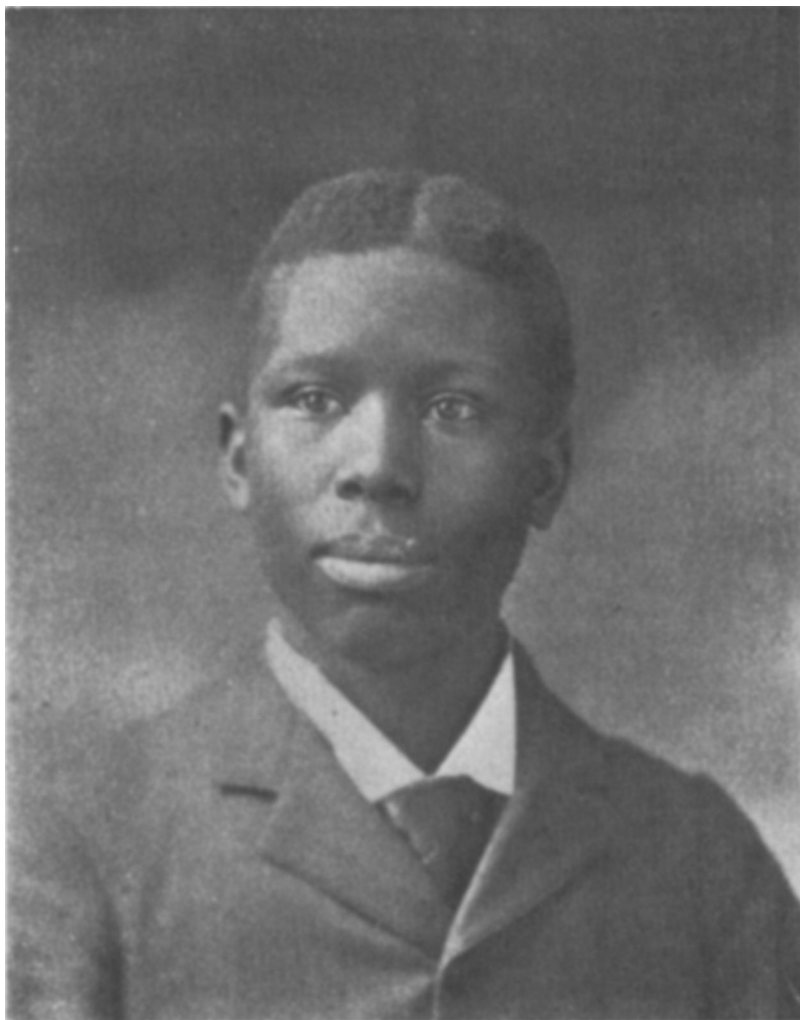


FIGURE 1. Paul Laurence Dunbar. Reprinted by permission of Brown University Library.

Whenever Dunbar's book defied these expectations, skepticism tempered Howells's enthusiasm. In his review Howells suggests that, in order to assure both critical acclaim and commercial success, the poet should dedicate himself to writing verses only in "Black" dialect, similar to those filling the second and smaller section of *Majors and Minors*. For Dunbar is "most himself," Howells insists, when he writes in such informal or collo-

quial English. Accordingly, he maintains that Dunbar should refrain from writing poems in formal or “literary” English, such as those filling the first and larger section of the book.

Howells subtly reiterates this assessment one month later in a letter to Ripley Hitchcock, then serving as literary editor and adviser at D. Appleton and Company. Dated 29 July 1896, the letter belongs to a long-running conversation between Howells and Hitchcock about promising American writers, most notably Stephen Crane. After informing Hitchcock of his laudatory review of Crane’s two books, *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets* (1893) and *The Red Badge of Courage* (1895), in the previous Sunday’s *World*, Howells closes the letter with a couple of sentences about Dunbar: “Major Pond is going to platform young Dunbar next winter, and I believe a book of entirely *black* verse from him would succeed. My notice raised such interest.”<sup>9</sup>

These words are remarkable for three reasons. First, Howells is referring to Major James A. Pond, a prestigious literary agent who had previously directed the lecture tours of Twain and Cable, among other popular American writers. Dunbar had secured Major Pond as an agent by the time he decided to travel to England in February 1897 to lecture and recite his poems.<sup>10</sup> Second, the reason that Dunbar interested Major Pond in the first place had much to do with that “notice”—Howells’s term for his review of *Majors and Minors* in *Harper’s Weekly*. Third, and most important, Howells’s assertion that “a book of entirely *black* verse from [Dunbar] would succeed” values the racial authenticity of African American literature, particularly the orthography of dialect that came from the pen of a “pure African type.” This appreciation, I argue, belongs to a larger critical and commercial demand for what I call “minstrel realism” in postbellum nineteenth-century American culture.

Although “minstrel realism” sounds oxymoronic, it makes sense when placed within the proper context of how certain ideologies of race (racialism) and realism interacted in the nineteenth century. In this essay I intend to show that the

<sup>9</sup> William Dean Howells, letter to Ripley Hitchcock, 29 July 1896, in the Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia Univ., New York City; underline in original.

<sup>10</sup> See Fredrickson, *The Black Image in the White Mind: The Debate on Afro-American Character and Destiny, 1817–1914* (New York: Harper and Row, 1972), pp. 101–2.

racialism of blackface minstrelsy, performed by individuals darkened usually by burnt cork, created a cultural precondition in which postbellum audiences regarded Black minstrelsy (that is, minstrelsy performed by Blacks) as realistic. This reaction resulted from the commercialization of Black minstrelsy in American culture as an avant-garde cultural performance of racial authenticity. An analogous reaction occurred upon the publication of *Majors and Minors* in 1896. Howells and other reviewers, editors, and publishers appreciated the particular section "Humor and Dialect" for what happened to be the protocols of minstrel realism: the humor and dialect of African American culture. My argument has several implications. Minstrel realism united realism with what George M. Fredrickson calls "romantic racialism,"<sup>11</sup> a relationship that flies in the face of the historical conflict between these genres in American culture. While characterizing Anglo-American literary realism as the eschewal of romance and sentiment, Howells in particular defined African American literary realism in these very terms. This apparent inconsistency points to the racialism that helped to perpetuate this definition in the dramatic and literary cultures of minstrelsy.

In this essay I urge another re-categorization of American literary realism. Elizabeth Ammons has already recommended an expansion of this genre to include a variety of realisms, to move beyond the "white, middle-class ideas" of Howells, Henry James, Stephen Crane, and Edith Wharton, among others, and accommodate the diverse approaches of African American, Native American, and Chinese American authors.<sup>12</sup> But Howells's notion of literary realism included Dunbar as well as other "ethnic minority" writers, such as Charles Chesnutt and Abra-

<sup>11</sup> For more information on Dunbar's professional advances, earnings, and travels, see Cunningham, *Paul Laurence Dunbar and His Song*, p. 153; Jay Martin and Gossie H. Hudson, "General Introduction," in *The Paul Laurence Dunbar Reader: A Selection of the Best of Paul Laurence Dunbar's Poetry and Prose, Including Writings Never before Available in Book Form*, ed. Martin and Hudson (New York: Dodd, Mead, and Co., 1975), p. 20; and Paul Laurence Dunbar, letter to Matilda Dunbar, 10 February 1897, in *The Paul Laurence Dunbar Reader*, p. 438.

<sup>12</sup> See Ammons, "Expanding the Canon of American Realism," in *Documents of American Realism and Naturalism*, ed. Donald Pizer (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois Univ. Press, 1998), p. 442.

ham Cahan. In order to explain, then, the fact that Howells cites both Crane and Dunbar in the same letter to Hitchcock as the avant-garde of American literary realism, I suggest that, for Howells and his contemporaries, racial authenticity determined the aesthetic value of literary realism. The contrasting racial identities of Crane and Dunbar, for example, created different sets of expectations for the kinds of realism that they could and should have produced.

Associating Dunbar with minstrel realism departs from twentieth-century debates over whether or not Dunbar sold out to inherently racist mainstream literary and publishing tastes.<sup>13</sup> Currently, the most popular scholarly argument on this subject emphasizes Dunbar's disenchantment with Howells and American literary criticism, and shows that the poet was more polemical than his mainstream readers might have realized. Indeed, Dunbar held mixed feelings about Howells's review. Sixteen days after it appeared, Dunbar sent Howells a letter stating that he had read the article and "felt its effect."<sup>14</sup> Less than a year after thanking Howells, however, Dunbar lamented the "irrevocable harm in the dictum [Howells] laid down regarding [his] dialect verse."<sup>15</sup> Along with analyzing this ambiva-

<sup>13</sup> In his 1921 "Preface" to *The Book of American Negro Poetry*, Johnson argues that Dunbar's dialect poems tended to assign the stereotypical temperaments of "humor" and "pathos" to African Americans (see James Weldon Johnson, "Preface to the First Edition," in *The Book of American Negro Poetry, Revised Edition*, ed. Johnson [1931; rpt. New York: Harcourt Brace and World, 1959], pp. 9-48). In "Old School of Negro 'Critics' Hard on Paul Laurence Dunbar," Henry disagrees with Johnson by criticizing the African American writers of *The Crisis*—Johnson, William Stanley Braithwaite, and W.E.B. Du Bois—for failing to accord Dunbar the respect he deserves. For summaries of arguments for why Dunbar was progressive or retrograde in the African American poetic tradition, see Joanne M. Braxton, "Introduction: The Poetry of Paul Laurence Dunbar," in *The Collected Poetry of Paul Laurence Dunbar*, ed. Braxton (Charlottesville: Univ. Press of Virginia, 1993), p. xxix; Gavin Jones, *Strange Talk: The Politics of Dialect Literature in Gilded Age America* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: Univ. of California Press, 1999), p. 185; Myron Simon, "Dunbar and Dialect Poetry," in *A Singer in the Dawn: Reinterpretations of Paul Laurence Dunbar*, ed. Jay Martin (New York: Dodd, Mead, and Co., 1975), p. 118; Ralph Story, "Paul Laurence Dunbar: Master Player in a Fixed Game," *CLA Journal*, 27 (1983), 54; Nettels, *Language, Race, and Social Class*, pp. 83-85; and Revell, *Paul Laurence Dunbar*, pp. 162-75.

<sup>14</sup> Paul Laurence Dunbar, letter to W. D. Howells, 13 July 1896, in *Life in Letters of William Dean Howells*, ed. Mildred Howells, 2 vols. (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, Doran, and Co., 1928), II, 67.

<sup>15</sup> Paul Laurence Dunbar, 15 March 1897 letter, rpt. in "Unpublished Letters of Paul Laurence Dunbar to a Friend," *Crisis*, 20 (1920), 73.

lence, scholars have also argued that Dunbar's dialect poems were protesting against minstrel realism all along, even as they seemed to be perpetuating it.<sup>16</sup>

I am not particularly concerned here with Dunbar's complex personal and literary responses to Howells, which I elaborate elsewhere.<sup>17</sup> Neither do I want to focus on Howells's own representations of African Americans in his literary art, which scholars have already pursued.<sup>18</sup> Rather, I situate the ideological politics of Howells's criticism of African American literature in terms of the cultural expectations and reading practices of postbellum nineteenth-century America, a subject that remains understudied.<sup>19</sup> By focusing on this subject, I encourage American literary and cultural studies to move beyond the routine indictment of the racial inauthenticity and discrimination of minstrelsy. W. T. Lhamon, Jr., notes that such declarations have bogged down this academic field in the past and no

<sup>16</sup> For observations about Dunbar's poetic protest and counter-discourse, see Braxton, "Introduction," p. xxv; Jones, *Strange Talk*, pp. 187, 190–94; Dickson D. Bruce, Jr., "On Dunbar's 'Jingles in a Broken Tongue': Dunbar's Dialect Poetry and the Afro-American Folk Tradition," in *A Singer in the Dawn*, p. 111; John Keeling, "Paul Dunbar and the Mask of Dialect," *Southern Literary Journal*, 25, no. 2 (1993), 29; Marcellus Blount, "The Preacherly Text: African American Poetry and Vernacular Performance," *PMLA*, 107 (1992), 586; Darwin Turner, "Paul Laurence Dunbar: The Rejected Symbol," *Journal of Negro History* 52 (1967), 2; and James A. Emanuel, "Racial Fire in the Poetry of Paul Laurence Dunbar," in *A Singer in the Dawn*, p. 76.

<sup>17</sup> See my forthcoming essay, "'We Must Write Like the White Men': Race, Realism, and Dunbar's Anomalous First Novel," in *Novel: A Forum on Fiction*.

<sup>18</sup> For scholarship on the representation of African Americans in the literary art of Howells, see Michele Birnbaum, "Racial Hysteria: Female Pathology and Race Politics in Frances Harper's *Iola Leroy* and W. D. Howells's *An Imperative Duty*," *African American Review*, 33 (1999), 7–23; Jeffery A. Clymer, "Race and the Protocol of American Citizenship in William Dean Howells' *An Imperative Duty*," *American Literary Realism, 1870–1910*, 30, no. 3 (1998), 31–52; M. Giulia Fabi, "Reconstructing Literary Genealogies: Frances E. W. Harper's and William Dean Howells's Race Novels," in *Soft Canons: American Women Writers and Masculine Tradition*, ed. Karen L. Kilcup (Iowa City: Univ. of Iowa Press, 1999), pp. 48–66; Joseph R. McElrath, Jr., "W. D. Howells and Race: Charles W. Chesnutt's Disappointment of the Dean," *Nineteenth-Century Literature*, 51 (1997), 474–99; Nettels, *Language, Race, and Social Class*; Kenneth W. Warren, *Black and White Strangers: Race and American Literary Realism* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1993); and Henry B. Wonham, "Writing Realism, Policing Consciousness: Howells and the Black Body," *American Literature*, 67 (1995), 701–24.

<sup>19</sup> The few studies on this subject include William L. Andrews, "William Dean Howells and Charles W. Chesnutt: Criticism and Race Fiction in the Age of Booker T. Washington," *American Literature*, 48 (1976), 327–39; and McElrath, "W. D. Howells and Race."



longer prove intellectually productive.<sup>20</sup> Accordingly, I resist the temptation to dismiss Howells's critical impressions of Dunbar—impressions molded by the cultural experience of minstrelsy—as merely racist, although Howells's instances of racism do factor into his interpretation of Dunbar's poetry. More important, we must explore how and why Howells's discussions of accurate/truthful representations of African American experiences tended to reflect public discourses about African American performance in the minstrel industry. Ultimately, the relationship between Howells and Dunbar and the implications for African American writers confronting a White-dominated literary marketplace might be an overwhelmingly familiar story. Less intuitive or obvious, however, are the precise ways in which the racialism of Howells and this marketplace arbitrated the realism of African American literature.



As I noted earlier, American culture from the 1820s until the 1930s was anchored in what George M. Fredrickson calls “romantic racialism.”<sup>21</sup> Fredrickson claims that “the romantic racist view simply endorsed the ‘child’

<sup>20</sup> Lhamon tries to overcome this scholarly impasse: “One does not approve the abhorrent racism in most minstrelsy by emphasizing its presence, then moving on to discuss the form's other—even its counter—aspects. I analyze the multiple aspects in blackface performance because it was not a fixed thing, but slippery in its uses and effects” (W. T. Lhamon, Jr., *Raising Cain: Blackface Performance from Jim Crow to Hip Hop* [Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1998], p. 6). At another point, regarding blackface performance, Lhamon writes: “Whether [blackface minstrels'] songs were inaccurate pictures of African-American culture is not the point. Until the cows come home, we might debate how well or ill minstrels copied black culture. But that is a fruitless task and always to be followed by such further imponderables as, What is authentic black culture? Is any authenticity there? What is ‘black’?” (*Raising Cain*, pp. 44–45). For the scholarship that Lhamon is operating both with and against, in terms of theatrical minstrelsy, see Eric Lott, *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1995); and Robert C. Toll, *Blacking Up: The Minstrel Show in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1974). In relation to poetry, see Jones, *Strange Talk*; and Jean Wagner, *Black Poets of the United States: From Paul Laurence Dunbar to Langston Hughes*, trans. Kenneth Douglas (Urbana and Chicago: Univ. of Illinois Press, 1973).

<sup>21</sup> On the rise of romantic racialism and its decline in American culture, see Fredrickson, *Black Image*, p. 329. Such scholars as Eric Lott have appropriated the term “romantic racialism” (vis-à-vis “sentimentalism”) and its permutations to define minstrel ideology and performance.

stereotype of the most sentimental school of proslavery paternalists and plantation romancers" (*Black Image*, pp. 101, 102). Racialism subscribes to the doctrine that associates certain "heritable characteristics" and distinctive cultural "traits and tendencies" with, for our purpose, the African Diaspora.<sup>22</sup> In order to show how and why African American literature had to reflect "romantic racialism" to be legitimate, authentic, or "entirely black," I employ the term "racial realism" to begin illuminating the cultural cooperation of racialism and realism during the postbellum period.<sup>23</sup>

Let us be clear about how realism can be racial. Realism is generally "a pseudo-objective *version* of reality," according to Raymond Williams, "a version that will be found to depend, finally, on a particular phase of history or on a particular set of relationships."<sup>24</sup> Racial realism likewise suggests that racialism arbitrates the accuracy or truth of cultural representations of the African Diaspora. The cultural pervasion of minstrelsy across the United States connected racialism and realism in such a way that a hybrid cultural genre, minstrel realism, formed and defined its own racial verisimilitude through the exploits of minstrelsy to romanticize or sentimentalize race.

Minstrel realism crystallized in the postbellum era of Reconstruction. Starting after the Civil War, the daunting federal program tried to transform the antebellum "Old" South from an isolationist Democratic region that endorsed slavery and racial inequality into a "New" South, or a nationalist Republican entity that promoted free labor and racial equality. The racial-political progress afforded by Reconstruction incited anti-Black feeling among many Anglo-American citizens, many of whom developed strategies for undermining the federal program. Such racial and political upheaval influenced the way

<sup>22</sup> See Kwame Anthony Appiah, "The Conservation of 'Race,'" *Black American Literature Forum*, 23 (1989), 44. While other kinds of diasporas (Anglo-Saxon, Asian, etc.) also warrant racial recognition, I am using "race" in reference to the bio-cultural representations of the African Diaspora.

<sup>23</sup> My literary-critical use of racial realism differs in kind and intention from Charles W. Mills's philosophical use and Derrick Bell's legal critiques. See Charles W. Mills, *Blackness Visible: Essays on Philosophy and Race* (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1998), pp. 45–48, 56–57, 59; and Derrick Bell, *Faces at the Bottom of the Well: The Permanence of Racism* (New York: BasicBooks, 1992), pp. 47, 98–99.

<sup>24</sup> Williams, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society*, rev. ed. (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1976, 1983), p. 261.

in which Americans engaged popular culture, especially minstrelsy. Minstrelsy drew upon an iconographic wealth of "Old Negro" uncles, mammies, and "chillun" dressing, talking, behaving, and thinking in inferior ways. Caricatures of this sort, whether from theatrical or literary forms of minstrelsy, oversimplified African American subjectivity and experiences and lampooned the idea of African American assimilability to American civilization.<sup>25</sup> At the same time, scholars have shown that audiences of minstrel shows viewed African American caricatures as "faithful representation[s] of reality" (Wagner, *Black Poets*, p. 47); Eric Lott notes that "often, in the minds of many, blackface singers and dancers became, simply, 'negroes.' . . . and there are several existing accounts of white theatergoers mistaking blackface performers for blacks" (*Love and Theft*, p. 20). According to Gavin Jones, "the idea of the plantation tradition," including blackface minstrelsy, "worked by blurring the line between memory and reality; nostalgic stereotypes were politically powerful because they were so often taken as truths" (*Strange Talk*, p. 195).

Racial realism applied even more to Black minstrel performers than to White minstrel performers in blackface.<sup>26</sup> In his monumental 1974 study *Blackening Up*, Robert C. Toll has examined more than any other scholar of minstrelsy the phenomenon and implications of Black minstrel performers in nineteenth-century America.<sup>27</sup> According to Toll, "colored"

<sup>25</sup> For an analysis of the full range of Black stereotypes, see Gaines, *The Southern Plantation*; Fredrickson, *Black Image*; Catherine Juanita Starke, *Black Portraiture in American Fiction: Stock Characters, Archetypes, and Individuals* (New York: Basic Books, 1971); and Jean Fagan Yellin, *The Intricate Knot: Black Figures in American Literature, 1776-1863* (New York: New York Univ. Press, 1972). For the relationship of these stereotypes to those of White Southern women and men, see Susan J. Tracy, *In the Master's Eye: Representations of Women, Blacks, and Poor Whites in Antebellum Southern Literature* (Amherst: Univ. of Massachusetts Press, 1995).

<sup>26</sup> According to Toll: "To further distinguish themselves from blackfaced whites, most early black minstrels did not use burnt cork, except for the endmen who used it as a comic mask" (*Blackening Up*, p. 200).

<sup>27</sup> Toll talks specifically about Black minstrels in two chapters of *Blackening Up*: chapter 7, "Black Men Take the Stage" (pp. 195-233); and chapter 8, "Puttin' on the Mask: The Content of Black Minstrelsy" (pp. 234-69). The book also includes an invaluable appendix, "Chronological List of Black Minstrel Troupes, 1855-1890" (pp. 275-80). The thesis of Toll's work on Black minstrels has yet to be refuted. Indeed, in *Love and Theft* Eric Lott, for example, has rightfully led the contemporary scholarly movement

troupes between 1855 and 1890 developed a couple of self-marketing strategies that cemented the link between Black performance and American popular culture. The first strategy included framing their advertisements with extensive quotes or paraphrases from reviews that praised the equality in entertainment value between Black minstrels and White minstrels in blackface. The second involved asserting, again in their advertisements, the racial realism and authenticity of their shows by selling the idea that Black minstrels had lived on the plantation and were incorporating their experiences into their performances. These approaches led to remarkable results in the public perception of Black minstrel performers. "Endlessly using the terms 'novelty,' 'curiosity,' 'genuine,' and 'bonafide,'" Toll notes, "reviewers grasped for words to express the unique appeal of these 'authentic' ex-slaves" (*Blacking Up*, p. 201). Toll goes on to say that Black minstrels often played out the racial stereotypes of Blacks that were already entrenched and deemed as credible in American culture with the help of blackface minstrelsy. Thus, White audiences viewed the Black minstrels "as natural, spontaneous people on exhibit rather than as professional entertainers," and "as simply being themselves on stage, without artifice, cultivation, or control" (pp. 201–2). As a result, throughout the nation "many white critics questioned the white minstrels' qualification to perform Negro, especially plantation, material," and this doubt, which spread in White public circles, became "one of the major reasons white minstrels sharply decreased the plantation material in their shows and moved toward variety" (pp. 201–2). Black minstrelsy was culturally produced and consumed as a clear, unobstructed window into African American life, primarily because it conformed to preset expectations for minstrel performance.

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to expose "the historical contradictions and social conflicts the minstrel show opened up," an approach that complicates the general revisionist approach of Toll, among others, which sees "minstrelsy as racial domination" and, problematically, as "univocal" (*Love and Theft*, pp. 7, 8). But, Lott absolutely agrees with Toll on the subject of Black minstrels: "Robert Toll makes it clear that blacks in blackface, far from providing an immediate corrective to minstrel types, actually reinforced them, lent them credibility, no doubt because the newcomers had to fit the ideological forms the minstrel show had itself helped to generate, but also because of the impact of racial ideology on even black performers" (*Love and Theft*, p. 104).

The improvement in racial realism and authenticity applicable to the transition from blackface minstrelsy to Black minstrelsy is analogous to the transition from the so-called plantation tradition of Anglo-American literature to marketable African American literary realism. It goes without saying that the plantation tradition borrowed from the same pool of stereotypes that enabled minstrel performances of race.<sup>28</sup> Coined by Francis Pendleton Gaines's *The Southern Plantation* (1925), perhaps the first book-length scholarly treatment of the subject, the plantation tradition also developed in response to the racial politics of Reconstruction. David W. Blight explains:

In an era of tremendous social change and anxiety, a popular literature that embraced the romance of the Lost Cause, the idyll of the Old South's plantation world of orderly and happy race relations, and the mutuality of the 'soldiers' faith' flowed from mass-market magazines as well as the nation's most prominent publishing houses. The age of machines, rapid urbanization, and labor unrest produced a huge audience for a literature of escape into a pre-Civil War, exotic South that, all but 'lost,' was now the object of enormous nostalgia.<sup>29</sup>

The plantation tradition referred mostly to the popular literature produced by Anglo-American Southerners, including the poetry of Thomas Dunn English, the brothers Sidney and Clifford Lanier, and Irwin Russell; the novels of George Tucker, James Ewell Heath, Harriet Beecher Stowe, Francis Hopkinson Smith, and Mark Twain; and the shorter fiction of John Esten Cooke, John Pendleton Kennedy, William Gilmore Simms, and most notably Joel Chandler Harris and Thomas Nelson Page, both of whom incidentally regarded Russell as a literary mentor. While the works of these authors are not entirely homogeneous, Blight suggests that their plot constructions, characterizations, settings, symbolism, and themes consistently romanticize the plantation societies and cultures of the Old

<sup>28</sup> Lott has already shown this idea with respect to George Washington Cable's lectures to postbellum middle-class audiences (see *Love and Theft*, p. 31).

<sup>29</sup> Blight, *Race and Reunion: The Civil War in American Memory* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard Univ. Press, 2001), p. 211.

South in order to communicate and alleviate national anxieties over sectional reunion between the South and the North.<sup>30</sup>

Toward the 1890s, with the plantation tradition (a genre previously dominated by Anglo-American writers), Anglo-American literature was shifting toward the extreme expressions of White supremacist anxieties over brutish and unyielding slaves who rejected the concept of Anglo-Saxon superiority.<sup>31</sup> Aside from the representational politics operating within Anglo-American literature, how and why does this transition connect to what was happening to African American literature? I venture that toward the end of the nineteenth century, minstrel realism characterized realistic African American literature. This association came at a time when, according to Henry B. Wonham, "many of the 'ethnic' writers who moved in Howells' orbit, including Charles Chesnutt, Abraham Cahan, Paul Laurence Dunbar, and Hjalmar Boyesen, employ the representational logic of ethnic caricature to mark out the boundaries of a coherent social reality."<sup>32</sup> The appeal of such caricatures had little to do with their racism. Howells's criticism of the plantation tradition as trying to "tickle our prejudices and lull our judgment, or . . . coddle our sensibilities, or pamper our gross appetites for the marvelous" arguably denounces racism.<sup>33</sup> Howells nonetheless belongs to a larger ideological tra-

<sup>30</sup> On the lack of homogeneity of the plantation tradition, see Wayne Mixon, *Southern Writers and the New South Movement, 1865-1913* (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 1980), p. 76: Mixon shows that Harris was not entirely pro-slavery. Mixon (*Southern Writers*, p. 98) and Jones (*Strange Talk*, pp. 122-33) have also revealed the complexity of George Washington Cable, who occasionally has been placed in the plantation tradition. For more general discussions of the imagery of the plantation tradition, see Gaines, *The Southern Plantation*; Wagner, *Black Poets*; Tracy, *In the Master's Eye*; and Blight, *Race and Reunion*.

<sup>31</sup> See Thomas Nelson Page, *Red Rock* (New York: C. Scribner's Sons, 1898); and Sarah Barnwell Elliott, *An Incident, and Other Happenings* (New York and London: Harper and Brothers, 1899). About thirty years after Francis Galton, in the United States social proclamations of White human superiority became the eugenic foundation for the institution of programs sterilizing genetically inferior groups of people. Subsequent Nordic supremacist ideology echoed these proclamations.

<sup>32</sup> Wonham, "'An Art to Be Cultivated': Ethnic Caricature and American Literary Realism," *American Literary Realism*, 32 (2000), 207.

<sup>33</sup> Howells, quoted in Alan Trachtenberg, *The Incorporation of America: Culture and Society in the Gilded Age* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1982), p. 185. Trachtenberg does not give a source for the quotation.

dition of romantic racialism that anointed authenticity, both of authorship and of textual representation, as the determinant of African American literary realism. The American literary market of the 1890s—particularly critics, editors, and publishers—likewise welcomed African American writers to the plantation tradition because of the accuracy of their orthographies of dialect. Dialect served as one of the marketable protocols of minstrel performance and eventually of authentic African American literature, exemplified by the poems of Paul Laurence Dunbar.

A close reading of the text and context of Howells's "discovery" of Dunbar in *Harper's Weekly* will attempt to prove this point, serving as a case study for how and why the continued appreciation for minstrelsy in American literary criticism had unified realism with romantic racialism in postbellum African American literature. Contrary to recent scholarly arguments minimizing his complicity, Howells ushered in this aesthetic union for the sake of African American literature in the late nineteenth century, although he had rejected this union for Anglo-American literature.<sup>34</sup>



An extraordinary set of circumstances enabled Howells to influence the direction of African American literature in such a remarkable way. First of all, the 27 June 1896 issue of *Harper's Weekly* sold out on newsstands everywhere. Numerous readers demanded the magazine's report on the presidential nomination of William McKinley at the Republican national convention in St. Louis, Missouri. Even Dunbar failed to secure his own copy of the so-subtitled "journal of civilization," which also detailed current events and featured edi-

<sup>34</sup> Nettels argues that Dunbar had complained about market demands for Black dialect writings three years before Howells's review and that Howells had considered Dunbar "to possess powers of feeling and imagination that mark the great artist in any language. He judged Dunbar not only as a black poet—as 'the first negro who has been able to deal objectively with negroism'—but as an 'absolute poet' whose 'excellences are positive and not comparative'" (*Language, Race, and Social Class*, pp. 83, 85). As I will show, however, Dunbar's symbolism as racially authentic overrode almost all other gestures Howells might have made toward the poet's general excellence.

torial columns by prominent writers of the United States and around the world. Second, Howells's reviews wielded enough power to make or break an emerging writer's career. According to Van Wyck Brooks, "Howells was perhaps the only critic in the history of American literature who has been able to create reputations by a single review."<sup>35</sup> The wide circulation of this issue of *Harper's Weekly* further empowered Howells to reach readers beyond the regular audience of his columns or the magazine in general, and thereby he was able to influence readers' expectations and interpretations of Dunbar and *Majors and Minors*.

The special circumstances of *Harper's Weekly* led to the commercialization not only of Howells's hyperbole about the racial authenticity and precedence of *Majors and Minors*, but also of his inaccurate and therefore problematic insinuations about African American literary history. In Howells's declaration that, prior to *Majors and Minors*, Dunbar's "race has not hitherto made its mark in his art," the Dean neglects several African American writers who were notable in various intellectual circles, both in America and abroad: Phillis Wheatley and George Moses Horton at the turn of the nineteenth century; William Wells Brown and Frederick Douglass in the mid nineteenth century; Albery Allson Whitman, James M. Whitfield, Charles Chesnutt, and Frances Ellen Watkins Harper in the latter part of the century; and international writers of African descent, including early-nineteenth-century authors Alexandre Dumas (*père* and *fils*) in France and Aleksandr Pushkin in Russia. Wheatley, Horton, Whitman, Whitfield, and Harper in particular published substantial amounts of poetry, while Dunbar's African American contemporaries, who primarily wrote dialect poetry, include James Edwin Campbell, Daniel Webster Davis, and J. Mord Allen.

Of all these writers, only Douglass, Chesnutt, Dumas, and Pushkin appeared in essays that Howells wrote elsewhere. None, as we shall soon see, could match Dunbar's literary potential in Howells's eyes—not even Chesnutt. Though Chesnutt was a writer who was well respected for publishing in the *Atlantic Monthly* several Black-dialect short stories (which he

<sup>35</sup> Brooks, *The Confident Years: 1885–1915* (New York: Dutton, 1952), p. 142n.



would later compile for his first book, *The Conjure Woman* [1899]), he did not appear as racially authentic as he sounded in these volumes. In a 10 November 1901 letter to Henry Black Fuller, a Chicago novelist, Howells suggests that Chesnutt could pass for White: "You know he is a negro, though you wouldn't know it from seeing him."<sup>36</sup> Thinking similarly, anthologists in the early twentieth century tended to omit Chesnutt from the African American canon, due to his ostensible lack of Black authenticity (see Figure 2).<sup>37</sup> Thus, Dunbar's impact on African American canon formation at the turn of the century—a period spanning from his rise to prominence in 1896 to the eventual disappearance of his work from national periodicals and from anthologized canons of American literature by World War I—exceeded Chesnutt's, insofar as Dunbar's perceived racial "purity" enabled critics and publishers to authenticate his dialect writing in ways initially inapplicable to the dialect writing of Chesnutt and other African American authors of ostensibly mixed racial ancestry.<sup>38</sup>

In Howells's eyes, the sort of interracial complexion that characterized not only Chesnutt, but also Dumas and Pushkin, disqualified them from the tradition of authentic African American literature. In his introduction to Dunbar's third book of poems, *Lyrics of Lowly Life* (1896)—an introduction that in-

<sup>36</sup> William Dean Howells, letter to Henry B. Fuller, 10 November 1901, in Howells, *Selected Letters, Volume 4: 1892–1901*, ed. Thomas Wortham with Christoph K. Lohmann, David J. Nordloh, and Jerry Herron (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1981), p. 274.

<sup>37</sup> Charles Chesnutt in 1879, aged 21; from Richard H. Brodhead, ed., *The Journals of Charles W. Chesnutt* (Durham, N.C.: Duke Univ. Press, 1993), p. 32. Michael North points out that C. Alphonso Smith, in his essay on "Negro Dialect" in the 1918 *Cambridge History of American Literature*, "dismisses Booker T. Washington and W. E. B. Du Bois not because they did not write in dialect but because they were not of 'unmixed negro blood,' and he ignores Charles W. Chesnutt altogether" (North, *The Dialect of Modernism: Race, Language, and Twentieth-Century Literature* [New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1994], p. 22).

<sup>38</sup> This is not to say, however, that an African American writer such as Chesnutt did not regard himself as a racial insider. See McElrath, "W. D. Howells and Race," p. 493n, which discusses Chesnutt's unpublished essays, "An Inside View of the Negro Question," and "The Negro's Answer to the Negro Question," along with Howells's praise of Chesnutt's racial insider-ness in the essay, "Mr. Charles W. Chesnutt's Stories" (1900). Chesnutt, however, was reluctant to disclose his racial identity at the outset of his career.

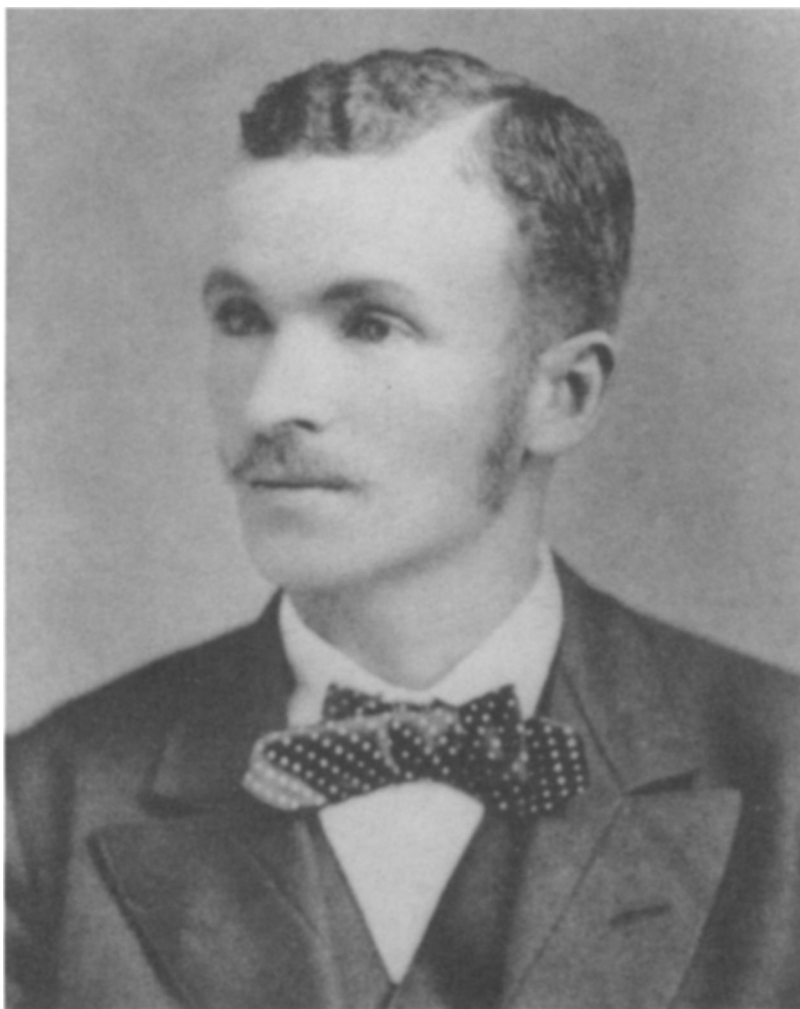


FIGURE 2. Charles Chesnutt. Reprinted by permission of Special Collections, Franklin University Library.

corporate but also modifies his review of *Majors and Minors*—Howells argues that though Dumas and Pushkin antedated Dunbar as renowned writers of African descent, “these were both mulattoes, who might have been supposed to derive their qualities from white blood . . . and who were the creatures of an

environment more favorable to their literary development.”<sup>39</sup> Dunbar, by contrast, was more authentic:

the father and mother of the first poet of his race in our language were negroes without admixture of white blood. . . .

. . . Paul Dunbar was the only man of pure African blood and of American civilization to feel the negro life æsthetically and express it lyrically. . . .

. . . There is a precious difference of temperament between the races which it would be a great pity ever to lose, and . . . this is best preserved and most charmingly suggested by Mr. Dunbar in those pieces of his where he studies the moods and traits of his race in its own accent of our English.

(“Introduction,” pp. vii–ix)

Howells’s investment in the discourse of blood in his introduction to *Lyrics of Lowly Life* followed in the wake of the Supreme Court decision for *Plessy v. Ferguson*, which legalized the biological discourse of interracialism and supported public notions that one could subject racial identity to biological measurement. This discourse both pervaded the literary criticism and art of African American authors and determined the politics of racial representation. By the time that Howells wrote his introduction to *Lyrics of Lowly Life* between September and December 1896, the biological language of *Plessy v. Ferguson* had already seeped into American popular consciousness for close to half a year.<sup>40</sup> For Howells one drop of “Black blood” did not so much detract from the intellectual potency of “White blood”; rather, this drop became, in its “unmixed” state, a racial virtue—just as it was in the minstrel industry.

Dunbar’s status of “Poet Laureate of the Negro Race,” the highest distinction enjoyed by any African American author in the late nineteenth century, resulted from Howells’s authenticating review. At the same time, Dunbar’s *Majors and Minors* utilized the same strategy of racial self-authentication behind

<sup>39</sup> William Dean Howells, “Introduction to *Lyrics of Lowly Life*,” in *The Complete Poems of Paul Laurence Dunbar*, ed. Dunbar (1895; rpt. New York: Dodd Mead and Co., 1970), p. viii.

<sup>40</sup> For documents covering the responses in the press and by African American intellectuals after the case, see *Plessy v. Ferguson: A Brief History with Documents*, ed. Brook Thomas (Boston: Bedford Books, 1997), pp. 127–67.

the authorial frontispieces of, for example, Douglass's three autobiographies: *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* (1845), *My Bondage and My Freedom* (1855), and *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass* (1881, 1893). Just as Douglass, according to John Stauffer, "relied heavily on portrait photography and the picture-making process in general to create an authentic and intelligent black persona,"<sup>41</sup> so Dunbar achieved a similar effect and became, in the eyes of contemporary reviewers, an icon of Black authenticity. The section "Humor and Dialect" in *Majors and Minors* tantalized Howells and his critical contemporaries with its minstrel realism, the cultural genre best capable of inaugurating a postbellum tradition of authentic African American literature.



The appeal of minstrel realism and the characterization of Black minstrel performers in the postbellum nineteenth century help to explain Howells's phenotypical and physiognomic interpretation of Dunbar's frontispiece in *Majors and Minors*. Howells's description belongs to a long-standing Western intellectual discourse that defines racial authenticity as a mythic preservation of African purity across genealogical space and time. This discourse influences Howells's embrace of *Majors and Minors* as a potential artistic manifestation of this authenticity, and therefore as an unprecedented "human event" for a race only one generation removed from slavery and striving for cultural acknowledgment in the New World.<sup>42</sup> But "Majors and Minors," the first and largest section

<sup>41</sup> Stauffer, *The Black Hearts of Men: Radical Abolitionists and the Transformation of Race* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 2002), p. 50. E. W. Metcalf, Jr., lists nearly sixty articles published in over forty different newspapers and magazines between the years of 1892, when Dunbar first attracted interest by reading poems at the Western Association of Writers in Dayton, Ohio, and 1906, when the poet passed away (see Metcalf, *Paul Laurence Dunbar: A Bibliography* [Metuchen, N.J.: Scarecrow Press, 1975], pp. 106–12). These critics often emphasize Dunbar's literary accomplishments in light of the review of *Majors and Minors*; his other books of poetry, songs, and fiction; his lectures across the nation and abroad; and other biographical information shedding light on the privileges and troubles the poet experienced due to his African ancestry.

<sup>42</sup> See Stauffer, *The Black Hearts of Men*, pp. 52–56, for succinct historical contexts for such Western intellectual discourses about racial authenticity. Stauffer discusses not

of the book *Majors and Minors*, is the moment when Dunbar is, in Howells's words, "least himself," or least the "pure African type." The frontispiece and this section, in short, contradict one another and complicate Howells's expectations.

Dunbar is arguably "least himself" for most of *Majors and Minors*. The internal section "Majors and Minors" comprises seventy prayers, lyrics, odes, ballads, and sonnets, amounting to nearly seventy-five percent of the book's ninety-five total poems. The section demonstrates formal—or what Howells calls "literary"—English. Aside from the poem "A Corn Song" (*Majors and Minors*, pp. 58–59), in which formal verse encases dialect songs, this section employs the diction, rhyme schemes, and metrical structures of classical Western poetry. Themes of love, life, dreams, nature, and divinity explored by "Ione" (pp. 7–16), "The Change Has Come" (p. 19), "A Drowsy Day" (pp. 25–26), "The Sparrow" (p. 26), "The Meadow Lark" (p. 29), and "A Creed and Not a Creed" (pp. 34–35) hark back to the work of British Romantic poets like Lord Byron, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, John Keats, Percy Bysshe Shelley, and William Wordsworth. Several poems, at the same time, counterbalance these universal narratives with specific racial and historical references to events, concepts, and figures. "Frederick Douglass" (pp. 17–19), for example, focuses on Douglass's heroism. The speaker of "We Wear the Mask" (p. 21) suggests that the "grins and lies" of African Americans disguise collective inner pain and resentment toward their oppressed status. "Ode to Ethiopia" (pp. 23–24) hails Ethiopia as the "Mother Race" from which African Americans descended. "The Colored Soldiers" (pp. 38–40) reimagines the effort of African American soldiers in the Civil War. "A Corn Song" envisions fieldhands returning home at dusk and resting their weary bodies.

The thematic and technical range of "Majors and Minors"

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only the rise of photography and other kinds of visual production in the 1850s but also such best-selling and influential books as Josiah Clark Nott and George R. Gliddon, *Types of Mankind; or, Ethnological Researches*, 6th ed. (Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott, Grambo and Co., 1854), which argues for the physiognomic similarities between gorillas and people of African descent. For an earlier historical context about the critical reception of African American literature, see Henry Louis Gates, Jr., *Figures in Black: Words, Signs, and the "Racial" Self* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1987), pp. 3–28 and 61–79 for the racist theories of the Enlightenment.

reflects the range that one finds in Dunbar's other books of poetry. In most of them he is "least himself," too. His first three books published poems in "literary English" seventy-eight percent of the time. Fifty of the fifty-six total poems in his first book, *Oak and Ivy* (1893), are in formal English. Dunbar's third book, *Lyrics of Lowly Life*, a combination of the poems of *Oak and Ivy* and *Majors and Minors*, contains eighty poems in formal English. Poems in formal English likewise fill Dunbar's later books, *Lyrics of Hearthside* (1899), *Lyrics of Love and Laughter* (1903), and *Lyrics of Sunshine and Shadow* (1905). Over the course of his professional literary career, Dunbar committed himself more to this kind of poetry than to any other.

The finding that Dunbar tended to be "least himself" in *Majors and Minors* must have puzzled Howells. In his review Howells states: "Most of these pieces are like most of the pieces of the most young poets, cries of passionate aspiration and disappointment, more or less personal or universal, which except for the negro face of the author one could not find specially notable." Few, if any, of the "young poets" whom Howells has in mind descend from Africa. Prior to Dunbar, Howells never associated romantic aspirations with African American literature in formal English; he did so with only Anglo-American literature in mind. Little did Howells know that such romanticism characterizes a well-established tradition of "neoclassical" African American writers publishing in the postbellum era, one that included Islay Walden, Henrietta Cordelia Ray, Eloise Thompson, George Marion McClellan, and Timothy Thomas Fortune.<sup>43</sup> But, in Howells's eyes, classical formal structures and "universal" romantic themes, associated with the Anglo-American and Anglo-British poets read by both Howells and these African American writers, fail to capture racial realism. The kind of racial realism found in Dunbar's "Frederick Douglass," "We Wear the Mask," "Ode to Ethiopia," "The Colored Soldiers," and "A Corn Song" does not count. Rather, the kind

<sup>43</sup> According to Joan R. Sherman, their verses "show a decided bias for neoclassical decorum, heightened poetic diction, and technical virtuosity. . . . The poetry is integrationist, at times explicitly, more often through conscious adherence to such white themes, techniques, and ethical attitudes" (Sherman, *Invisible Poets: Afro-Americans of the Nineteenth Century* [Urbana and Chicago: Univ. of Illinois Press, 1974], p. xxvi).

found in "Humor and Dialect," the small second section of *Majors and Minors*, shows Dunbar when he is "most himself," according to Howells. The primary prosodic difference between "Majors and Minors" and "Humor and Dialect" lies not in the degree to which the former is "literary" and the latter is not. "Humor and Dialect" is literary; it incorporates the same complex metrical structures and rhyme schemes located in the formal poems of "Majors and Minors." The difference lies in the racial politics of literary orthography.

"Humor and Dialect" belongs to the local-color traditions of American dialect poetry, which includes the works of James Russell Lowell, Ella Wheeler Wilcox, Eugene Field, and James Whitcomb Riley. Dunbar studied the essential phonetic nuances distinguishing the vernacular of Blacks and Whites, Midwesterners and Northeasterners, Virginians and Mississippians, even the Irish and the British. In the nineteenth century, literary orthography encapsulated not only racial politics but regional and national identity politics as well, since several kinds of ethnic and regional dialects were being spoken all across the United States.<sup>44</sup> The regional origin and experiences of writers, it was said, predetermined the exactitude, credibility, and aesthetics of their local-color dialect writing.<sup>45</sup> According to this definition, "Humor and Dialect" should have qualified for this genre of American literature.

The historical record shows, however, that local color signified something quite different for ethnic minorities. By the late nineteenth century, vaudeville shows exoticized Jewish, Irish, German, and Ethiopian language and culture. By reiterating the belief that true Americans descended from Anglo-Saxon England, these shows conspired in Othering, or making

<sup>44</sup> According to Myron Simon, Dunbar "derived from his mother some indication of black speech in Kentucky," where she and Dunbar's father were plantation slaves. The poet also "had direct knowledge of the speech of black communities in Ohio, Kentucky, Maryland, and the District of Columbia" ("Dunbar and Dialect Poetry," p. 123).

<sup>45</sup> In their collection, Harry R. Warfel and G. Harrison Orians introduce the aesthetic contingency of local color on regional authenticity: "Merit depends upon an author's knowledge, insight, and artistry" (see *American Local-Color Stories*, ed. Warfel and Orians [New York: American Book Co., 1941], p. x). Warfel and Orians reiterate the long-standing definitions of local color established in early-nineteenth-century France (*la couleur locale*) and refashioned toward the end of the century by such American authors as James Lane Allen and Hamlin Garland.

non-normative, certain races or nationalities. The performance of dialect in American popular entertainment facilitated this cultural conspiracy, especially against African Americans.<sup>46</sup> Minstrelsy in particular associated African American dialect with romanticizing myths of African American intellectual inferiority and verbal inarticulateness. At the heart of this connection is the racial essentialism of dialect—that is, the irrevocable role of dialect in prevailing cultural myths of African American society as a racial group, and subordinately a regional group, of traits and values.

Howells's *Harper's Weekly* review draws upon these myths. He plays up the racial authenticity of Dunbar's dialect while playing down its local-color possibilities, even though the poet (like Howells) was a native Ohioan and sensitive to regional phonetics. At first Howells seems to laud both the racial and regional "ears" of Dunbar: "He [Dunbar] calls his little book *Majors and Minors*; the *Majors* being in our American English, and the *Minors* being in dialect, the dialect of the middle-south negroes and the middle-south whites; for the poet's ear has been quick for the accent of his neighbors as well as for that of his kindred."<sup>47</sup> This praise, however, belies the degree to which Howells is quick to racialize the poet's dialect, regard Dunbar as more African than American, and dismiss as more anomalous than the norm his formal English poems in the section "Majors and Minors."

Infatuated with the poetic potential of otherness, Howells creates a rhetorical analogy between Dunbar and Robert Burns, the late-eighteenth-century Scottish poet who once wrote Scottish dialect lyrics. Like Dunbar, Burns achieved a command of dialect through his childhood engagement with orally transmitted folksongs and folktales. An autodidact, Burns soon mastered the art of versification and trope. His 1786 *Poems, Chiefly in the Scottish Dialect* demonstrates a poetic expertise

<sup>46</sup> See Jones, *Strange Talk*, pp. 177–81.

<sup>47</sup> Several poems in the "Humor and Dialect" section do not represent such racial expression, however. Dunbar did not write all of the poems in the "Humor and Dialect" section in dialect: some appear in formal English, falling solely into the humorous category, including "The Corn-Stalk Fiddle" (*Majors and Minors*, pp. 116–18), "Curtain" (p. 118), "The Made to Order Smile" (pp. 126–27), and "The Dilettante: A Modern Type" (p. 134).



applauded by Scottish lay folk and intellectual critics alike, elevating Burns to the status of premier Scottish dialect and realist poet of his country in the late eighteenth century. But Howells recommends that one should read "Burns when he was most Burns, when he was most Scotch, when he was most peasant." Likewise, one should read Dunbar because, in Howells's words,

He is so far as I know, the first man of his color to study his race objectively, to analyze it to himself, and then to represent it in art as he felt it and found it to be: to represent it humorously, yet tenderly, and above all so faithfully that we know the portrait to be undeniably like.

Dunbar is most Dunbar when he is most Negro, Howells would have said. Dunbar resides in the race, living literally among its members, near enough for intimate reportage; yet he also belongs to the race, emotionally, psychically, and spiritually attached to them. In the dialect poems of his own "kindred," Howells suggests, Dunbar possesses greatest racial "authority."

The three poems that Howells cites and quotes at length—"The Party" (which he mistitles "The Pahty"), "When de Co'n Pone's Hot," and "When Malindy Sings"—illustrate the romantic and sentimental effect of Dunbar's dialect poetry. Howells has reason to believe that "The Party," the introductory dialect poem of the "Humor and Dialect" section, is "black." Including a "house-boy," a "dahky," a "colo'ed preachah," and many more, the African American protagonists, including the speaker, represent "All de folks f'om fou' plantations" that "had a gread big pahty down to Tom's de othah night" (*Majors and Minors*, pp. 89–95). The other three poems that Howells adores—"When de Co'n Pone's Hot" (pp. 111–12), a tribute to freshly cooked corn bread; "The Deserted Plantation" (pp. 118–20), a post-emancipation account of a slave territory; and "When Malindy Sings" (pp. 138–40), a testimony to the overwhelming vocal talent of Malindy—all display the suggestively African American dialect orthography of "The Party." Howells goes so far as to say that "When Malindy Sings" is "purely and intensely black . . . in its feeling." In general, Howells appreciates the "pure sentiment," "primitive human na-

ture," "jolly rush," "vivid picturesqueness," and "broad characterization" of Dunbar's dialect poetry, qualities that make African American folk seem "simple," "sensuous," and "joyous" in nature. This is the same kind of interpretive language that surrounded Black minstrelsy a couple of decades earlier.

It is ironic that Howells's reading of Dunbar is inconsistent with his historical disregard of literary sentiment and romance in the promotion of Anglo-American literary realism, whose fundamental aspects he defined in *Criticism and Fiction* (1891). Howells's opinion characterizes the stance of a larger intellectual movement in the late nineteenth century endorsing the "economy" of realism and critiquing the "excess" of romance and sentiment.<sup>48</sup> By contrast, Howells celebrated the romantic and sentimental excesses of racial realism in both his own writings and in his criticism of both Anglo-American and African American literature.

For example, Michele Birnbaum, Jeffery A. Clymer, Giulia M. Fabi, Joseph R. McElrath Jr., Elsa Nettels, Kenneth W. Warren, and Henry B. Wonham have already shown that Howells's earlier fiction—namely, the short story "Mrs. Johnson" (1868) and the two novels *A Hazard of New Fortunes* (1890) and *An Imperative Duty* (1893)—portray African Americans in romantic, sentimental, or other problematic ways that suggest not only a vulgar proclivity for minstrel realism but also the subtle prejudices (not all pejorative) he held about race and biraciality. Moreover, according to Wonham's investigation of the letters between Howells and Twain, as late as 1908 Howells was advising Twain to read for literary inspiration George Ade's *Pink Marsh* (1897), a "novel about a black shoeshine boy in Chicago" who spoke in admirably "rich dialect, a version of the quaint broken English spoken by the 'resplendent darkeys in livery' who populate the dim backgrounds of Howells's own

<sup>48</sup> For incisive analyses of the terms—romanticism, melodrama, bizarre plots, and sensationalism—by which sentimentalism is known and of how these terms have historically contradicted the terms of realism, see Hildegard Hoeller, "Economy and Excess: An Introduction," in her *Edith Wharton's Dialogue with Realism and Sentimental Fiction* (Gainesville: Univ. Press of Florida, 2000), p. 13; and Elissa Greenwald, *Realism and the Romance: Nathaniel Hawthorne, Henry James, and American Fiction* (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1989), pp. 3–7.

fiction.”<sup>49</sup> Finally, in his late critical writings—especially in his criticism of Chesnutt’s fiction and Booker T. Washington’s autobiographical writing—Howells romanticized African American psychology and sociology.<sup>50</sup> Howells’s *Harper’s Weekly* review of *Majors and Minors* also links to his later commentary on racial purity. In “An Exemplary Citizen,” a review of Booker T. Washington’s work, Howells expresses his long-standing conviction that three kinds of African American writers existed, according to racial concentrations of African blood: “Mr. Dunbar is entirely black, and Mr. Chesnutt, to the unskilled eye, is entirely white. Mr. Washington, as Douglass was, is a half-blood. But they are all colored people, and it is only just to credit their mother-race with their uncommon powers and virtues.”<sup>51</sup> It is not a coincidence that Howells characterized Dunbar here as “entirely black,” or that five years earlier he wrote to Ripley Hitchcock, in nearly the same phrasing, that “a book of entirely black verse” from the poet would succeed.

Howells’s obsession with this idea of “entirely black verse” causes him to misrepresent certain verses as “black” in “Humor and Dialect.” In one of the section’s poems, “When Malindy Sings,” the only marker of racial realism is the spiritual that Malindy sings, “Swing Low, Sweet Chariot.” The song does not guarantee that Malindy herself, or any of the other figures in the poem, descends from Africa. In fact, along with the poems that Howells calls ostensibly “non-negro dialect pieces”—“Speaking o’ Christmus” (which he mistitles “Speakin’ o’ Christmas” [*Majors and Minors*, pp. 141–43]), “After a Visit”

<sup>49</sup> Henry B. Wonham, “‘I Want a Real Coon’: Mark Twain and Late-Nineteenth-Century Ethnic Caricature,” *American Literature*, 72 (2000), 120. The quotation “resplendent darkies” is from William Dean Howells, *Letters Home* (New York: Harper and Bros., 1903), p. 11.

<sup>50</sup> William Andrews writes: “Through his reviews of Dunbar’s poetry, Chesnutt’s first stories, and Washington’s autobiography, Howells developed a fairly consistent psychological profile of the Afro-American consciousness, one which emphasized the black man’s ‘conservative’ temperament, his positive outlook, his ‘patience’ in the face of injustice, his ‘unfailing sense of humor,’ and his freedom from ‘bitterness’ and subversive impulses” (“William Dean Howells and Charles W. Chesnutt,” p. 335). See also W. D. Howells, “Mr. Charles W. Chesnutt’s Stories,” *Atlantic Monthly*, 85 (1900), 699–701; and Howells, “A Psychological Counter-Current in Recent Fiction,” *North American Review*, 173 (1901), 872–88.

<sup>51</sup> William Dean Howells, “An Exemplary Citizen,” *North American Review*, 173 (1901), 280.

(pp. 124–25), “Lonesome” (pp. 113–14), and “The Spellin’ Bee” (pp. 95–101)—several other poems are not “black,” though their situation in the section “Humor and Dialect” compels lumping them together as such.

Howells’s review generated much critical excitement over the implications of *Majors and Minors*. The repercussions were immediate when the readers of *Harper’s Weekly* learned that Dunbar represented the “Robert Burns of Negro Poetry,” a poet who wrote with the authentic voice of his race. In the wake of Howells’s review, various lay and intellectual communities read, discussed, and/or wrote about the review, appreciating Dunbar in a way analogous to the way in which advertisers and audiences appreciated Black minstrel performers. Cultural institutions like journals, magazines and newspapers, and marketing apparatuses turned Dunbar into a racial phenomenon.<sup>52</sup> Between September 1896 and May 1897, for example, other reviewers of Dunbar’s book echoed the view that Howells had discovered the most promising poet of his race. One reviewer regarded *Majors and Minors* a “remarkably hopeful production” and a “triumphant demonstration” of the potential of the Black race for verbal rhyme and melody. Another believed that the book “was not great, but it had, in its dialect verse at least, a certain homeliness of sentiment which challenged attention.” Greater proof of Dunbar’s phenomenal status appears in reviews of his next book of poems, *Lyrics of Lowly Life*. Printed between January 1897 and April 1898 in major U.S. and British periodicals, the (ten) reviews praised Dunbar’s orthography of dialect as an accurate and authentic re-creation of African American vernacular. The critics stated that the dialect poems were “on the whole, excellent”; examples of a Negro being “thoroughly spontaneous and natural”; “pure Negro songs”; “not overloaded . . . with ornaments of culture so heavy and costly that the slender thought can stagger beneath the weight”; expressions of “a certain homeliness of sentiment

<sup>52</sup> See Elizabeth McHenry, *Forgotten Readers: Recovering the Lost History of African American Literary Societies* (Durham, N.C.: Duke Univ. Press, 2002), p. 234, where McHenry discusses an article in the September 1896 issue of *Woman’s Era* (an African American periodical) that hailed the importance of the review to African American communities across the country.

which challenged attention"; and, finally, contributions to his "becom[ing] an interesting phenomena. He is a full blood Negro."<sup>53</sup> These phrases characterizing the dialect poems of *Majors and Minors* echo those phrases previously applied to Black minstrel performance as well as those phrases central to Howells's review of Dunbar's *Majors and Minors*.

Howells did for Dunbar what various prefatory or concluding letters, signatures, guarantees, and/or tales had done for ex-slave authors: to authenticate a "newfound black voice."<sup>54</sup> Most "authenticators" of slave narratives were Anglo-American, and they commanded this literary industry as amanuenses, editors, and ghostwriters. Just as important as the authenticator's racial identity are the rhetorical strategies they had employed in order to convince a predominantly Anglo-American readership that former slaves could read as well as write, and even do so at high intellectual levels. Authenticators counteracted public doubts over African American authorship, legitimized the slave narrative as well written and historically accurate, and established the aesthetic value of the slave narrative. Although Howells valued dialect, not just formal English, as the literary vernacular of choice, the slave-narrative paradigm applies to Howells's authentication of Dunbar. The *Harper's Weekly* review is not attached to *Majors and Minors*, but the article nonetheless functioned as an authenticating document. A few months after the review's publication, Howells revised and reprinted it as the actual introduction to *Lyrics of Lowly Life*. In this context, the *Harper's* review became an authenticating document in the conventional sense, appended to Dunbar's book and marketed in order to touch readers far and wide. It elevated Howells to the commercial influence of Walter Hines Page and Richard Watson Gilder, editors who encouraged African American authors to write literature in dialect in order to get published.<sup>55</sup>

<sup>53</sup> For these reviews, see Metcalf, *Paul Laurence Dunbar: A Bibliography*, pp. 127–29.

<sup>54</sup> See Robert B. Stepto, *From Behind the Veil: A Study of Afro-American Narrative* (Urbana: Univ. of Illinois Press, 1979), p. 17.

<sup>55</sup> Walter Hines Page was editor of the *Atlantic Monthly* from 1898 onward and co-founder in 1899 of Doubleday, Page, and Company. Richard Watson Gilder served (circa 1870) on the editorial board of *Scribner's Monthly*, which became *Century*. For the restrictions that Howells, Page, and Gilder imposed on Chesnutt, see Wonham, "The Curious Psychological Spectacle"; McElrath, "W. D. Howells and Race"; Andrews, "William Dean Howells and Charles W. Chesnutt"; William L. Andrews, *The Literary Ca-*

Dunbar's association with the "Dean of American Letters" did not end with *Majors and Minors*. Dunbar published and circulated his next book, *Lyrics of Lowly Life*, with Howells's introduction, to the delight of readers much greater in number and regional span than those who might personally have come across *Majors and Minors* or even the book review in *Harper's Weekly*. The New York publisher Dodd, Mead, and Company released *Majors and Minors* for the first time in the United States in late 1896, and the Young People's Missionary Movement of the United States and Canada reprinted it that same year. An English edition of *Majors and Minors* appeared a year later under London's Chapman and Hall Publishers, and Toronto's G. N. Morang Company reprinted it yet again in 1898. Letters sent directly from Howells to Dunbar while the poet was lecturing in England (from February to August 1897) encouraged British publishers to consider publishing *Majors and Minors*. Hardly any of the African American writers at the turn of the century achieved the national and international commercialism of Dunbar, as both the personnel and the geographic reach of their presses were remarkably limited. African American writers were published by a number of different publishing houses, such as Anna Julia Cooper, by Ohio's Aldine Printing House; Francis Ellen Watkins Harper, by Philadelphia's Garrigues Brothers; Pauline Hopkins, by Boston's Colored Co-operative Publishing Company; Amelia Johnson, by Philadelphia's American Baptist Publication Society; Emma Dunham Kelley, by Providence's Continental Printing Company; and Sutton Griggs, by Cincinnati's The Editor Publication Company. None of these presses, however, possessed the same national prestige as did those that published Dunbar's books of poetry.<sup>56</sup>

The two African American writers who worked with publishing companies equal in prestige include Charles W. Ches-

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reer of Charles W. Chesnutt (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State Univ. Press, 1980); Helen M. Chesnutt, *Charles Waddell Chesnutt: Pioneer of the Color Line* (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 1952); and Chesnutt, *Journals*.

<sup>56</sup> Robert C. Nowatzki supports this point (see "'Passing' in a White Genre: Charles W. Chesnutt's Negotiations of the Plantation Tradition in *The Conjure Woman*," *American Literary Realism, 1870-1910*, 27, no. 2 [1995], 20-36). For more information about the industry of American presses in Dunbar's era, see Frank Luther Mott, *A History of American Magazines, 1865-1885* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1938).

nutt and Booker T. Washington. Chesnutt released *The Conjure Woman* (1899) and *The Wife of His Youth* (1899) through Boston's Houghton, Mifflin, and Company. Washington revised and reprinted his first autobiography, *The Story of My Life and Work* (1900), which Illinois's J. L. Nichols and Company first released, as *Up from Slavery* (1901) with Doubleday, Page, and Company. But despite Chesnutt's and Washington's emergences in U.S. periodicals and politics, respectively, Dunbar was the first African American born after slavery to achieve both national and international acclaim and commercialism for his literary work.

A letter from the African American poet William Stanley Braithwaite to Howells, dated 7 October 1899, provides an illustration of Dunbar's phenomenal success. In this letter Braithwaite introduces himself to Howells as "Your Ob[edient]. Servant" and addresses him as "Most Reverend Sir": "I am an American Negro in my twentieth year who has just come to New York with a *MS* with the hope of disposing of it to a publisher"; "To you as the 'Dean of American Literature' I make an application for assistance, hoping that you will evince the same interest in me and my work (if you find it worthy of your consideration) as you revealed in behalf of Paul L. Dunbar."<sup>57</sup> Evidently, Dunbar's "entirely black verse" had succeeded.

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#### ABSTRACT

Gene Jarrett, "‘Entirely *Black* Verse from Him Would Succeed’: Minstrel Realism and William Dean Howells" (pp. 494–525)

In a letter to a literary editor about promising American writers, William Dean Howells asserted that "a book of entirely *black* verse" from the African American poet Paul Laurence Dunbar "would succeed." Howells's appreciation of the racial authenticity of Dunbar's dialect poetry belongs to a larger critical and commercial demand for "minstrel realism" in postbellum nineteenth-century American culture. The racialism of

<sup>57</sup> William Stanley Braithwaite, letter to William Dean Howells, 7 October 1899, in *The William Stanley Braithwaite Reader*, ed. Philip Butcher (Ann Arbor: Univ. of Michigan Press, 1972), p. 238. As for Braithwaite's poems, however, written mostly in formal English, Howells wrote to Braithwaite: "I do not think your verse always runs clear"—certainly not as "clear" as Dunbar's poems in Black dialect (Howells, letter to William S. Braithwaite, 12 October 1908, in W. D. Howells, *Selected Letters, Volume 5: 1902–1911*, ed. William C. Fischer with Christoph K. Lohmann [Boston: Twayne, 1983], p. 260).

blackface minstrelsy created a cultural precondition in which postbellum audiences regarded Black minstrelsy (that is, minstrelsy performed by Blacks) as realistic. This reaction resulted from the commercialization of Black minstrelsy in American culture as an avant-garde cultural performance of racial authenticity. An analogous reaction, I suggest, occurred in 1896, when Dunbar published *Majors and Minors* and Howells reviewed it in *Harper's Weekly*. By situating the ideological politics of Howells's criticism of African American literature, I show that Howells ignored the characteristic eschewal of romance and sentiment in Anglo-American literary realism, while also defining African American literary realism in these very terms. This apparent inconsistency results from Howells's subscription to racialism, which then helped to perpetuate this definition in the dramatic and literary cultures of minstrelsy. Ultimately, the relationship between Howells and Dunbar and the implications for African American writers confronting a White-dominated literary marketplace might be an overwhelmingly familiar story. Less intuitive or obvious, however, are the precise ways in which the racialism of Howells and this marketplace arbitrated the realism of African American literature.