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## Rhetorics of Literacy

Nurhussein, Nadia

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## *introduction*

# “Mere Mutilation”

## *Becoming Literate in Dialect Poetry*

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With a desperate thrust of his long fingers through his Bard of Avon locks the young man confronted the beautiful girl.

“Refuse me,” he hissed, “and I shall do something that the whole world will regret!”

The beautiful girl shuddered.

“Oh, Archibald,” she pleaded, “you—you are not going to write love poetry for the magazines?”

“Worse still. I shall start writing dialect poetry.”

Thinking of the terrible calamity that could be thwarted by a woman’s “yes,” she accepted him on the spot.

—Anonymous, “Terrible Threat”

Around 1880 poetry turned into literature.

—Friedrich Kittler, *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter*

•

*In the April 1897* issue of the *Century Magazine*, humorist Charles Battell Loomis published a short story titled “The Dialect Store.” In it, a newspaper writer narrates a dream in which he shops at a store selling “[a]ll kinds of dialects . . . by the yard, the piece, or in quantities to suit.” Browsing, he inspects their stock of Scotch, black American, Western, German, French-Canadian, Yiddish, Yankee, Irish, and English “dialects.” All of the clerks assisting him are stereotypes of their ethnicities, repositories of exaggerated literary dialect in themselves: the black man selling black dialect is sycophantic and eager to please, the Jewish clerk obsessed with bargaining. The dialects are deliberately bad, and the story’s

central message is one about how formulaic contemporary dialect writing, an enterprise tried by many in their desperation to succeed in the late-nineteenth-century literary marketplace, can be. “The Dialect Store” satirizes dialect writers who approach composition in this mechanical manner, arguing that they are artistic failures, even if they are commercial successes. Tacking material—literally, because the dialect is sold as if fabric—to literary work is depicted as artificial and unnatural, and the “quill-drivers” who would patronize this storehouse are not creating genuine literature but manufacturing products. As the newspaper writer absurdly concludes, “I’d be the greatest dialect-writer of the age if I could get goods on credit there.”

If this is bad dialect writing, good dialect writing, by extension, necessarily captures the essence or spirit of the particular speech represented. It must be natural; it must not submit to the kind of easy translation suggested by the black clerk of “The Dialect Store” when he urges his customer, “any tahm you want to fix up a tale, an’ put in de Queen’s English in black, come yer an’ as’ fer me.”<sup>1</sup> One reviewer, for example, providing an explanation for why “references of the press to dialect poetry are in the main cold and unsympathetic,” cited a partially successful dialect poem that ended unconvincingly, because “no man who is capable of writing ‘neath a grassy screen’ is capable of following it with ‘Durn it all!’—except an amateur dialect poet.”<sup>2</sup> Most serious dialect writers in late-nineteenth-century America conceived of their writing as sincere efforts to represent “nonstandard” speech, and demanded that literary dialect look like it would sound convincing if read aloud, without obstructing the reading process. A journal called *The Writer*, founded in 1887 with the subtitle “A Monthly Magazine for Literary Workers,” frequently addressed the issue of how to write dialect effectively in the magazine’s early years. A typical assessment was that “[o]rdinary dialect writing appeals merely to the eye, indeed, and its rules seem to be conventional or traditional. Really good work . . . must be read aloud to be appreciated.”<sup>3</sup> Literary dialects that call attention to themselves visually were considered flawed because, as one writer argues, “[p]athos is not attained by the use of apostrophes to mark the omission of letters and syllables, nor by the use of extraordinary alphabetical combinations (though, to be sure, some spelling of so-called dialect *is* enough to bring tears.)”<sup>4</sup> And yet, the effects of punctuation and orthographical experimentation constituted a large part of the experience of reading dialect poetry. If we can accept that, as Jennifer De Vere Brody writes, “one of punctuation’s many functions is to endow print with affect and emotion,” it is possible that the apostrophes marking elisions that are

found everywhere in dialect poetry somehow elicit an affective response in its readers.<sup>5</sup>

Despite the fact that so many found fault with dialect writing as it was commonly practiced, the genre was incredibly popular at the turn of the century, as illustrated by the dialogue in the epigraph above. The *Century*, like many other American magazines and newspapers, was able to sustain a special section in the late nineteenth century devoted largely to dialect pieces, along with other light and humorous literature and cartoons. (“The Dialect Store” shares a page, in a section titled “In Lighter Vein,” with a poem by Paul Laurence Dunbar.) *Harper’s Monthly Magazine* and the *Atlantic Monthly* also devoted a considerable amount of space to dialect writing, and in 1890 Edward Bok, editor of the *Ladies’ Home Journal*, aggressively solicited James Whitcomb Riley for a dialect poem, believing that it would increase the magazine’s circulation by “one or two hundred thousand subscribers.”<sup>6</sup> The force of the dialect writing trend was so overwhelming that contemporary reviews frequently complained of it. Some complained simply of poor execution, as I’ve already mentioned. Others had more serious concerns about the impact of the genre itself on its readers. A reviewer for *Appleton’s Journal* demanded that “the critics, in mercy to mankind, must avoid pointing out this easy path to fame, lest a new and devastating epidemic of dialect verse fall upon the land.”<sup>7</sup> The supposed dangers of nonstandard language such as slang and regional and ethnic varieties of English, in speech and as represented in writing, were of grave concern to some lexicographers and philologists who were committed to the idea of preserving the American language against corruption, as Kenneth Cmiel, Michael North, Gavin Jones, and others have written. The dialect fabrics found at “The Dialect Store” may be sewn together to create something resembling the perfect dialect story, but the seams where these cloths meet are, for some, flaws themselves. As one critic grumbled, in a metaphor anticipating the conceit of Loomis’s story, “Our literature seems bent on turning its wrong side out, and displaying to the world its seams and ravellings and tattered linings.”<sup>8</sup>

Itself a patchwork of various tacked-on literary dialects, “The Dialect Store” becomes the type of easy dialect story it warns against, passing briefly through dialects as the protagonist passes through the space of the store. The visual effect for readers of the different dialects jostling against each other—here, in one heteroglossic story, but also in late-nineteenth-century literature in general—is one of constant disorientation and reorientation. As North and Jones point out, the linguistic diversity brought about by increased immigration posed a threat to the imagined purity of

a still-developing standard American English language, and dialect literature, with all of its multilingual characters, served as documentation testifying to this “terrible threat,” to quote the title of the first epigraph above. An essay in *The Bookman* articulates this sentiment:

Of course the chatter of these types is nothing now to what it will be—when they all begin to intermarry and produce other types. If Johnny or Chimmie should be spared to wed a Hungarian lady, or Ole should become enamoured of Miss Li Sing, or one of Mr. Cahan’s Poles should seek the hand of a Bowery “loidy,” will any one vouch for the consequences? Surely the American novelist has taken on himself a tremendous linguistic burden.<sup>9</sup>

Needless to say, the mixture of races behind “this Babel of discord” is the unstated threat, not simply the mixture of languages undermining a centralized and standardized American English.<sup>10</sup> And the writer is somehow responsible for this intermarriage, in his assuming this “tremendous linguistic burden.” Unmediated interaction between these ethnic types will doubtless “produce other types”: miscegenated and potentially unreadable. Writers and readers will be faced, the *Bookman* writer fears, with dialects that are less distinct, exceeding definition, and both writers and readers will be forced to navigate unfamiliar waters. This is most assuredly not a picture of happy “melting pot” assimilation; it is one of surreptitious and menacing ethnic identity. Moreover, this charge, while here leveled at the novelist, was more effectively directed at the dialect poet. The circulation of dialect in periodical literature and in publicly displayed and disseminated ephemera, such as signs, broadsides, and advertisements, implicated poets—whose lyric verse is frequently understood to be monologic, and thus unmoored from any tempering and mediating narrative voice to control that menace—in this jostling.<sup>11</sup> The story of this book, therefore, is implicitly one of literary miscegenation, despite the fact that each poet discussed here is closely associated with one particular literary dialect.

However, no dialect writing—even if “pure”—can ever truly be familiar. Dialect had fascinating effects on the reading process, and writers exploited these effects formally and thematically. In this study, I explore the production and reception of dialect in late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century American poetry, examining the contexts in which dialect poetry was written, read, and performed. I am invested in both the formal mechanisms and the cultural history of dialect poetry, and, as a result, I

bring something like what Caroline Levine calls a "strategic formalist" perspective and what Monique Morgan describes as "politically inflected formalism" to the study of dialect poetry. Levine's strategic formalism, a theoretical position acknowledging that "[l]iterary forms . . . trouble and remake political relationships in surprising, aleatory, and often confusingly disorderly ways," is part of a "new attention to form as a part of a politically aware historicism," and this position aligns with my intervention into dialect poetry as a genre. In fact, as Morgan writes, there may be something about "poems written in this period" that "invite[s] readers to view social perspectives and formal choices as inextricably linked, constantly influencing each other."<sup>12</sup> I consider my work here to be in conversation with that of Morgan and Levine, who represent a significant trend in Victorian poetry studies, and with that of Virginia Jackson, Yopie Prins, and other poetry scholars represented in the January 2008 *PMLA* special section titled "The New Lyric Studies" and in the groundbreaking collection *The Traffic of Poems: Nineteenth-Century Poetry and Transatlantic Exchange*, edited by Meredith L. McGill. In addition, the dialect poem presents us with a provocative case study when read through Virginia Jackson's illuminating study of the twentieth century's literary-critical drive to reduce all poetry to the lyric. As a type of dramatic monologue, one that more than any other poetic form defies John Stuart Mill's definition of poetry as something "overheard" (as opposed to "eloquence," which is "heard"), the dialect poem poses challenges to "lyric reading" as described by Jackson. As Jackson points out, Mill calls the book of poetry "a soliloquy in full dress," but also claims that, though "[t]he actor knows that there is an audience present; . . . if he act as though he knew it, he acts ill."<sup>13</sup> Dialect poems, on the other hand, explicitly require audiences, and they require actors to dramatize their acting rather than obscure it.

Unlike Gavin Jones, Richard Brodhead, and others, I focus exclusively on the use of dialect in verse rather than prose in part because the dialect poem was ready made for elocutionary use in a way that the dialect prose piece was not. It was easier for audiences to, on one hand, imagine that the recited dialect poem captured the unmodified voices of a disappearing culture, and, on the other hand, struggle through odd transcriptions of those voices. In this respect, the dialect poem resembles what Susan Stewart calls a "distressed" genre, one in which "the literary 'voicing' of folklore forms emphasizes their new textuality all the more," because "any genre that in literature attempts to 'pass itself as' the oral is destined to appear in ill-fitting clothing."<sup>14</sup> (The transcribed-speech-as-clothing metaphor resurfaces.) The intersections of the oral and textual aspects of the

dialect poem, visible in both its composition and its reception, resulted in confusing and contradictory interactions with the genre.

As this book demonstrates, neither the cultural nor formal aspects of dialect poetry may be neglected if one wants to understand how the genre operated in late-nineteenth-century American culture. Like Shira Wolosky, who, in a section of the *Cambridge History of American Literature* dedicated to nineteenth-century poetry, “approaches poetry as a distinctive formal field on which the rhetorics of nineteenth-century American culture find intensified expression, concentration, reflection, and command,” I find that dialect poetry offers a specialized case of this relationship between poetics and rhetoric; as Wolosky puts it, “far from negating the specifically literary nature of a poetic text, rhetorical context illuminates and affirms poetry’s cultural importance and aesthetic power.”<sup>15</sup> With similar goals in mind, I explore in this book dialect poetry’s rhetorical interest in where sound meets literacy and textuality. My approach thus also shares ground with approaches like Garrett Stewart’s “phonemic reading” and John Shoptaw’s “lyric cryptography.” Like the Victorianists cited above, Shoptaw states that his approach is concerned with “mak[ing] a historical and cultural reading of [a] poem textually specific.”<sup>16</sup> In the lyric cryptography he observes, poetic meaning is produced as alternative senses hiding in words and in the relationships between words. These kinds of meanings, especially those resulting from graphemic and phonemic cryptography, are produced again and again in dialect poetry.

While some critical attention has been paid to the important role of dialect poetry in the United States—Wolosky, for example, addresses it in her contribution to the *Cambridge History of American Literature*—that attention is rarely sustained. Dialect poetry is often mentioned in passing and yet rarely discussed in depth. My goal in this book is to demonstrate that the profound influence of this popular genre stems not only from its use as an entertaining distraction from “serious” poetry, or as a force for standardization or caricature, but as a complicated pedagogical and rhetorically purposeful tool. In order to demonstrate this, I am concerned with the formal details, the mechanics, and the cultures of reading practices, and this is one respect in which my book differs from recently published books by Joshua L. Miller and Matthew Hart, studies that are concerned with the relationships between nonstandard language and modernist writing (American in Miller’s case and transnational in Hart’s).

Throughout this book, I use the terms “dialect” and “literary dialect” to describe the limitless ways in which writers evoke so-called nonstandard speech in written English and not speech itself. Written English does

not correspond to a particular spoken dialect; thus, orthographical alteration wrongly suggests deviation from a correct standard. Because literary dialect differs qualitatively from spoken dialects, any dialect poetry—“good” or “bad”—calls attention to its inauthenticity. A poet’s transcription of speech inevitably shows bias, recording some features which seem relevant to him or her while omitting aspects of his or her own.<sup>17</sup> Too frequently, dialect poetry has been read as an unsuccessful attempt to record speech, when it should be read instead as evidence of the difference between speaking dialect and writing it (or as Charles Bernstein puts it, “the yammering gap between speech and writing”<sup>18</sup>). The fact that so many readers and writers have failed to note that dialect poems could be driven and enriched by their visual effects, by their appeal to the eye in addition to the ear, has surprisingly continued to exert influence upon readings of dialect poetry over one hundred years after the period of its greatest popularity.

I use the term “dialect” rather than “vernacular” precisely to emphasize that any analysis focusing exclusively on the orality of literary dialect is necessarily limited, ignoring an entire field of activity. The visual and textual elements of literary dialect have been historically undervalued especially by African American literary criticism, devoting greater attention instead to dialect poetry’s roots in an oral tradition. In a 2010 review, Tess Chakkalal writes that all five of the recently published studies covered by her essay “document and supplement the turn away from vernacular and oral forms of African American expression that were once central to the formation and study of African American culture,” pointing to a general trend toward illuminating African American literate practice.<sup>19</sup> My study joins, perhaps ironically, this recent work turning away from the vernacular and generally concerned with the literate dimensions of African American culture. Despite this trend, however, the most significant and lasting criticism of dialect poetry remains that of James Weldon Johnson, who called it “mere mutilation of English spelling and pronunciation,” thereby rejecting the genre’s visual and textual aspects.<sup>20</sup> I argue that, in fact, it is the interplay between suggestions of orality and literacy that gives literary dialect its interest, and much of the African American literary tradition depends upon this interplay to a degree that has still not been fully acknowledged. Henry Louis Gates, Jr., for example, argued a generation ago that dialect poetry generally “failed when it tried to cram a live, spoken form into a rigid, written one, oblivious to its internal logic, unaware of its linguistic possibilities, technically inadequate to preserve the poetry as spirit.” Consequently, he writes, it “choked and wasted a

spirit and produced a mediocre body of trivia.”<sup>21</sup> The tension produced by this imagined incompatibility and coercion is precisely what requires closer attention. The juxtaposition of elements that gesture toward orality alongside those exploiting literate forms does not necessarily impoverish the genre. Dialect poetry in the nineteenth century did not “waste” an existing form; it developed a new, productive, and strangely difficult one.

Because dialect poetry has been associated with orality, critics of dialect poetry have in most cases assumed that the genre succeeds best when attempted by a native speaker of that dialect. As a reviewer of Bret Harte’s work wrote, “It is gravely to be doubted whether any rhymes written in dialect by men who are not in the habit of using that patois as their ordinary speech should be regarded as anything but literary curiosities, as *tours de force* of odd learning, precisely like the Greek verses of schoolboys and the anagrams of a century ago.”<sup>22</sup> The reviewer’s comparisons are revealing. Gates’s “mediocre body of trivia” appears here in the form of “literary curiosities.” Both perspectives suggest that, unless dialect poetry comes naturally, it can only be a futile intellectual exercise. In fact, according to this reviewer, the new dialect poems (Harte and John Hay are considered in his review) are not the work of poets at all; instead, they “belong to the class of *jeux d’esprit* which poets have rarely written, but with which clever men have always amused themselves.”<sup>23</sup>

In response to readers’ and writers’ frustrations with dialect spellings that failed to evoke speech, representations of dialect in American poetry have moved, as several critics have noted, from primarily orthographical to primarily syntactical over the course of the last century. Unlike orthography, syntactical variety is as apparent aurally as it is visually, satisfying readers who are invested in preserving the impressions of orality in poetry. However, I argue that the poets discussed in this book alter orthography in order to encourage visual readings. It is not surprising, then, that poets interested in dialect were also interested in the illogic of conventional spelling. The author of “The Dialect Store” is also the author of humorous poems about spelling, including the well-known “O-U-G-H,” which is included in the *Norton Book of Light Verse* under the section “Some Fun with the Mother Tongue.” The poem’s speaker, a French child whose speech is represented in dialect, attempts again and again, in stanzas escalating in absurdity, to determine how “-ough” as it appears in certain English words should sound. First, he rhymes “plough” with “through,” only to be corrected by the schoolteacher; finally told that “lough” should be pronounced with the ending “-ock,” he is driven to violence and threatens to throw a “rough” (a rock).

Strange spellings, in the forms of both dialect writing and orthographies encouraging phonetic spelling reform—with Loomis’s poem being an example of both—reflected cultural dissatisfaction with the inaccuracy of written English and the desire to have American spelling correspond closely to the way people really spoke. Both nineteenth-century dialect poetry and spelling reform, then, emerged from the intersections of orality and literacy. Walter Ong describes the nineteenth century in America as a period of nostalgia for a primarily oral culture, in which oral performances, including lecturing and public novel reading, were popular. For example, Ong writes that, “[s]till yearning for the old orality, the nineteenth century developed ‘elocution’ contests, which tried to reprimarize printed texts, using careful artistry to memorize the texts verbatim and recite them so that they would sound like extempore oral productions.”<sup>24</sup> Lecturing in America was becoming big business for English novelists, essayists, and other belletrists, with Charles Dickens’s 1867–8 reading tour “the first financial blockbuster.”<sup>25</sup> The next two decades, the decades during which Bret Harte and James Whitcomb Riley—the subjects of my first two chapters—respectively made names for themselves, “seem to have been the climax of the business” of lecturing.<sup>26</sup> Despite the fact that dialect writing achieved some popularity earlier in the nineteenth century, most notably with the publication of James Russell Lowell’s *The Biglow Papers*, Harte’s “Plain Language from Truthful James” (also known as “The Heathen Chineese”), published in 1870, provides the chronological starting point for this study precisely because of the coincidence of the extreme, unprecedented popularity of the poem in both its print and oral incarnations.

The education of children, according to Ong, was influenced by this “yearning” for orality: “The famous *McGuffey’s Readers*, published in the United States in some 120 million copies between 1836 and 1920, were designed as remedial readers to improve not the reading for comprehension which we idealize today, but oral, declamatory reading.”<sup>27</sup> All of this interest in orality coincided, ironically, with increased literacy. Lee Soltow and Edward Stevens show that the second and third of three dramatic drops in illiteracy occur in the 1870s, corresponding with compulsory education in many states, and in the 1880s, corresponding with compulsory attendance.<sup>28</sup> By the turn of the century, literacy rates were high, certainly among whites. And, among African Americans, 70 percent were literate in 1910, up from 30 percent only three decades earlier, demonstrating “the slow but steady rise in black literacy in the United States in the decades of the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries.”<sup>29</sup> So, where

Ong emphasizes attempts to revive oral practices such as elocution, Shirley Brice Heath finds an invasion of print in the late nineteenth century:

In what was termed the “age of reading,” more people were literate than ever before, and wide varieties of information were available. Conversations and other oral forms of communication—even public oratory—were declining in favor of newspapers and other written means of exchanging knowledge and opinion. This extension of writing into formerly oral areas of communication, such as public lectures, debate series, picnics, stump meetings, and conversation clubs, influenced the increasing drive for standardization by grammarians and like-minded citizens.<sup>30</sup>

In fact, this mingling of writing and speech, of literate and oral modes, helps to explain the popularity of dialect poetry and to describe how it functions. The success of dialect poetry depended upon the environment provided by coexisting—and mutually enriching—oral and literate modes at the end of the nineteenth century. At the turn of the century, one could encounter poetry, as Joan Shelley Rubin points out, “not only in the intimate surroundings of a lovers’ tête-à-tête, but also, for example, in classroom recitations, family gatherings, speaking choir concerts, Boy Scout campfires, religious services, celebrity performances, and, eventually, radio broadcasts. Each of those venues supported ideologies and behaviors (such as rereading, reading aloud, and reading in groups) that eluded ledgers and statistics.”<sup>31</sup> And, yet, all of those oral reading practices were accompanied by pervasive silent reading, which was becoming more and more entrenched within and without the classroom, as I discuss in the first chapter of this book.

Reading dialect poetry as a phenomenon that requires of its readers a degree of competence with the features of both oral and literate art forms, I demonstrate in this study how the emergence of the figure of the silent dialect poetry reader in late-nineteenth-century America herself embodies a challenge to the perception of literary dialect as unequivocally oral. The reception of dialect poetry, as sometimes a silent reading experience and sometimes public declamation, was pulled in what were perceived to be opposing directions to create an entirely novel and experimental reading experience, one that was disquieting for some poetry readers. Many readers and writers thought that dialect poetry—even poetry in general—suffered if it was not read aloud. Readers such as John Harrington Cox, in a 1914 essay, expressed a commonly held view when he complained that

the silent reading of poetry was “artificial” and that it was “a marvelous delight only when the subtle harmonies of the verse pulse through the reader’s soul and his inward ear catches its stately tread or tripping measures.”<sup>32</sup> In other words, even silent poetry reading, it was argued, should never be truly silent. Furthermore, even more than the silent reading of other subgenres of poetry, the silent reading of dialect poetry itself enacted the mingling of orality and literacy intrinsic to it, and contradicted understandings of dialect writing as simply a nostalgic attempt to recover an oral time in our culture’s development.

Because late-nineteenth-century and early-twentieth-century dialect poetry is frequently about, and explicitly addresses, semi- and nonliterate people, they are presumed to be its intended audience. However, despite statements of poetics by dialect poets insisting that they see their dialect work as the mode of expression best suited to their roles as poets of the people, the mode that allows them to write inclusively to literate and illiterate alike, dialect poetry actually excludes readers who cannot engage successfully with the complex oral and literate components of the verse. In effect, dialect writers’ experiments with spelling distanced them from less competent readers and impeded direct communication. Take, for example, Twain’s assertion in the “Explanatory” for *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* that he “painstakingly” represented “shadings” of dialect in the novel, which, as Lisa Gitelman points out, “is equally a claim about his proficiency in spelling them. Orthography was one ground upon which literate English speakers negotiated their own identity and the identity of others while at the same time experiencing writing as artificial, glimpsing everywhere the potential failure of textual representation to recuperate aural experience.”<sup>33</sup> That writers labored over their dialect spellings to such an intense degree suggests that they targeted an audience who would respond both to the elements that make dialect poetry easy to listen to and to those that make it difficult to read. Dialect poems intended for competent readers sometimes—as in the case of Riley’s “child writing” poems—prompt readers to revisit childhood, when a reader is typically most aware of his or her efforts to process writing, with all of the attendant struggles, but to retain in the end the ability to move easily between oral and literate modes.

Ironically, though dialect poetry requires work from both reader and writer—not as semantic or conceptual complexity would, but as something like mechanical complexity—it has been dismissed by scholars and critics, then and now, largely because of its lack of complexity.<sup>34</sup> Oliver Wendell Holmes, a literary lion by Riley’s time, damned him with faint

praise by claiming that he “has done things, perhaps, which will outlast the more laborious work of some of the older and more pretentious poets.”<sup>35</sup> While predicting an immortality (that Riley would not achieve) as a way of honoring the younger poet, he also assumes that his verse is effortlessly produced, that no labor has gone into it, and, by extension, that no work is required to interpret it. This was, of course, a common misconception. A journalist writing in 1871 of the popularity of Harte’s poem the year before expressed the feelings of many when he wrote that “[i]t seemed that nothing was so easy as to write dialect poetry.”<sup>36</sup> In response to this misconception, I intend for the “cultivation” in my subtitle to evoke the multiple senses of the word in Raymond Williams’s etymology in *Keywords*, containing almost opposite meanings: cultivation shifts from describing a kind of work to describing a quality or temperament that is most easily fostered by a lifestyle free from work. As dialect poetry was actively cultivated in the late-nineteenth-century United States, its practitioners expose in various ways the labor involved in its reading as well as its writing. What critics of the genre attacked as a formulaic quality is alternatively evidence of its constructedness, as opposed to the ethereal and mysterious inspiration attached to other forms of lyric poetry. We see this distinction in an 1871 newspaper poem titled “A Recipe for a Poem ‘In Dialect,’” published one year after Harte’s “Plain Language from Truthful James,” which compares writing a dialect poem to preparing a dish. After choosing a crude Western character, one needs only to “Pepper his talk with the raciest slang, / . . . / Seasoned with blasphemy,—lard him with curses.” Once finished cooking, so to speak, the would-be poet may “Serve him up hot in your ‘dialect’ verses,— / Properly dished, he’d excite a sensation, / And tickle the taste of our delicate nation.” Whether stitched together as in the fabric metaphor in Loomis’s story or mixed together in a culinary metaphor, a dialect poem was thought to be—to add yet another metaphor—a creaky machine, assembled through formula.

The difficulties presented by dialect poetry, then, mean that it does not behave as much popular literature does. The nineteenth century saw a tremendous increase in the number of books, magazines, and newspapers published in the United States, including those of the seemingly effortless sort, such as dime novels, that high-brow readers considered detrimental. James Russell Lowell, himself once a dialect poet, complained that the increase of printed materials “has supplanted a strenuous habit of thinking with a loose indolence of reading which relaxes the muscular fiber of the mind.”<sup>37</sup> While I would not argue that reading dialect poetry necessitates “a strenuous habit of thinking”—quite the opposite—it does require its

readers to work through it before allowing them to relax. Popular literature, as Janice Radway argues, displays its essential conservatism "in its refusal to adopt the subversive modernist argument that meaning is the result of a complex collaboration between text and reader"; instead, she writes, "author and reader seem to understand each other automatically, naturally and without effort."<sup>38</sup> William Charvat's definition of popular poetry is similar:

Ordinarily it is not conspicuously or radically experimental in form; it does not challenge the reader on grounds where he does not wish to be met; it is not intellectually daring or adventurous; it is not pervasively cynical or pessimistic. More positively, it is, or seems to be, clear and lucid; its rhythms and rhyme patterns are unmistakable; its imagery and symbolism are exposed rather than hidden, functional rather than ends in themselves. Its subject matter, not its method or its devices, is its reason for existing. . . . To be professionally successful, the poet who produces it must have a "manner" that is his own and is as readily recognizable as a brand name, and a "matter" or "matters" that can be exploited without seeming repetitiousness over a long period of time.<sup>39</sup>

According to Charvat's definition, the poets discussed here certainly do display some of the aspects associated with popular poetry. They are certainly "brand name[s]," and most use "unmistakeable" rhyme schemes, even those writing during an era when free verse was the norm among most major poets. However, I would argue that dialect poetry is experimental in its way, and does challenge the reader in its labor-intensive manipulations of language. Nineteenth-century dialect poetry, as Bernstein suggests in his grouping of poets like Dunbar and Claude McKay with poets like Louis Zukofsky and Gertrude Stein, anticipates some of the experiments of modernist writing. It depends upon collaboration that is more or less translation: the interpretive work involved in decoding dialect.

*The process* of reading dialect poetry in late-nineteenth-century America was shaped by the writing practices of two of the most famous poets of the era, Harte and Riley. The cultural impact of their popular poetry is major, but few have taken it seriously; Angela Sorby, in her recent book chapter about Riley, and Gary Scharnhorst, in his substantial body of work on Harte, are notable exceptions. In my first two chapters, I argue that dialect poetry served contradictory educational goals—for example,

supporting recitation but “corrupting” informal speech—in a multifaceted atmosphere of increasingly silent reading, of devotion to spelling, and of popular poetry performance. Harte’s and Riley’s public personae were developed in part by their performances, and in these chapters I discuss how audiences perceived the relationship between their physical presences on the stage and their dialects. Poetry performance, however, extended beyond the stage at the end of the nineteenth century: Riley’s presence was also preserved on phonograph by the Victor Talking Machine Company and in film (he served as a narrator in a silent film adaptation of “Little Orphant Annie”), which I address here. As Margaret Linley writes, “Given that the nineteenth century was a time of tremendous and exciting proliferation of new industrial and communications technologies, there is much to be done by simply considering poetry in historical relation to the vast array of Victorian inventions such as the stereoscope, kaleidoscope, phonograph, computational machines, photography, and film.”<sup>40</sup> In response to Linley and to Ivan Kreilkamp’s suggestion that scholars of Victorian poetry, like those of Victorian fiction, understand poetry of the period “as one element in a much broader modern culture of mechanical reproduction, mass visual experience, [and] mediated print cultures,” I propose the same for the dialect poetry of Victorian America represented most visibly by Riley. Dialect poetry—a subgenre viewed as particularly backward-looking, offering an even more exaggerated version of “Victorian poetry’s own production of an often romanticized or nostalgic vision of the past”—can be understood anew through these modern technologies.<sup>41</sup>

In addition, I identify two distinct types of literary dialect developed in the last decades of the nineteenth century. The “plain language” dialect typified by Harte’s “Plain Language from Truthful James” and the “peculiar language” dialect used in Riley’s poetry, especially in his “child writing,” represent distinct branches of American dialect poetry, each inducing particular effects upon the ways their original audiences read. In Harte’s case, the satirical bent of “Plain Language from Truthful James,” a poem that Scharnhorst calls “one of the most popular poems ever published,” was especially subject to gross misreading because of its allegedly plain language, as I discuss in this book’s second chapter.<sup>42</sup> Because plain language is less of a visual departure from written English than is peculiar language, readers interpreted the former as more transparent. Riley’s peculiar language, in its deviation from conventional English spelling, invites readers to reenact childhood literacy acquisition. Dialect poetry frequently takes as its subject the process of becoming literate, and Harte and Riley both contribute to the subgenre of dialect poetry that I call the Spelling

Bee poem. These are poems that depend for their humor upon the false association of dialect writing with illiteracy, crowning a character whose speech is recorded to suggest illiteracy as the winner of a spelling bee.

My third and fourth chapters address the poetry of Paul Laurence Dunbar, who, I argue, uses cultivation’s opposing senses to publish dialect poetry that points to both work and leisure in elite magazines such as the *Century* (usually relegated to a special section called “In Lighter Vein”). For Dunbar to attempt to place his publications in dialect in the *Century*, when most of the magazine’s readers would have viewed dialect poems as necessarily uncultivated, is a deliberately political move, forcing these readers to labor while cloaking his poetry in an air of effortlessness and ease. Black and white readers and listeners alike chose to forget Dunbar’s Midwestern roots and forays into Riley-like dialects because they compromised the effortless “authenticity” of his black poetic voice, which was grounded in an often stereotyped Southern culture. Dunbar’s “inauthenticity,” I argue, should be read in terms of both his failed emulation of Riley’s performances and his pursuit of a dialect poetry shaped by literacy as much as orality. Critical focus on the oral elements of Dunbar’s dialect obscures literate concerns, most notably in a subgenre developed in Dunbar’s work: the epistolary dialect poem. In this variation on an existing form, Dunbar introduces the problem of how speech could be reflected in writing a letter. In his choice of the letter as a model for these poems, Dunbar responds to an emerging silent reading public for dialect poetry.

In James Smethurst’s most recent book, *The African American Roots of Modernism: From Reconstruction to the Harlem Renaissance*, he argues that Dunbar “was the towering figure of black poetry who cast a huge literary shadow on all African American poets who followed him—and white, Asian American, and Latino poets, for that matter” and that his work has been “generally very poorly served by scholarship—at least until relatively recently.”<sup>43</sup> Like Smethurst, I firmly believe that Dunbar’s role in American literary history has been vastly underestimated and undervalued. For this reason, Dunbar is the central figure of this book, around whom the figures of the rest of the book directly or indirectly revolve and to whom I devote two chapters. Dunbar’s example exerts a centripetal force that serves as an organizing principle for this book, gesturing forward to Maggie Pogue Johnson, Langston Hughes, and Claude McKay, and gesturing backward to Harte, Riley, and Frances Ellen Watkins Harper.

The book’s fifth chapter addresses the relationship between women and dialect writing through the examples of Frances Ellen Watkins Harper and Maggie Pogue Johnson. As critics have pointed out, dialect writing

at the turn of the century was written primarily by men, as the genre was considered culturally inappropriate for women. (The stylistically divergent careers of married poets Paul Laurence Dunbar and Alice Dunbar-Nelson illustrate this point.) In this cultural milieu, Harper and Johnson chose to write and publish dialect poems, two of a small number of female dialect poets. Harper, in her “Aunt Chloe” poems in *Sketches of Southern Life*, and Johnson, in several poems about education, dealt explicitly with the process of literacy acquisition in their dialect poetry. Using a variety of the “plain language” I identify with Harte, Harper’s Aunt Chloe broaches subjects that are explicitly political and topical. Johnson’s poems in *Virginia Dreams*, modeled closely after Dunbar’s, were written (as the subtitle tells us) “for the idle hour,” linking dialect poetry with leisure.

My sixth chapter investigates the effects of handling a genre that is available to readers but not listeners. Although McKay’s and Hughes’s poems in *Songs of Jamaica* and *The Negro Mother and Other Dramatic Recitations* respectively may urge their readers to perform them aloud, the apparatus accompanying each is a silent text. In this chapter, I consider the excesses of both Walter Jekyll’s notes to McKay’s book and Hughes’s notes to his own collection. I argue that Hughes’s notes effectively become parallel poems themselves, sustaining narratives that are independent of the text to which they are attached. Jekyll’s notes reflect his perspective that the poet and his literary dialect must be mediated, being not sufficiently literary on their own. McKay’s poems, however, emphasize the continuities between literary dialect and poetic diction, and expose Jekyll’s stumbling attempts to distinguish between two kinds of “purity”: that of black speech as it represented in the book and that of standard English speech.

As Charles Bernstein writes, “One of the extraordinary things about the poetics of the ordinary is that it can make poems that look so strange.”<sup>44</sup> In fact, Bruce Andrews uses the materials of Riley’s dialect poetry to this end in his recent experimental sound poetry project, *White Dialect Poetry*; his “Libretto,” for example, repeats the word “o” for more than a page, creating blocks of text that work to defamiliarize the dialect word by isolating it from its potential linguistic structures and suddenly rendering it graphic. In addition, Andrews juxtaposes the spellings “adzac’ly,” “adzackly,” and “adzactly”—three ways of getting to the same sound.<sup>45</sup> (He even includes, in a part of this project titled *WhDiP, a sequence*, Riley’s punning “ortographts,” a word that makes an appearance at the start of this book’s first chapter.) Andrews’ project exploits the fact that dialect poets must negotiate their ways through their distinctive alterations. Because there is no standard lexicon or orthography of dialect

writing, a writer must develop his own “mutilated” spelling, to cite James Weldon Johnson’s description of literary dialect.

Rather than drawing the audience in, which is the illusion of the talky raconteur’s “gather round” type of dialect poem Harte and Riley especially were known for writing, literary dialect strains the intimacy between the writer and his or her audience. The loss of intimacy is a direct result of an intense focus—of reader and writer—on an unusual printed text. In relation to the “typographically centered” lines of poetry designed “for physiological reading ease” by German poet Arno Holz, who asked “why the eye should *not* have its particular pleasures in the printed type of a poem,” Frederick A. Kittler argues that “[t]he aesthetics of reception had become quite different circa 1900: instead of communication and its myth of two souls or consciousnesses, there are numerical relations between the materiality of writing and the physiology of the senses.”<sup>46</sup> Dialect poetry, more than other literary genres at the turn of the century, made readers aware of this lack of transparency. Whether or not they share the writer’s ethnic, gender, or class identities, readers need to puzzle out or translate the poem into standard written English from the poet’s spelling, which is peculiar to him or her. The dialect poems discussed in this book present themselves as rhetorics of literacy, demanding from their readers a silent reading experience alongside the performance-based aural reception usually associated with the genre. Dialect poetry’s paradox is in its concurrent simplicity and difficulty, its familiarity and strangeness, its ordinariness and literariness. The approaches taken by these poets illustrate how dialect poetry becomes a barometer of the shifting relationship between orality and literacy in late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century American literary culture.