

Specters of the Ballad

VIRGINIA JACKSON

I_N the last month of the first year of the twentieth century, Paul Laurence Dunbar published a poem about a talking tree—or actually, about a talking tree limb. What the limb (or, since it is in a poem, the “bough”) talks about is a lynching it not only figuratively witnessed but literally made possible, though apparently the conclusion of its testimony displeased the editors of the *Century Illustrated Monthly Magazine*, who cut the poem’s last two stanzas:

And ever the judge rides by, rides by,
And goes to hunt the deer,
And ever another rides his soul
In the guise of a mortal fear.

And ever the man he rides me hard,
And never a night stays he;
For I feel his curse as a haunted bough,
On the trunk of a haunted tree.¹

Nineteenth-Century Literature, Vol. 71, No. 2, pp. 176–196, ISSN: 0891–9356, online ISSN: 1067–8352, © 2016 by The Regents of the University of California. All rights reserved. Please direct all requests for permission to photocopy or reproduce article content through the University of California Press’s Reprints and Permissions web page, <http://www.ucpress.edu/journals.php?p=reprints>. DOI: 10.1525/ncl.2016.71.2.176.

¹ Paul Laurence Dunbar, “The Haunted Oak,” in his *Lyrics of Love and Laughter* (New York: Dodd, Mead and Co., 1903), p. 156. Further references are to this edition and appear in the text. See Paul Laurence Dunbar, “The Haunted Oak,” *Century Illustrated Monthly Magazine*, 61 (1901), 276–77. The full poem is also available in *Collected Poetry of Paul Laurence Dunbar*, ed. Joanne M. Braxton (Charlottesville: Univ. Press of Virginia, 1993), pp. 219–20. Dunbar’s relation to the *Century* is a long story. Mark Noonan has argued that the *Century* “was Dunbar’s literary handbook and Holy

Poised between a reprinting of a test given at The Hampton Institute on “Significant Knowledge of the Bible” among black students (“Save in the matter of color, they seemed very like white students as to susceptibility to education, but with rather more eagerness to get it”) and an essay entitled “Paths of Hope for the Negro: Practical Suggestions of a Southerner” (“It is too late in the day to discuss whether it would have been better had the Negro never been brought into the Southern States”), what remained of Dunbar’s “The Haunted Oak” stopped short of the sinister threat to the history of the present those last eight lines may have posed to the readers and editors of the *Century*, where Dunbar had published more of his verse than in any other periodical by 1901.² The first quatrains of the remaining poem are actually disarmingly ingenuous:

Pray why are you so bare, so bare,
 Oh, bough of the old oak-tree;
 And why, when I go through the shade you throw,
 Runs a shudder over me?

Grail,” a view that had its beginnings in the tales of visitors to Dunbar’s elevator in Dayton, Ohio. Between trips as an “elevator hop,” Dunbar was said to have kept a recent issue of the *Century* and pen and paper by his post (Mark Noonan, “‘Jump Back, Honey, Jump Back’: Reading Paul Laurence Dunbar in the Context of the *Century Magazine*,” in *We Wear the Mask: Paul Laurence Dunbar and the Politics of Representative Reality*, ed. Willie J. Harrell, Jr. [Kent, Ohio: Kent State Univ. Press, 2010], p. 84). Noonan argues that the *Century*’s own elite racist literary politics paralleled the racism that placed Dayton’s high school valedictorian in an elevator in the first place, and that even after Dunbar’s considerable literary success the *Century* contributed to “the cage that racist America during the Guilded Age had built for itself, as well as for its first black poet to reach a national audience” (p. 95). According to Noonan, the magazine “may have helped produce a young aspiring writer and helped to make him famous, but it also ultimately contributed to the unjust demise of his reputation” by forcing his work into racial caricature (p. 96).

² See T. T. Munger, “Significant Knowledge of the Bible,” and Jerome Dowd, “Paths of Hope for the Negro: Practical Suggestions of a Southerner,” *Century Illustrated Monthly Magazine*, 61 (1901), pp. 273, 278. In her excellent book *Rhetorics of Literacy*, Nadia Nurhussein suggests that Dunbar’s appearances in the *Century* “changed the path of Dunbar’s career. . . . Dunbar’s career breakthrough came not with Howells’s 1896 review of *Majors and Minors*, usually cited as the event that ‘made’ him, but with Dunbar’s 1895 *Century* poems” (Nadia Nurhussein, *Rhetorics of Literacy: The Cultivation of American Dialect Poetry* [Columbus: Ohio State Univ. Press, 2013], p. 133). Nurhussein’s emphasis on the *Century*’s promotion of Dunbar’s dialect verse makes the magazine’s decision to cut the last two stanzas of “The Haunted Oak” seem part and parcel of that racist cultivation.

My leaves were green as the best, I trow,
 And sap ran free in my veins,
 But I saw in the moonlight dim and wierd
 A guiltless victim's pains.

I bent me down to hear his sigh;
 I shook with his gurgling moan,
 And I trembled sore when they rode away,
 And left him here alone.

(“The Haunted Oak,” p. 153)

While in the stanzas that did not appear in the *Century* the temporality of the experience (if that's the word) of the “haunted bough” is ongoing (“And ever . . . And ever . . . And ever . . . And never . . .”), in the first stanzas of the poem what the bough describes in response to the poet's question is an event set in the past. Even the call-and-response structure of the first two stanzas contains the event and contains as well the anxiety associated with the poet's oh-so-poetic apostrophe to the tree. John Keats's nightingale or Percy Shelley's skylark or mountain or William Blake's rose did not talk back when so addressed, and this lack of response tended to result in the poet's internal dialogue, a series of lyric self-reflections that were the basis of romantic poetics. Unlike these romantic objects of apostrophe, but like Alfred Tennyson's Victorian “The Talking Oak” (1842), Dunbar's oak answers the poet immediately by accounting for the cause of the effect the poet notices. This is to say that if early-nineteenth-century romantic apostrophe was a source of potential embarrassment (who but poets talks to trees and birds and mountains and flowers?) and subjective struggle, then Dunbar's post-romantic, fin-de-siècle apostrophe builds on Victorian dramatic monologue and dialogue to affirm the poet's sensations rather than to place them in doubt.³ In “The Haunted Oak,” the tree's silence is not the poet's problem; on the contrary, after the first stanza, the poet is no longer the subject in question. It turns out that he is right to shudder when passing through the tree's shade, since the bough has quite a tale to tell:

³ Jonathan Culler makes this point about apostrophe as “embarrassing to me and you” in his *The Pursuit of Signs: Semiotics, Literature, Deconstruction* (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1981), p. 135.

They'd charged him with the old, old crime,
 And set him fast in jail:

Oh, why does the dog howl all night long,
 And why does the night wind wail?

He prayed his prayer and he swore his oath,
 And he raised his hand to the sky;
 But the beat of hoofs smote on his ear,
 And the steady tread drew nigh.

Who is it rides by night, by night,
 Over the moonlit road?
 And what is the spur that keeps the pace,
 What is the galling goad?

And now they beat at the prison door.
 "Ho, keeper, do not stay!
 We are friends of him whom you hold within,
 And we fain would take him away

"From those who ride fast on our heels
 With mind to do him wrong;
 They have no care for his innocence,
 And the rope they bear is long."
 ("The Haunted Oak," p. 154)

In these lines, poetic address to a natural object elicits not only an answer but a full narrative account, a story that explains the bough's transformation from "green" and "free" to "so bare, so bare." Rather than following the path of romantic apostrophe toward fantasy response and disillusion ("Was it a vision, or a waking dream?"), the structure here acts (at least temporarily) as a reassuring envelope for the poem's disturbing content, and the verse genre containing this structure of containment is the foundation of that reassurance. For over a century, readers have thought of this poem not as a romantic apostrophe on the order of Keats's odes (or any ode) or as a Victorian monologue or dialogue, but as a pre-romantic "Border ballad"—and one sees why.⁴ The antique diction of "Ho, keeper, do not stay"

⁴ Peter Revell gives the exemplary reading repeated in variation by several other Dunbar critics when he writes of "the comparatively late 'The Haunted Oak': "The simple stanzas, sparse rhyming, and stark and baleful language of the Border ballad, which frequently involves the description of primitive and cruel acts of murder, are well

would almost be enough on its own to prompt such a recognition, particularly when added to the call and response reminiscent of familiar Anglo-Scottish ballads like “Lord Randall” and to the familiar meter, which falls roughly into the tetrameter-trimeter pattern understood as balladic by the late nineteenth century.⁵ Those cues would (and did) prompt turn-of-the-century readers to think of “The Haunted Oak” as an Anglo-Scottish border ballad, and that recognition meant that when the event narrated by the bough shifts into the present tense in the sixth stanza, we enter the interpellated present of the balladeer, the present tense of an old song performed for a new audience, a way of masking contemporary history in the guise of folklore. By 1901, Dunbar was well known as a writer of ballads, which is to say that he was well known as a representative of the “lowly” common folk, though the authenticity of that representation has been a source of debate for over a century.⁶ Thus the

adapted to the contemporary theme of lynching. The violent action of the Border ballad is also frequently motivated by the spell or the curse of evil influences. In Dunbar’s poem the device of the tree’s lamenting its unwilling part in the lynching and of the withering of the bough which had borne the victim is exactly in character with the traditional mode of the ballad” (Peter Revell, *Paul Laurence Dunbar* [Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1979], p. 66).

⁵ In Francis James Child’s *The English and Scottish Ballads* (1882–1898), “Lord Randal/Randal/Randall” (Ballad 12) is rendered in twenty variations, all based on the same basic call-and-response structure. Here is the first part of version D: “O WHERE hae ye been, Lord Randal, my son? / O where hae ye been, my handsome young man?’ / ‘I hae been to the wild wood; mother, make my bed soon, / For I’m weary wi hunting, and fain wald lie down.’ / ‘Where gat ye your dinner, Lord Randal, my son? / Where gat ye your dinner, my handsome young man?’ / ‘I din’d wi my true-love; mother, make my bed soon, / For I’m weary wi hunting, and fain wald lie down.’ / ‘What gat ye to your dinner, Lord Randal, my son? / What gat ye to your dinner, my handsome young man?’ / ‘I gat eels boild in broo; mother, make my bed soon, / For I’m weary wi hunting, and fain wald lie down’”, etc. (“Lord Randal,” in *The English and Scottish Ballads*, ed. Francis James Child, 5 vols. [Boston: Houghton Mifflin & Co., 1882–1898], I, 160). As you can see in “Lord Randal,” the idea that “ballad meter” was always made of quatrains in alternating tetrameter and trimeter lines is a popular myth. For an astute unraveling of that myth, see Meredith Martin, “Imperfectly Civilized’: Ballads, Nations, and Histories of Form,” *ELH*, 82 (2015), 345–63. For my argument here, the important point is that by 1900, American readers thought that they *recognized* a ballad when they read a poem in tetrameter/trimeter quatrains (though “The Haunted Oak” also contains variant lines, so that recognition was pattern-based). On a definition of literary genres as modes of recognition, see Carolyn Williams, *Gilbert and Sullivan: Gender, Genre, Parody* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 2011).

⁶ Again, for an excellent discussion of the attribution of authenticity to the Southern dialect that was far from native to Dunbar as a Midwesterner, and specifically

comparative safety of a genre pretending to be old but actually (like lynching) a product of Reconstruction buffered the supposedly “old, old crime” of interracial rape that (as Frederick Douglass pointed out) was also a fiction of Reconstruction, and both that artificially dated genre and that artificially dated content worked to date artificially the very current and very real crime of the lynching itself, which, as Jacqueline Goldsby has written, was by 1900 quickly taking shape as “racism’s modern life form.”⁷ My argument here is that Dunbar’s work marked a key moment in the creation of poetry’s modern life form, a form not incidentally forged in the intimate relation between post-romantic fictions of poetic address, late-nineteenth-century ideas of the ballad, and the racism that continues to haunt American poetics from root to branch.⁸

When Goldsby dubs lynching “racism’s modern life form,” what she means is that “lynching thrived as a social practice at the turn of the nineteenth century because, to the degree that the violence could be integrated ‘secretly’ into the new regimes and routines of American life, the death toll of African American lynch victims could be both shocking and ordinary, unexpected

as a Hoosier poet writing in the wake of James Whitcomb Riley, see Nurhussein, *Rhetorics of Literacy*.

⁷ In “Why is the Negro Lynched?” (A.M.E. Church Review, 1894) Douglass argued forcefully that “the Negro . . . was never accused of assault, insult, or an attempt to commit an assault upon any white woman in the whole South” during the years of the Civil War (Frederick Douglass, “Why is the Negro Lynched?” [rpt. Bridgewater: John Witby and Sons, 1895], p. 10). Douglass was Dunbar’s patron during the 1893 Columbian Exposition in Chicago, where Dunbar was introduced to the last year of Douglass’s radical politics as his clerk at the Haitian exhibition. In *A Spectacular Secret: Lynching in American Life and Literature* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2006), Jacqueline Goldsby writes: “literature imagines the terrible acts and consequences of lynching as racism’s modern life form, to remind us of the lives we could save if only by remembering the many thousands gone before” (p. 307).

⁸ For recent examples of the racism that continues to define American poetics, one need look no further than the crisis that dissolved the intended fiftieth anniversary Berkeley Poetry Conference in the summer of 2015. The conference was canceled after furious debate and reaction to a Twitter feed based on lines from Margaret Mitchell’s *Gone With the Wind* (1936) initiated by the poet Vanessa Place. Earlier in 2015, poet Kenneth Goldsmith’s performance of the autopsy report of Michael Brown as a poem at Brown University drew charges of racist performance. For an extremely stylish and incisive treatment of the various racisms implicit in contemporary models of poetic address, see Claudia Rankine, *Citizen: An American Lyric* (Minneapolis: Graywolf Press, 2014).

and predictable, fantastic and normal, horrifying and banal" (*A Spectacular Secret*, p. 27). The scare quotes around "secretly" in Goldsby's sentence index the ways in which mass media representations (newspaper accounts, photographs, sound recordings, stories, poems) made lynching harder to see for what it was by virtue of its hypervisibility. What Goldsby calls the "cultural logic" of lynching "enabled it to emerge and persist throughout the modern era because its violence 'fit' within broader, national cultural developments" (p. 6). "Lynching worked as a strategy of terrorism and racial domination," according to Goldsby, "precisely because it was more than a highly visible and cruel ploy for power on the part of southern whites against the civil rights and aspirations of black people" (p. 27). On this view, the cultural logic of lynching is ongoing in America (which is why it is not only "racism's modern form" but "racism's modern *lifeform*"), part of the *longue durée* of modernity that still binds us to the nineteenth century. In "The Haunted Oak," that *longue durée* history is exemplified in the spectral ideal of the ballad itself, since by 1900 the ballad was not only the most popular and most commonplace verse genre printed and read in the United States, but also the genre manufactured to look as if it were a communal, original, and democratic inheritance.

As Meredith McGill writes in her essay in this special issue, by the end of the nineteenth century, "the ballad [had become] the literary form of nonliterary verse."⁹ Dunbar's solicitation of his readers' recognition of his poem as a ballad thus made his verse both literary and nonliterary at once: "The Haunted Oak" aesthetically frames the structure of the Anglo-Scottish ballad as if it were the genre of a communal folk story, but the story the bough delivers is definitely not Anglo-Scottish and it is certainly not folklore. By casting the shocking, unexpected, fantastic, horrifying account of a "guiltless" victim in an ordinary, predictable, normal, banal, Anglo-Scots-identified verse genre, Dunbar used the ballad to spell out the cultural logic that Goldsby articulates.¹⁰

⁹ Meredith L. McGill, "What Is a Ballad?: Reading for Genre, Format, and Medium," *Nineteenth-Century Literature*, 71 (2016), 161.

¹⁰ It is tempting to think about the easy adaptation of the Scots border ballad to turn-of-the-century lynching narrative as a representation of the Ku Klux Klan, or as a suggestive gesture toward that iconography. Although the Klan was officially disbanded between

Because the ballad was itself, as McGill points out, not actually a folk song but by the nineteenth century a mass media form, and because, as we shall see, it was also the vehicle of a fantasy of cultural development, it could exemplify the eerie “fit” between modernity and racist violence by rendering that violence (like the violence of lynching itself) apparently old rather than actually new, mimetically part of a common tradition, a common history, a common law rather than the symptom of a brutal contemporary crisis in which the fiction of race was being writ in fire. Ironically (and painfully), Dunbar could use his readers’ assumptions about what they understood as the generic conventions of the popular ballad to make his own literary claims in the *Century* at the same time that the content of his poem undid all of those claims.

Or did it? Nowhere in “The Haunted Oak” is the “guiltless victim” identified as a black man wrongfully accused of raping a white woman. The fact that for over a century readers have been convinced that this is what the poem is about proves Goldsby’s point: we know and enact the outlines of racism’s modern life form even or perhaps especially when the abstract outline is all we have. We know (or readers have thought they knew) and assume the representation of racial lynching so easily that we can fill in the details for ourselves—even or perhaps especially when American mob violence is cast in the discourse of Scottish rebels and British injustice. Certainly Dunbar scholars have thought they know the real story. In 1932, Edward F. Arnold wrote that the poem is based on a story that Dunbar reported to him, and in 1973 Jean Wagner repeated the report that “the content is a story told to Dunbar by an old Negro of Howard Town whose nephew had been falsely accused of rape.”¹¹ Critics have cited not only the generic but also the personal story that inspired the poem, which, as Wagner writes, tends to be praised and defended as “the one [Dunbar] poem

1871 and 1915, it continued to circulate in representations, including the Thomas Dixon novels that would become the basis of D. W. Griffith’s film *Birth of a Nation* in 1915.

¹¹ 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), p. 102. See Edward F. Arnold, “Some Personal Reminiscences of Paul Laurence Dunbar,” *Journal of Negro History*, 17 (1932), 401.

that attacks lynching” (*Black Poets of the United States*, p. 102).¹² “The bloodthirsty Alabama mob had dragged him out of prison and hanged him from the branch of an oak tree,” Wagner continues. “The branch had withered instantly, while the others continued to flourish” (p. 102). Wagner does not give a source for this historical account, but since almost all of Dunbar’s letters remain unpublished, it may be the story that Dunbar told. If it is, then the poem merely relays the facts of the case in a verse genre made to order for tales of crime and punishment. Yet the way in which the poem’s figure for the consequences of intimate witness becomes in Wagner’s version one of the facts of the case might lead us to suspect that the line between fact and fiction is being blurred in this explanation, since the idea that “the branch had withered instantly” makes it seem as if poetry made history rather than the other way around.

If poems could make history, then the kind of poetic justice the withered branch represents would solve a lot of problems. If racial injustice actually left such a visible record, if natural logic were able to protest what cultural logic enabled, then this would be a different world indeed. Unlike his modern professional reader, Dunbar does not pretend that history is made out of poetry; instead, the balladic frame of “The Haunted Oak” emphasizes the way in which poetry is made out of historical silences. We know that the tree does not really speak, just as we know that the unnamed lynched man really did. Generations of readers have thought that they know that the lynched man is black and that the men who lynch him are white, even though the poem mentions nothing about race at all. The poem gives speech to what is silent and silences the man and the issue that needs to be spoken. As Michel-Rolph Trouillot writes, “Silences enter the process of historical production at four crucial moments: the moment of fact creation (the making of *sources*); the moment of fact assembly (the making of *archives*); the moment of fact retrieval (the making of *narratives*); and the moment of retrospective significance (the making of *history* in the final

¹² Wagner actually notes that “there appear to be reminiscences of Goethe’s ‘Erkönig’” in “The Haunted Oak,” a provocative suggestion that would add another romantic verse genre to the mix (*Black Poets of the United States*, p. 102, n. 97).

instance).¹³ If we think of “The Haunted Oak” as a poem cast in a historical verse genre in order to frame uncommon contemporary violence as common poetic history, then we can see the ways in which Dunbar used both the genre and the story his readers thought they recognized to point to the silencing of reliable sources, the silencing of accessible archives, the silencing of first-person narrative, and finally the silencing of history in the modern life forms of racism and of poetry alike.

It may seem strange to suggest that if Dunbar’s readers recognized his poem as a ballad then they did not recognize its facts or its story as contemporary history, but, by the late nineteenth century, that’s how ballads tended to work. As Susan Stewart has suggested, by the eighteenth century ballads were “distressed genres,” more often “imitations of the antique” than the real thing, “an attempt to recoup the voice of orality in all its presumed authenticity of context” for a self-authorizing literary elite.¹⁴ As those literary elites changed across centuries and across the Atlantic, the fantasies attached to ballad imitations changed, too. Meredith Martin has dubbed the shift in ballad discourse in the nineteenth century “the ballad-theory of civilization”: in Victorian fantasies of empire, Martin argues, “the peripheral is elevated as the primitive and brought into the whole fabric of the nation as an imagined common past of the colonizing nation. . . . An imagined innocent past, a purer primitive poetics in the shape or guise of ‘ballad,’ is most familiar as the uncorrupted cadences of the now lost ballads of Scotland but it has powerful implications for India as well” (“Imperfectly Civilized,” p. 348). On this view, all borders, all peripheries became potential sources for rustic ballads in nineteenth-century ballad discourse, and those “primitive” peripheries were in turn incorporated into the civilizing project of British Empire.¹⁵

¹³ Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995), p. 26.

¹⁴ See Susan Stewart, “Notes on Distressed Genres,” in her *Crimes of Writing: Problems in the Containment of Representation* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1991), pp. 67, 68.

¹⁵ In *Making England Western*, Saree Makdisi suggests that the civilizing project of ballad discourse is internal to romanticism, most notably in William Wordsworth’s *Lyrical Ballads* (1798), and that “the struggles around the constitution of English identities do indeed take place in the space of cultural difference, but that those sites begin in England itself” (Saree Makdisi, *Making England Western: Occidentalism, Race,*

Michael Cohen has argued that the black dialect poems that made Dunbar famous, and that Dunbar himself called “negro ballads,” acted as late-nineteenth-century counterparts to the ballad-theory of civilization in the American context—which is to say that nineteenth-century American ballad discourse created its own fictions of periphery and center in the service of a logic of race rather than of colonialism per se, though the use of ballad discourse to represent the Native American genocide in famous poems such as Henry Wadsworth Longfellow’s *The Song of Hiawatha* (1855) managed to cut both ways. “The negro ballad is well adapted to be narrative,” Dunbar told an interviewer for the *Chicago Tribune* in 1902, “but it must be simple narrative. It cannot be epic. . . . Whatever is most charming about the negro dialect is in the way of endearing words. Its genre is domestic, so to speak.”¹⁶ Cohen writes: “Naming dialect poems as ‘negro ballads’ condensed into a single term a train of associations—from ballad to spiritual to dialect poem—that enabled printed, aesthetic poems like Dunbar’s to mediate cultural fantasies about oral, pre-modern culture. Through this elision, nineteenth-century readers substituted abstractions of genre for persons and personal voices, so that certain kinds of poems came to *stand for* certain kinds of social experience” (“Dunbar and the Genres of Dialect,” p. 248).

In Martin’s terms, Cohen is arguing that Dunbar’s dialect verse participated in “the ballad-theory of civilization” by figuring the dialect of “primitive” black folk as an imagined common past of the Reconstruction United States (which is why Dunbar’s dialect poems are so often plantation fantasies). In American ballad discourse, Cohen suggests, Francis James Child’s *English and Scottish Popular Ballads* (1882–1898) paved the way for such civilizing appropriation, since it “was part of a postbellum literary reconstruction of the United States, which reimagined the American Civil War as the origin of a distinct

and *Imperial Culture* [Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2014], p. 130). Since America is always already a space of English cultural difference, we might see Dunbar’s poem as a balladic enactment of degrees of difference within Anglo-America itself.

¹⁶ Dunbar, quoted in Michael Cohen, “Paul Laurence Dunbar and the Genres of Dialect,” *African American Review*, 41 (2007), 247.

'American' literature serving a newly united 'American' people."¹⁷ As early as 1867, the Child student (and Emily Dickinson editor) Thomas Wentworth Higginson called the black spirituals he heard during the war "a kindred world of unwritten songs, as simple and indigenous as the Border Minstrelsy."¹⁸ Thus when William Dean Howells famously compared Dunbar to Robert Burns in his often-reprinted review of Dunbar's second book in 1896, he was participating in an established discourse that characterized black dialect verse as a close cousin of Scottish balladry; further, when Howells wrote that "when Burns was least himself he wrote literary English, and Mr. Dunbar writes literary English when he is least himself," he was proving Cohen's and Martin's points that, as "certain kinds of poems came to *stand for* certain kinds of social experience," the "ballad-theory of civilization" came to rely upon certain poets writing certain kinds of poems.¹⁹ In the United States, that reliance meant that the logic of many popular verse genres was not only inevitably raced but insistently racist (or, since race emerges from racism, it meant that the logic of popular verse genres aided and abetted the precipitation of the fictions of whiteness and blackness). This is all to say that if "The Haunted Oak" had been a black dialect poem of the sort Howells thought Dunbar wrote when he was "most himself," then it would be taken to represent the indigenous "negro" perspective on lynching, the peripheral voice on printed display that could be incorporated into the cultural logic that Goldsby describes. In fact, this is just how "The Haunted Oak" has been read for over a hundred years, or at least since James Weldon Johnson featured the uncut

¹⁷ Michael Cohen, "Popular Ballads: Rhythmic Remediations in the Nineteenth Century," in *Meter Matters: Verse Cultures of the Long Nineteenth Century*, ed. Jason David Hall (Athens: Ohio Univ. Press, 2011), p. 213. For an elaboration of this argument, see Michael C. Cohen, *The Social Lives of Poems in Nineteenth-Century America* (Philadelphia: Univ. of Pennsylvania Press, 2015).

¹⁸ Thomas Wentworth Higginson, "Army Life in a Black Regiment" and Other Writings, ed. R. D. Madison (New York: Penguin, 1997), p. 149.

¹⁹ William Dean Howells, "Life and Letters," rev. of *Majors and Minors*, by Paul Laurence Dunbar, *Harper's Weekly*, 27 June 1896, p. 630. Howells repeats these remarks in his introduction to *Lyrics of Lowly Life* in 1896. Sixty years later, Langston Hughes was still calling Dunbar (disparagingly) "the black Robbie Burns" (see Arnold Rampersad, *The Life of Langston Hughes* [Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2002]).

version in *The Book of American Negro Poetry* in 1922 as racially representative verse.²⁰ But “The Haunted Oak” is not what Dunbar described as “a negro ballad”; it is, to go back to McGill’s useful formulation, “the literary form of non-literary verse” with a vengeance—which is to say with an emphasis on both the *literary* and the *English* (because Scottish) literary language and verse form that Howells dubbed inauthentic. By 1900 Dunbar knew very well what his literary public wanted, and he often complied. Why, then, did Dunbar cast what Wagner calls his “one poem that attacked [racial] lynching” as an obviously distressed, faux-Anglo-Scottish literary ballad rather than as a black dialect poem or “negro ballad”?

There are many ways to answer this question from the perspective of Dunbar’s biography, and that is the way such questions are most often answered in Dunbar scholarship. But if we pose the question in relation to Trouillot’s list of the “silences [that] enter the process of historical production” rather than in the context of Dunbar’s personal love-hate relationship with his successful dialect poems and Coon Song performances, then “The Haunted Oak” begins to look like a canny use of nineteenth-century ballad discourse to mark the limits of the subjects it touched—to mark a border between fictions of verse genres and fictions of race. In the book that Howells had in mind when he compared Dunbar to Burns, Dunbar published “A Border Ballad,” a short poem full of Scottishisms (“Dimmock o’ Dune,” “Glen Arragh,” “the hand o’ MacPherson”) no longer in evidence four years later in “The Haunted Oak,” in which the turn to an ongoing history uncontaminable by either apostrophic address or balladic tale begins to emerge in the lines leading up to the stanzas that the *Century* cut:

²⁰ For an overview of Dunbar’s critical reception in the twentieth century, see Gavin Jones, *Strange Talk: The Politics of Dialect Literature in Gilded Age America* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: Univ. of California Press, 1999), pp. 182–86. As his title suggests, Jones is most interested in the “representative” potential and pathos of the dialect verse, as is the critical tradition he surveys. There has been surprisingly little work on Dunbar’s non-dialect poetry, though there has been much recent interest in Dunbar’s non-dialect prose.

They have fooled the jailer with lying words,
 They have fooled the man with lies;
 The bolts unbar, the locks are drawn,
 And the great door open flies.

Now they have taken him from the jail,
 And hard and fast they ride,
 And the leader laughs low down in his throat,
 As they halt my trunk beside.

Oh, the judge, he wore a mask of black,
 And the doctor one of white,
 And the minister, with his oldest son,
 Was curiously bedight.

Oh, foolish man, why weep you now?
 'Tis but a little space,
 And the time will come when these shall dread
 The mem'ry of your face.

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

And never more shall leaves come forth
 On a bough that bears the ban;
 I am burned with dread, I am dried and dead,
 From the curse of a guiltless man.

(“The Haunted Oak,” pp. 155–56)²¹

In these lines, we are forced to witness a very abstract version of what the oak has been forced to witness, but the sources, archives, narrative, and historical significance of our witnessing are all suppressed. The whole scene plays in virtual silhouette, the barest outline of form without content, as if Fritz Lang had filmed it. The only source or archive or narrative or history of the event we have comes down to the bough’s testimony, and what does a dead tree limb know? Eighteenth- and nineteenth-century crime ballads often gave the criminal’s confession or recounted the crime itself, but the bough merely describes the

²¹ See Paul Laurence Dunbar, “A Border Ballad,” in his *Majors and Minors: Poems* (Toledo: Hadley & Hadley, 1895), p. 57.

“black” judge, the “white” doctor, and the “curiously bedight” minister, whose garb seems to parody in antiquarian form the binary relation between judge and doctor that stands in for the fictional binary relation between races.²² The bough cannot comment upon the mock trial it recounts; instead, it can only suffer passively, be “burned” and die as a consequence of a silence that cannot be broken.

Though like the readers of the *Century* unable to stop injustice and in a literal sense responsible for it, the bough is made to register the intimate details of the racial violence it cannot understand: “the rope against my bark,” “the weight of him in my grain,” “the throe of his final woe.” The bough dies as a direct effect of all this affect, though the pathos here is not the sympathetic act of feeling *with* the victim but actually the *feeling* of the victim—the bare sensation of what it is like to bear a dying body and the illusion that its death is one’s own. The bough’s physical position makes the unnamed man’s murder possible, and as a consequence the bough dies. What is the logic of this “consequence”? The bough is neither the most important cause nor the most important effect of this story; the bough’s death is not usually what is meant by “poetic justice.” The death of the bough is not the death of the lynch mob or of racism; as we know from the stanzas the *Century* cut, under the dead bough, the mock-judge lives on and “rides by, rides by / And goes to hunt the deer,” fear or no fear, rhyme or no rhyme, poem or no poem:

And ever the judge rides by, rides by,
 And goes to hunt the deer,
 And ever another rides his soul
 In the guise of a mortal fear.

And ever the man he rides me hard,
 And never a night stays he;
 For I feel his curse as a haunted bough,
 On the trunk of a haunted tree.

²² In 1904, Dunbar published a short story entitled “The Lynching of Jube Benson,” in which a “Dr. Melville” tells the story of a lynching for which he was responsible. Although he keeps hearing the phrase “Blood guilty!” he lives to tell the tale. The story was first published in Dunbar’s prose collection *The Heart of Happy Hollow* (New York: Dodd, Mead and Company, 1904), pp. 223–40.

The bough is punished for the mob's crime, and so the ongoing crime—the silenced pantomime of racial violence—will continue by other means. The bough's bad conscience changes nothing—in fact, this stand-in for white liberal guilt continues to witness and testify to more violence, becoming the obviously fictional “speaker” of the poem itself. The bough is our source, our archive, our first-person narrator, and finally it is our guilty pleasure, the inhuman “voice” on which the phenomenology of our reading depends. The dead bough may no longer be able to enable a hanging, but it has enabled reading for over a hundred years.

“The Haunted Oak” thus in effect traces a long arc of post-eighteenth-century American poetics, from the “border ballad” to the apostrophic structure associated with the romantic ode to Victorian dramatic monologue and dialogue to mid-to-late nineteenth-century ballad discourse to what will become the twentieth-century genre of the modern lyric. The title of Dunbar's 1896 breakthrough volume, *Lyrics of Lowly Life*, broadcast his embrace (and, I am suggesting, invention) of this new genre, as did the titles of *Lyrics of the Hearthside* (1899), *Lyrics of Love and Laughter* (1903), and *Lyrics of Sunshine and Shadow* (1905). Not all of Dunbar's books of poetry were labeled “Lyrics,” but all of the fancy Dodd, Mead, and Company volumes that did not feature accompanying photographic “illustrations” supplied by the Hampton Camera Club were so named.²³ That emerging poetic genre would take the place of the ballad as the most popular and capacious version of poetry for the new century. Unlike the ballad, the broadly conceived lyric could be indisputably literary without also being apparently raced, without remaining tied to either Anglo-Scots or black (or German, or Ojibwe, or Spanish, or Persian, or Swedish, or Siamese, or Icelandic) folk sources. The bifurcation that characterized Dunbar's titles from his first books, *Oak and Ivy* (1893) and *Majors and Minors* (1895), through all

²³ The exceptions during Dunbar's short life were *Poems of Cabin and Field* (1899), *Candle-Lightin' Time* (1901), *When Malindy Sings* (1903), *L'il Gal* (1904), *Chris'mus is A-Comin and Other Poems* (1905), *Howdy, Honey, Howdy* (1905), *A Plantation Portrait* (1905), and *Joggin' Erlong* (1906), all except the *Chris'mus* volume reprints of popular poems in the *Lyrics* volumes accompanied by photographs.

of the “*Lyrics*” listed above has almost always been read as raced, though the volumes themselves never direct such a reading.²⁴ McGill’s characterization of the ballad as “the literary form of non-literary verse” persisted in the reception of Dunbar’s work despite his own (or his publisher’s) characterization of his work as sets of “lyrics.”

Like the talking bough, the spectral presence of the ballad outlived its time and place in the modern lyric. The messier business of the ballad’s mediation of different folk (or faux-folk) sources and communities is what is abstracted (if not quite neutralized) by the substitution of the lyric, since the work of stipulative verse-genres still clung to outmoded cultural functions and scenes of address in the case of the ballad—as the Anglo-Scots faux-origins of “The Haunted Oak” clung to its newly racialized American content. But that messier business of the ballad also still clung to the emerging lyric at the turn into the twentieth century. For Dunbar, the abstraction of his “lyrics” could only be partial, since his readers would always identify them with the “lowly life” of the race with which they identified him and which this identification helped to create.²⁵ Yet despite (or, I have been arguing, perhaps because of) his work’s immersion in earlier genres, Dunbar’s motivated abstraction of those genres moved poetics in a direction that has succeeded so completely that we no longer know how to read poems in any other way.

²⁴ Again, one example may stand for many here: In *Lyrics of Sunshine and Shadow: The Tragic Courtship and Marriage of Paul Laurence Dunbar and Alice Ruth Moore* (New York: New York Univ. Press, 2001), Eleanor Alexander writes that in Dunbar’s first book of poetry, *Oak and Ivy* (published with borrowed money by the Press of the United Brethren in Dayton in 1893), “the first and larger section, the ‘Oak,’ holds solemn poems in standard English, while the smaller section, the ‘Ivy,’ consists of light dialect pieces. But much to Paul’s surprise, the ivy strangled the oak; for the poems in the dialect section garnered the most favorable comment” (p. 38). Although Alexander’s version of Dunbar’s first book would make an interesting part of my analysis of “The Haunted Oak,” it is another fantasy of racial segregation in print. *Oak and Ivy* was not divided in sections, and I have not been able to find any letters of interviews in which Dunbar gave any explanation of the title’s significance.

²⁵ As Nurhussein points out, this racialization of lyricism was also Dunbar’s: “In an essay titled ‘The Negro in Literature,’ [Dunbar] writes, ‘the predominating power of the African race is lyric.’ Later, he repeats the sentiment, even rendering this lyricism essential: ‘the black man’s soul is lyric, not dramatic. We may expect songs from the soul of the Negro, but hardly much dramatic power, either in writing or acting!’” (Nurhussein, *Rhetorics of Literacy*, pp. 98–99).

As I have argued elsewhere, the history of poetics in the nineteenth century was a long, uneven process of such lyricization of inherited verse genres, a process in which particular poetic structures with particular modes of address and particular publics (odes, epistles, elegies, georgics, poems of affairs of state, locodescriptive poems, epitaphs, ballads, epyllions, acrostics, epigrams, sonnets, hymns) were gradually abstracted into one larger genre of poetry that came to be loosely associated with the lyric.²⁶ What the resulting big abstraction of “the lyric” ends up meaning in this ongoing historical process is open to interpretation and debate, but one thing that all readers seem to agree upon is that this large genre depends upon a fictional “speaker.” One of the most important questions that has been posed in response to the lyricization thesis is, simply, “Why?” Why do verse genres gradually collapse and become more abstract after the last decades of the eighteenth century?²⁷ Why does the reading of poems come to depend on the fiction of a dramatic persona? Why is this process ongoing? I have been suggesting here that, at least for American poetics, Dunbar’s poem spells out one very good answer to that very good question.

Like “The Haunted Oak” (and like everything else in Anglo-America in the eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth centuries), the process of lyricization did not descend directly from romanticism without passing through the symptomatic history of racialization. As we have seen, the apostrophic opening of the poem quickly shifts into the structure of balladic narrative, but in the stanzas the *Century* cut, that framing ballad begins to break down and give way to something new and strange. The historical logic of that emergent abstraction is no more natural than is the logic of the bough’s spectral testimony, and this unnatural history of poetic discourse may be the poem’s most significant legacy. The bough in its dead and speaking

²⁶ For more extensive explanations and demonstrations of the lyricization thesis, see Virginia Jackson, *Dickinson’s Misery: A Theory of Lyric Reading* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 2005); *The Lyric Theory Reader: A Critical Anthology*, ed. Virginia Jackson and Yopie Prins (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 2014); and Virginia Jackson, “Lyric,” in *The Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, Fourth Edition, ed. Roland Greene, et al. (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 2012), pp. 826–34.

²⁷ I am grateful to Eliza Richards for posing the question in just this way.

form is not an inevitable outgrowth of the oak in the sense in which, for the history of philosophy (from Aristotle to John Locke, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Immanuel Kant, G.W.F. Hegel, and Karl Marx), the oak was the inevitable outgrowth of the acorn, the privileged figure for genealogical identity and for the ideal relation of cause and effect, the guarantee of a progressive history.²⁸ Instead, the eloquently dead oak bough is (like modern racism) the effect of a historical cause that cannot be explained by recourse to the history of philosophy, or to nineteenth-century theories of history, or to nineteenth-century theories of poetics. If in romantic poetics apostrophe tended to obey the logic that Barbara Johnson described when she wrote that “apostrophe is a form of ventriloquism through which the speaker throws voice, life, and human form into the addressee, turning its silence into mute responsiveness,” then we can begin to see how Dunbar’s twist on that logic—first through the ballad frame and then on the other side of that frame—makes “mute responsiveness” itself into “the speaker” of the poem, inverting the romantic and Victorian paradigms in which that muteness is the object rather than the subject of enunciation, thus canceling the expressive potential of “the speaker” at the same time that he creates what will become the mainstay of twentieth-century lyric reading.²⁹ The bough’s speaking silence is “the ban” it bears; it is prohibited from living, but also, apparently, it is prohibited from being put out of its misery.³⁰ This is what alienation feels like: the bough is

²⁸ This is not the place to recount the use of the acorn and oak as paradigms in the entire history of philosophy, though it is worth noting that for Hegel, the oak must negate the acorn to grow from it, thus turning Aristotelian and romantic progressive history into the (also progressive) dialectical history that Marx would adopt. Although I do not have time to do it here, I am suggesting that it would be interesting to put Dunbar’s oak into the history of Western philosophy in order to test the theory of optimistic internal causality that runs through that history against the pessimistic confusion of causality that characterizes Dunbar’s poem.

²⁹ Barbara Johnson, “Apostrophe, Animation, and Abortion,” *Diacritics*, 16, no. 1 (1986), 30.

³⁰ Dunbar’s use of “ban” here is actually an odd return to the historical English frame in the poem’s final lines, since the word derives from Old English *banna*, “to summon, command, proclaim,” from earlier Germanic *bannan*, “to command, forbid, banish, curse.” In the Indo-European etymologies that had become popular in the nineteenth century, it is an added irony that all of these words derive from the root *bha-*, meaning “to speak.” Available online at <[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ban_\(law\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ban_(law))>.

on but not of the oak; its speech cannot be heard and so must be read; it makes the claims of a subject but cannot be a subject.³¹

In the poem's last stanza, "the man"—the subject so alienated that like "the speaker" he can be designated only by the definite article—acquires posthumous agency by subjecting the bough to what verges on sexual violence:

And ever the man he rides me hard,
And never a night stays he;
For I feel his curse as a haunted bough,
On the trunk of a haunted tree.

The bough has been the means of hanging the man, and now it is the man's turn to be the means to an end for the bough—but what end? To feel "as a haunted bough" is to be alienated even from this speaker's own odd pathos, as if another "I" had crept into these last two lines and separated the limb not only from the tree but from itself. As Theodor Adorno would argue half a century after this poem's publication, perhaps the condition of a shared alienation is the imaginary community invoked by the first-person "speaker" of all modern lyric poetry, but Dunbar's poem testifies to the fact that in the history of American poetics, that dream of communal self-estrangement comes at a cost, since its utopian horizon hews so closely to the history of racial violence.³² The mute responsiveness of the bough is the poem "The Haunted Oak," and the idea that this muteness is the poem's "speaker" means that this speaker is a fantasy produced by lyric reading, by our vicarious embrace of a structure

³¹ Brent Edwards has written that "the lyric is not a timeless, universal form; it is marked by history—and its history couches a threat to the enunciation of black subjectivity" (Edwards, "The Seemingly Eclipsed Window of Form: James Weldon Johnson's Prefaces," in *The Jazz Cadence of American Culture*, ed. Robert G. O'Meally [New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1998], p. 596). Edwards has in mind the response of blues poetics to "traditional" lyric, but I have been suggesting an alternative history in which modern American lyric is made out of such threats.

³² See Theodor Adorno, "Lyric Poetry and Society (1957)," trans. Bruce Mayo, *Telos*, 20 (Summer 1974), 52–71. Adorno's idea of a "lyric speech [that] becomes the voice of human beings between whom the barriers have fallen" is actually anticipated by Dunbar's contemporary Francis Barton Gummere in *The Beginnings of Poetry* (New York: Macmillan Company, 1901). In that book, Gummere coins the phrase "imagined community" to describe the shared state of alienation invoked by the modern lyric, but that is another story.

of feeling constitutive of racism's modern life form, which is to say that racism is constitutive of American poetry's modern life form, ever and ever a haunted bough on the trunk of a haunted tree.

University of California, Irvine

ABSTRACT

Virginia Jackson, "Specters of the Ballad" (pp. 176–196)

This essay argues that Paul Laurence Dunbar's ballad "The Haunted Oak" (1901) indexes Dunbar's invention of the modern American lyric through the (lynching) form of modern racism. How does race ghost-write poetry's redefinition around the lyric? How does it create a dramatically abstract "speaker" that gives voice to and for an imagined community? Dunbar inverts both romantic apostrophe and Victorian dramatic monologue and dialogue in his speaking bough. He does this by framing his poem as a pre-romantic border ballad, a tale of Scots rebellion and English law superimposed upon American racist violence. What Jacqueline Goldsby has dubbed "racism's modern life form" thus becomes modern American poetry's life form, a lyricized poetic history haunted from root to branch.

Keywords: Paul Laurence Dunbar; lyric; ballad; racism; speaker