



PROJECT MUSE®

Rhetorics of Literacy

Nurhussein, Nadia

Published by The Ohio State University Press

Nurhussein, Nadia.

Rhetorics of Literacy: The Cultivation of American Dialect Poetry.

The Ohio State University Press, 2013.

Project MUSE.muse.jhu.edu/book/23953.



➔ For additional information about this book

<https://muse.jhu.edu/book/23953>

chapter five

Gendered Dialect

*Frances Ellen Watkins Harper and
Maggie Pogue Johnson*

•
Don't criticize my writing
'Cause I ain't well trained you know
I hab al-ways been so sickly
Dat I haben had much show.

Don't laff and ridicule me
Cause 'twill make me feel ashamed,
For I knows dat I ain't great
Nor neither have I fame.

Some of dese poems you'er reading
Was written long ago,
When I was jist a little kid
Of thirteen years or so.

Don't criticize my poems,
'Cause I wrote 'em all for you;
I ain't had much training
'Tis de best dat I can do.

And if you find's my book
Ain't good as t'ought to be,
Jist leave it to my ignorance
And don't you laff at me.

—Christina Moody, “To My Dear Reader”

•

This defensive proem opens Christina Moody's 1910 *A Tiny Spark*. In a dialect style that shares some features with Riley's child writing, full of eye dialect and cacography (such as “laff”), Moody emphasizes her

modest, self-deprecating, and almost servile (“I wrote ’em all for you”) approach to poetry writing. She warns her reader that, because she “ain’t well trained,” he or she should not expect the verse that follows to show the effects of any education. Although versions of this rustic humility can be found in Riley’s and Dunbar’s poetry, the fact that Moody is a woman writing dialect poetry complicates how a contemporary audience would have understood that stance.

Despite the fact that the last decade of the nineteenth century and the first of the twentieth were unusually productive years for black women writers—it has, in fact, often been called the “Black Women’s Era”—relatively few women dared enter the realm of dialect poetry.¹ When critics have addressed this silence, they have usually claimed that dialect writing was not an acceptable domain for women, and that it was seen as an affront and challenge to black womanhood. For example, Caroline Gebhard argues that, “[a]s partners in racial uplift, black women could ill afford to dispense with the prerogatives of genteel femininity. For black women, so often caricatured as hypersexual and ignorant, language associated with a lack of proper decorum or education carried a double risk.”² So, for instance, when Paul Laurence Dunbar asked Alice Ruth Moore “whether or not [she] believe[d] in preserving by Afro-American . . . writers those quaint old tales and songs of our fathers which have made the fame of Joel Chandler Harris, Thomas Nelson Page, Ruth McEnery Stuart and others!,” her response made it clear that she wanted nothing to do with conventional dialect writing.³

In addition to the threats it posed to “genteel femininity,” dialect writing often espoused ideologies that ran counter to working-class women’s interests. In an essay about poetry by working-class British women, Susan Zlotnick ultimately comes to a conclusion similar to Gebhard’s—that women’s writing and dialect writing were at odds—but she focuses on gender divisions within social class rather than race in her argument that dialect literature is a working-class genre that is exclusively male. In fact, according to Zlotnick, “dialect discourse was itself inimical to female self-expression. . . . [W]orking-class women were silenced by the dialect tradition, which, in its adherence to the ideology of domesticity, made it difficult for working women to write of their own experiences as women who worked.”⁴ What Zlotnick discovers about British working-class dialect poetry generally obtains for African American dialect poetry. And, moreover, what becomes clear in the meeting of Zlotnick’s and Gebhard’s arguments is the revelation that black women were driven from dialect poetry from both sides: black working-class women would turn from dia-

lect poetry for its promotion of a lifestyle they didn't recognize as true, and black bourgeois women would turn from dialect poetry that was not consistent with racial uplift. In other words, both those who did and did not conform to the ideology of domesticity mentioned by Zlotnick would avoid dialect poetry.⁵

In this chapter, I take up the question of why so few women wrote dialect poetry, or rather why so few women were successful dialect poets (very few books of dialect poetry by women reached the literary marketplace), and what those women who did publish dialect poetry hoped to accomplish by doing so. In response to pressures that excluded women from the field, some women explicitly and directly confronted gender restrictions in their dialect poetry, particularly through the topic of the theatricality of clothing. I focus on the work of Frances Ellen Watkins Harper and Maggie Pogue Johnson, one known primarily as an activist and author of a novel and the other not known much at all. Although Harper's *Sketches of Southern Life* was first published in 1872 and was reprinted throughout the '70s, '80s, and '90s by Merrihew & Son and Ferguson Brothers, Johnson's *Virginia Dreams* and *Thoughts for Idle Hours* were published in 1910 and 1915 respectively in relative obscurity.⁶

According to Elizabeth McHenry, it is important to recognize that African American literature in the early twentieth century, a period "for which we have no real literary bearing, for which there is no catchy name or useful grouping of writers or works," has been characterized mainly by remarkable political, sociological, and otherwise nonfictional writing.⁷ As such, many productive black writers—especially women, though it was still their "era"—were silenced in the sphere of fictive writing. McHenry singles out the unsuccessful (because unpublished) fictive work of Mary Church Terrell, and I extend McHenry's claims about black "literary failure" during this period for the purposes of my examination of Johnson's poetry. We could say, as McHenry says of Terrell, that Johnson's poetry in particular "is not 'great,' nor was it popular, and as such it fits in neither of the two primary (if vague) categories we have most often used to identify literature and comprehend literary history."⁸ My work on Johnson's poetry intends to make her visible as one of many writers during this period—particularly African American women writers—whose literary production has not been examined closely precisely because they do not fit easily into the categories of "amateur," "coterie," or "professional" poet; in fact, this liminal status allows Johnson's poetry to serve as a case study of a fascinating, underexamined path in the development of African American poetry.

If prescribed gender roles at the turn of the century prohibited most black women from writing books of dialect poetry, why were they so often eager readers of them, and how can we reconcile this significant readership with those few dialect poets among them? As McHenry and others have discovered, Dunbar's dialect poetry was apparently especially well received by members of African American women's literary clubs at the turn of the century.⁹ In addition, newspaper coverage of literary club events shows that black bourgeois women were avid consumers of dialect poetry, reading and celebrating and even performing it. For example, in 1914, a few years after Dunbar's death, a *Chicago Defender* article titled "Miss Lois C. Simmons Entertains" describes a mysterious event that piqued the curiosity of "[m]any people living in the 54th block on Dearborn St.," who were "pulled to their wit's end to know what the cause of so many beautifully dressed young ladies calling at the Simmons, 5424 Dearborn, autos driving up unloading, going away, some autos staying and a perfect stream of the smart set." After an elaborate dinner, this "smart set" of guests performed poems by Dunbar, "after which the young ladies left well pleased with a well spent afternoon."¹⁰ Bourgeois women could be consumers and reproducers of dialect poetry without compromising their status—in fact, their participation in a popular literary trend signaled their inclusion in the "smart set"—even if they usually would not and could not be producers of it.

Because black bourgeois women such as those attending the Simmons event could afford the luxury of leisure, and could therefore devote time to reading, they made up a valuable readership for mainstream writers, which included many writers of dialect during this period. In fact, William Dean Howells's advice for writers emphasized the important presence and influence of female readers in general at the turn of the century:

The man of letters must make up his mind that in the United States the fate of a book is in the hands of the women. It is the women with us who have the most leisure, and they read the most books. They are far better educated, for the most part, than our men, and their tastes, if not their minds, are more cultivated. Our men read the newspapers, but our women read the books . . . As I say, the author of light literature, and often the author of solid literature, must resign himself to obscurity unless the ladies choose to recognize him.¹¹

Because many of the books on the newly established best-seller list were written in dialect,¹² it stands to reason that women were frequently the purchasers of these books. It stands to reason, also, that, if she was buy-

ing books of dialect poetry, the female reader during this period was a silent dialect poetry reader as well as a performer of it. Despite the fact that women sometimes performed poetry in settings such as the Simmons event and literary club meetings, the practice of reading aloud to a crowd of listeners, which many historians claim shared space with silent reading in Western reading culture at the turn of the century, was mainly reserved for men and performed in male-dominated places of employment or amusement. As a result, “female readers of the nineteenth century can be associated with the development of silent, individual reading, which relegated oral reading to a world that was disappearing.”¹³ The paradox of the figure of the silent dialect poetry reader—reading without articulation a phonetic transcript of speech, one that is *supposed* to work best when performed—recalls the tensions behind Harte’s, Riley’s, and Dunbar’s approaches to dialect poetry, which in various ways spotlighted the intersections of orality and literacy in dialect poetry when the two modes seemed to be in opposition. Harper and Johnson were both interested in literacy, and they were interested in dialect at the same time, and found no contradiction in this position.

Harper’s Aunt Chloe and Her Literacy

In her biography of Harper, Melba Joyce Boyd contends that she composed *Sketches of Southern Life* as a “practical function of her literacy campaign.”¹⁴ Through the use of the persona of Aunt Chloe, a recently freed and newly literate African American woman, Harper’s book enacts the process of literacy acquisition with which many of her readers were just becoming familiar. Aunt Chloe expresses her opinions in a variety of the “plain language” dialect made famous by Bret Harte a few years earlier, a dialect defined mainly by its syntax rather than its spelling. According to Boyd, Harper avoided an “overapostrophied dialect” in favor of “accessible language” in order to allow for greater ease in reading; somehow plain-language dialect would engender in its semi-literate readers “a positive psychological response to learning.”¹⁵ Some critics, however, question whether the Aunt Chloe poems qualify as dialect poems at all. For example, J. Saunders Redding, in his influential *To Make a Poet Black*, describes Harper’s dialect thus:

In the volume called *Sketches of Southern Life* the language she puts in the mouths of Negro characters has a fine racy, colloquial tang. In these poems she managed to hurdle a barrier by which Dunbar was later to

feel himself tripped. The language is not dialect. She retained the speech patterns of Negro dialect, thereby giving herself greater emotional scope (had she wished or had the power to use it) than the humorous and the pathetic to which it is generally acknowledged dialect limits one. . . .¹⁶

Redding's subtle distinction between "dialect" and a "racy, colloquial tang" and his ready acceptance of the association of dialect with humor and pathos show the unmistakable influence of James Weldon Johnson's attack upon dialect (even echoing Johnson's use of the word "racy" to describe an acceptable modern alternative to dialect). Decades later, Elizabeth A. Petrino similarly argues that "Harper's regional and colloquial expressions veer away from dialect toward a broader, more inclusive representation of African-American speech."¹⁷ Less extreme than Redding and Petrino, Boyd finds what appears to be a middle ground, calling Aunt Chloe's voice an invention intended to "bridge the cultural distance between standard English and black dialect."¹⁸ However, what lies between these two poles sounds suspiciously like Redding's "colloquial" voice. Furthermore, in 1977, Gloria T. Hull could write that, during the Reconstruction years, "there are no women dialect poets," with a parenthetical qualification: "(Although Harper wrote dialect poems in her 1872 *Sketches of Southern Life*, she is not studied in this period or considered a part of the dialect 'school')."¹⁹

It is worth considering why so many readers want to dissociate Harper from dialect. When Paul Lauter claims that Aunt Chloe does not speak in dialect and that her "language is, I believe, designed to legitimate her keen political commentary," he is indirectly refusing the possibility that dialect can be used effectively by Harper as a political tool.²⁰ Although the Aunt Chloe poems are written in a "high-readability" dialect, there is no question that they are in fact dialect poems, and that Harper intended for them to be read as such, as part of that tradition. The fact that the Aunt Chloe poems are not limited to expressions of humor and pathos does not, as Redding suggests, prove that they are not dialect poems; instead, it proves only that dialect is a more elastic medium for poetry than he supposes. Boyd argues of Aunt Chloe, "Her literacy has modified her dialect," but I contend that Harper chooses to write the Aunt Chloe poems in dialect in order to prove precisely the opposite, implicitly responding to dialect poems that associated their speakers with illiteracy: that there is no relationship, and therefore no incompatibility, between dialect speaking and literacy.²¹

Here is “Learning to Read,” one of Harper’s Aunt Chloe poems, in its entirety. While the dialect spellings are not extreme (“agin’,” “’Twould,” “’em”) and are kept to a minimum, “Learning to Read” functions, as do many of the dialect poems examined in this study, as a didactic presentation of a reading experience. In it, the aging Aunt Chloe enthusiastically sets herself to the task of acquiring literacy after a lifetime of having it withheld from her:

Very soon the Yankee teachers
 Came down and set up school;
But, oh! how the Rebs did hate it,—
 It was agin’ their rule.

Our masters always tried to hide
 Book learning from our eyes;
Knowledge didn’t agree with slavery—
 ’Twould make us all too wise.

But some of us would try to steal
 A little from the book,
And put the words together,
 And learn by hook or crook.

I remember Uncle Caldwell,
 Who took pot liquor fat
And greased the pages of his book,
 And hid it in his hat.

And had his master ever seen
 The leaves upon his head,
He’d have thought them greasy papers,
 But nothing to be read.

And there was Mr. Turner’s Ben,
 Who heard the children spell,
And picked the words right up by heart,
 And learned to read ’em well.

Well, the Northern folks kept sending
 The Yankee teachers down;

And they stood right up and helped us,
 Though Rebs did sneer and frown.

And, I longed to read my Bible,
 For precious words it said;
 But when I begun to learn it,
 Folks just shook their heads,

And said there is no use trying,
 Oh! Chloe, you're too late;
 But as I was rising sixty,
 I had no time to wait.

So I got a pair of glasses,
 And straight to work I went,
 And never stopped till I could read
 The hymns and Testament.

Then I got a little cabin
 A place to call my own—
 And I felt as independent
 As the queen upon her throne.²²

The first reading experience that appears in the poem—some would “put the words together / And learn by hook or crook”—signals that something odd has happened to reading. It is ambiguous, as it is difficult to determine whether word fragments are being put together to form words, or complete words are being put together with others to form phrases and sentences. It may seem like a minor distinction, but it is a significant difference: if the former, the poem describes phonics and something similar to a literary dialect reading experience; if the latter, the poem describes a whole-word reading process, as I discussed briefly in this book’s first chapter. If the poem presents the former, as I believe the poem does, that presentation would be perfectly in keeping with the project of dialect poetry.

Another unusual depiction of the reading process involves Ben, who simply “heard the children spell,” then “picked the words right up by heart,” and finally “learned to read ’em well.” He begins in a position similar to that of a spectator at a spelling bee before memorizing the words he hears spelled, absorbing knowledge by rote just as one declaiming a poem might. But then, miraculously, his oral knowledge is transferable to the

written page, and he is able to read the words whose letters he has learned without being taught what those letters look like. He is the owner of what Frederick A. Kittler calls, in reference to the illiterate Prophet Muhammed whose encounter with the Archangel Gabriel prompts him to read the scripture revealed to him, “miraculously alphabetized eyes.”²³

We learn nothing about how Uncle Caldwell learned to read. Uncle Caldwell, whose reading material is cleverly integrated into his wardrobe, is able to convince his master that the papers in his hat are no cause for alarm. Apparently, the master observes a distinction between writing and literature: the papers, once dirtied and disguised (perhaps used to line the hat?), no longer represent “book learning” and no longer pose a threat. They are “nothing to be read.” The passive voice in this line raises the question of just who is doing the reading. From the master’s perspective, the papers are “nothing to be read” by the slave, whom the master persists in believing to be illiterate in the face of overwhelming evidence to the contrary. In addition, the slave master decides that the papers are also “nothing to be read” by him, nothing to be examined or interpreted. In any case, the sentence is conditional: “*had* his master ever seen . . .”; Uncle Caldwell manages to successfully avoid even raising suspicion. Uncle Caldwell’s secreting of his papers parallels an earlier concealment by the masters themselves, who “always tried to hide / Book learning from our eyes,” but the masters’ efforts—the negative obstruction of knowledge rather than the positive pursuit of it—are in vain where Uncle Caldwell’s are successful.

Early in the poem, Aunt Chloe presents the furtive attempts of those in her community to learn to read as theft, saying that “some of [them] would try to steal / A little from the book.” In an essay on *Iola Leroy*, Patricia Bizzell describes Robert’s reading skills as the result of “stolen literacies,” because his mistress, in illegally teaching him to read, “stole literacy for him” and Robert in turn “has stolen this literacy away from the mistress” by applying his skills in ways she did not foresee or sanction.²⁴ What is most interesting about the theft described by Aunt Chloe, however, is the degree: they would only “steal / A little,” as if the stolen reading were a quantifiable material good; this differs from the wholesale theft implied in “stolen literacies.” Stealing a little, without eliciting notice, recalls instead Michel de Certeau’s concept of “*la perruque*” (“the wig”), cited productively by Charles Bernstein in “Poetics of the Americas.” “*La perruque*” is the “worker’s own work disguised as the work of his employer. . . . [T]he worker who indulges in *la perruque* actually diverts time (not goods, since he uses only scraps) . . . for work that is

free, creative, and precisely not directed toward profit.”²⁵ Bernstein applies de Certeau’s concept metaphorically in order to describe Claude McKay’s use of dialect writing in pentameter as “a running double play of ingratiating and defiance,” as I will discuss in the next chapter, but here the example of Uncle Caldwell’s scraps is a literalization of the metaphorical theft that typically lies behind a slave’s (or even an ex-slave’s) acquisition of literacy.²⁶

Hiding papers under one’s hat for the purpose of sneaking literacy is not unique to Uncle Caldwell. Heather Andrea Williams cites several cases: “Some slaves hid spelling books under their hats to be ready whenever they could entreat or bribe a literate person to teach them. . . . As a young enslaved boy, Richard Parker . . . carried a primer under his hat to be ready for class at any time. . . . ‘Uncle’ Charles, a former slave in North Carolina, recounted that he also carried a primer under his hat and challenged white boys to tell him what a letter was, until he managed to learn to the alphabet.”²⁷ In none of these cases did the slave learn to read spontaneously or independently. Similarly, in *Iola Leroy*, Harper tells stories of literacy acquisition resembling those in “Learning to Read,” but she fleshes out some of the details. We learn of Tom Anderson, who “can read a little”:

He used to take lessons from a white gardener in Virginia. He would go between the hours of 9 P. M. and 4 A. M. He got a book of his own, tore it up, greased the pages, and hid them in his hat. Then if his master had ever knocked his hat off he would have thought them greasy papers, and not that Tom was carrying his library on his head.

Another man is described in the same paragraph, one who sounds much like Ben:

One day he had an errand in the kitchen, and he heard one of the colored girls going over the A B C’s. Here was the key to the forbidden knowledge. She had heard the white children saying them, and picked them up by heart, but did not know them by sight. . . . He got the sounds of the letters by heart, then cut off the bark of a tree, carved the letters on the smooth inside, and learned them. He wanted to learn how to write. He had charge of a warehouse where he had a chance to see the size and form of letters. He made the beach of the river his copy-book, and thus he learned to write.²⁸

These stories hardly make learning to read seem effortless, as the poem does. In fact, *Iola Leroy's* Tom “never got very far with his learning,” despite his Herculean efforts. Although, regarding Tom, Boyd remarks that “the oral orientation of the culture can become a pedagogical technique for literacy,” the problem with this model is that orality and literacy are not transferable skills, and we see this in the case of the girl who mediates the unnamed *Iola Leroy* character’s acquisition of literacy.²⁹ After hearing white children reciting letters, she can imitate them orally, but has no means of understanding those letters as writing. The acquisition of literacy described in “Learning to Read” would have to qualify as almost miraculous.

Harper devotes several stanzas to Aunt Chloe’s learning to read (she is, after all, the center of this series of poems), but by the end of the poem we are no closer to knowing how she does it. We know that she wants to learn primarily in order to read her bible, a desire that was not uncommon during the postbellum years.³⁰ Interestingly, Chloe wants to read the bible for “precious words it *said*” (emphasis added), as if she understands the book to represent a voice locked in text, invoking the “talking book” trope.³¹ She already knows what the Bible *says*, from having heard it, but she expects that approaching the Bible through literacy will provide a different experience, a different sort of knowledge. Chloe says only that she “began to learn it” and, later, she tells us that she “got a pair of glasses” and went “straight to work,” understanding learning to read as a process and comparing it to a kind of labor. Ultimately, she “never stopped till [she] could read.” In the end, like Ben—although Chloe’s learning presumably took time—her literacy is, again, nothing short of miraculous.

Why would Harper want to describe these acquisitions of literacy as spontaneous and almost magical, even if they are (as Chloe’s was) laborious? If she truly intended for these poems to serve as aids in increasing literacy, it is strange to leave the process so shrouded in mystery. Ironically, it is likely that Harper left the process vague because she did not want any part of the poem to discourage beginning readers. Chloe is, as Paula Bernat Bennett points out, “a singularly hard act to follow”; she is Harper’s model for progress, but “not one to which many ex-slaves, especially those suffering direst poverty in the deep South, could easily relate.”³² The poem is, however, entirely uplifting: Aunt Chloe overcomes the doubts of the naysayers, and she is happy in the end. Not only is she happy, the poem draws a causal link between her literacy and her success.³³ The last stanza begins with a conditional “Then,” as if learning to read necessarily leads

to wealth (“I got a little cabin”) and autonomy (“I felt as independent / As the queen upon her throne”). This is a fantasy of unlikely achievement, but the step that initiates Chloe’s climb is literacy, a step that the ideal reader of Harper’s poems is in the process of achieving. The Aunt Chloe series straddles the war years, with some of the poems taking place during the period leading up to the war and some after. “Learning to Read” depicts a doubly free Aunt Chloe. She is a freedwoman, but she believes that it is only through literacy that she achieves self-government and becomes her own master and her own “queen.” It is also worth noting that, in terms of sequence in *Sketches of Southern Life* (taking the “Aunt Chloe” poems as a chronological narrative series), the poems following “Learning to Read” are still dialect poems, emphasizing again that Aunt Chloe’s newfound literacy does not transform her into a standard-English-speaking character.

The character of Aunt Chloe has often been compared to Aunt Linda, a similar character who appears in *Iola Leroy*.³⁴ James Christmann claims that Aunt Linda (unlike Aunt Chloe) “rejects Western education . . . , instead basing her judgments on standards and values indigenous to her culture and class.”³⁵ And, throughout most of the novel, she does turn away from reading. When Iola asks Aunt Linda, “Won’t you get a pair of spectacles and learn to read?,” she replies, “Oh, yer can’t git dat book froo my head, no way you fix it. I knows nuff to git to hebben and dats all I wants to know.” In fact, her attitude toward reading, according to the narrator, is not one of resignation but one of stubborn defiance: “Aunt Linda was kind and obliging, but there was one place where she drew the line, and that was at learning to read.”³⁶ Aunt Linda seems content to “read” her environment for the same knowledge others get from print. Early in the novel, she says, “I can’t read de newspapers, but ole Missus’ face is newspaper nuff for me.”³⁷

However, Aunt Linda reveals a violent association with literacy that explains her reluctance. She admits that she “allers wanted to learn how to read,” that she “once had a book, and tried to make out what war in it, but ebery time my mistus caught me wid a book in my hand, she used to whip my fingers. An’ I couldn’t see ef it war good for white folks, why it warn’t good for cullud folks.”³⁸ Aunt Linda’s early traumatic reading experience echoes Douglass’s and many other slaves’ throughout the African American literary tradition and beyond.³⁹ A more picturesque and encouraging scene of adult literacy acquisition in *Iola Leroy* involves nameless elderly freedmen and women, and they are closer descendants of Aunt Chloe than Aunt Linda is. Iola’s new school receives students “ready and anxious to get some ‘book larnin’.” Some of the old folks were eager to learn, and it

was touching to see the eyes which had grown dim under the shadows of slavery, donning spectacles and trying to make out the words.”⁴⁰ The students’ difficulty in “making out the words” can be attributed not only to their obscured vision but also to the labor involved in literacy acquisition, a labor similar to that of “putting the words together,” to borrow Chloe’s language.

Even during the Reconstruction period represented in the Aunt Chloe poems, when the immediate challenges of everyday life meant that former slaves could not always afford to be concerned with reading instruction, education was still highly valued. As Harper observed in an 1870 letter,

I rather think from what I hear that the interest of the grown-up people in getting education has somewhat subsided, owing, perhaps, in a measure, to the novelty having worn off and the absorption or rather direction of the mind to other matters. Still I don’t think that I have visited scarcely a place since last August where there was no desire for a teacher; and Mr. Fidler, who is a Captain or Colonel, thought some time since that there were more colored than white who were learning or had learned to read.⁴¹

Harper intends through the Aunt Chloe poems to show, as Janet Gray argues, to “the distanced white audience and to educated black readers the urgent need of the newly freed communities for educators, as well as the dangers that they face.”⁴² The minimal literary dialect of the Aunt Chloe poems serves her purpose well in this respect: in challenging (but only slightly) her already literate audience to reenact the process of achieving literacy, she connects them directly with her subject and with the non-literate and semi-literate audiences she urges them to serve. As for those semi-literate readers for whom *Sketches of Southern Life* was intended to act as a pedagogical tool, their reading experience would be one not of re-enactment but enactment, and the aim of increasing literacy was attempted not only in thematizing that process but in actively ushering readers down Aunt Chloe’s path.

Femininity, Fashion, and Dialect

In another 1870 letter, Harper noted that some accused her of disguise: “I don’t know but that you would laugh if you were to hear some of the remarks which my lectures call forth: ‘She is a man,’ again ‘She is not col-

ored, she is painted.”⁴³ Of course, behind the charges of cross-dressing and “blacking up” is the implication that Harper would not be capable of her thought were she truly a black woman. In addition, to appear at a lectern during this period would be to surrender one’s femininity. As Frances Smith Foster writes, “Women who spoke in public to mixed audiences were considered by most people to lack good sense and high moral character.”⁴⁴ If women were the keepers of moral virtue, then lecturing women—who represented compromised morality—were not really women. Appearing on stage as Harper did “paradoxically at once sexualized her . . . and masculinized her.”⁴⁵ “Painted” not only suggests that her race is a guise, it also links her to the cosmetically enhanced and morally suspect world of the theater. The word, Carla L. Peterson argues, “resexualizes her, and dangerously so, as an actress, and perhaps even a prostitute. In fact, these women lecturers needed in some sense to become actresses in order to negotiate their public exposure in front of ‘promiscuous assemblies.’”⁴⁶

Despite this questioning of Harper’s femininity and character as she appeared on stage, some of her audience, conversely, remarked upon an observable refinement that marked her unmistakably as ladylike, noticing “her ‘slender and graceful’ form and her ‘soft musical voice,’” and describing her as “a quiet, slender looking, matronly mulatto woman, the structure of whose sentences and purity of diction were at once a surprise and revelation to her audience.”⁴⁷ As with Dunbar, many articles refer to her unexpected “purity of diction” (she is, in other words, not a “dialect” speaker); another notes that Harper spoke “fluently, earnestly and used excellent language, after which display Miss Susan B. Anthony was led in remark to Miss [Frances E.] Willard: ‘I’d like to see a white woman who could speak any more concisely than that.’”⁴⁸ However, what I would like to focus on here is the overwhelming attention to Harper’s body. The refined demeanor remarked upon by so many journalists may have been presented and accentuated by Harper as a calculated attempt to counter criticism that directed sexual and inappropriate attention to her person—in other words, part of Harper’s “acting strategies,” according to Peterson, included the desire “to decorporealize the body from the outset and present the self as a disembodied voice.”⁴⁹ Alternatively, however, in an essay titled “Frances Ellen Watkins Sings the Body Electric,” Michael Bennett proposes that we consider Harper the true “poet of the body” of the mid-nineteenth century, not her contemporary Whitman, because her “poetic performances put her work and her self on display” and she “bodied forth her poetry on the stage.”⁵⁰

As a means of resolving these seemingly opposed views of Harper's physicality, I argue the obvious point that we must attribute Harper's success as an acclaimed orator to the effective combination of her verbal and physical skills. She did not shy away from using her body to good effect on stage. One of her best known poems, "Free Labor," in fact depended upon her audience noticing her body. As she celebrated the fact that her garments were not produced by slave labor, she repeatedly and deictically drew attention to her dress ("lightly shall it press my form").⁵¹ As it happens, the entire description of a lecture by Harper in an 1888 Chicago *Daily Inter Ocean* article consisted only of the observation that Harper wore a "plain brown cloth dress," in which she "spoke to the most cultured and fashionable audience of the whole conference."⁵² To note this plainness, of course, means to clearly distinguish between Harper and her presumably white and female audience—to suggest that Harper is not "cultured"—but Harper chooses to put forward a distinctly rustic figure, drawing attention to her costume's unfashionableness as well as its asexuality. This description of her appearance even suggests that the coarseness of her costume may have intended to evoke the coarseness of the typical slave's spartan wardrobe. This strategy stands in stark contrast to that of black male lecturers such as Frederick Douglass, who, as Richard J. Powell writes, "dressed in what would have been considered 'white men's clothing'—a formal suit, vest, dress shirt, and cravat—and thus challenged [his] audiences even before uttering a word."⁵³ In countrifying her costume in both print and performance, Harper embodies the homely dialect-speaking characters like Aunt Chloe in her fictive writing. Even the appearance of *Sketches of Southern Life* itself seems intended to contribute to this message of plainness. Boyd describes the book's "beige covers" which "were simply, but attractively embroidered around the borders, accented by an elegant, but unpretentious design in each corner."⁵⁴

Maggie Pogue Johnson, on the other hand, often chooses to present her dialect poetry not in a cloak of blank asexuality but in a deliberate and emphatic masculine disguise; her speakers are often men. This move is not uncommon among African American women poets who wanted to take advantage of dialect poetry's popularity and goals at the turn of the century without sacrificing the appearance of bourgeois gentility. Clara Ann Thompson, for example, used a male persona, Uncle Rube, throughout her 1908 *Songs from the Wayside* (in one of these poems, "Uncle Rube to the Young People," the speaker even repeatedly enjoins his audience to "act like men").⁵⁵ In general, however, this phenomenon is relatively rare, as Siobhan B. Somerville points out in an essay that addresses the "dearth of

examples of cross-gender impersonations by African American woman,” in part because black women “have been granted limited access to the very category of femininity (from which one would presumably cross to a masculine persona).”⁵⁶ An essay by Tavia Nyong’o, in which he compares literary performer Mary Webb and the fictional Emily Garie (a character in *The Garies and their Friends* by Frank Webb, who was Mary’s husband), provides a surprisingly useful way into approaching Johnson’s poetry. Garie, Nyong’o writes,

achieves [racial] solidarity through a retreat into the coverture of marriage and the social reproduction of a black bourgeois household . . . ; her nonfictional analogue, by contrast, established her racial solidarity by transgressing woman’s sphere and publically [*sic*] performing racial and crossracial identifications, unmediated by either husband or marriage. She did not, after all, only perform women’s roles from *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*; she also assumed the voice of Uncle Tom and other male characters. In *Hiawatha*, dressed in the feathers of an Indian warrior, she similarly performed all the voices. These crossdressed performances were not interpreted as transgressions of propriety. By embodying multiple races and genders, however, Webb established a relationship among them that hinged upon her durational presence, her performance, and her body.⁵⁷

Johnson’s first two books of poetry are projects of racial uplift that, like the actions of Webb and Garie, express her racial solidarity, but Johnson’s poems are both deeply domestic in their marital conventions and subversive in their cross-dressing, combining Webb and Garie’s positions, careers, and ideologies.

The most anthologized of Johnson’s poems, “What’s Mo’ Temptin’ to the Palate,” has a male speaker.⁵⁸ One of the few critics to address Johnson’s work, Ajuan Maria Mance points to the irony of this fact, arguing that, despite the poem’s apparent focus on the male speaker’s labor, the poem ends up presenting and celebrating his wife’s labor in the domestic sphere.⁵⁹ The husband, tired from work, returns home to find pots and pots of food prepared for him, with no evidence of the cook until the end of the poem, when she enters with a pot of coffee. Mance calls the list of foods mentioned by the speaker “a detailed audit of both the duties and products of woman’s domestic work,” but is this a real meal?⁶⁰ The husband’s list is conditional—a compilation of foods that *would* be “temptin’ to de palate”—and includes possum, sweet potatoes, chicken, dumplings,

baked beans, greens, and corn cakes. It seems unlikely that all of these foods would be eaten at once, but even if we accept that they would, the list continues with potential Thanksgiving and summer-time meals: turkey, cranberry sauce, celery, and watermelon. Then comes another list, unattached to any holiday: pork chops, lamb, ham, veal chops, and mutton chops. At this point, it should be clear that the speaker doesn't find all of these foods greeting him when he returns home. If it is an audit, it's an annual and not a daily one. In the penultimate stanza, he returns from his mythic gastronomic fantasy to find himself grounded in the post-work scenario, and "eat[s] dar by de fiah" a vague and unspecified "supper" of "plenty good to eat." His wife has not in actuality prepared those foods for which he "pines," but, significantly, it seems as if she has.⁶¹

The husband of "What's Mo' Temptin' to the Palate" is invested in this idealization of domestic life, and the idea of being greeted in this unrealistic manner is deeply satisfying. The successful marriage, as it is defined by the degree to which the wife meets her husband's expectations, affirms his sense of his social status.⁶² Another poem by Johnson depicts a troubled marital situation: it records the alcohol-fueled fantasies of a man who dreams of killing his wife and child. "The Drunkard's Dream," however, turns out to be uplifting temperance propaganda, as the man is awakened (in both senses) by his wife and subsequently vows to change his ways, telling her, "I'll worship Thee only."⁶³ In this poem and in "What's Mo' Temptin' to the Palate," the suffering women in the background are supernaturally good and capable; in this case, the drunkard's wife is a goddess worthy of worship. From the perspective of behavior that is presented as aggressively masculine (dining as leisure, alcohol-fueled violence), the behavior of the women is understood by their husbands to be saintly and self-sacrificial (dining as work, victimhood or martyrdom). Behind female dialect poets' attempts to inhabit male characters lies the desire to "act like men" not as a convincing performance of masculinity but as an artificial and theatrical exaggeration of masculinity.

It is, I argue, because of this desire to expose the ways in which gender is performed that so many poems in Johnson's oeuvre revolve around the details of clothing, a visual index of gender identity. Johnson's recognition of the dramatic potential of clothing emerges from a personal interest in fashion: as a child, she sold her poems for straight pins to use in sewing; as an adult, she owned a millinery shop and enjoyed sewing clothes.⁶⁴ "Kris-mas Dinnah," apparently modeled closely after Dunbar's "The Party," describes from the perspective of an implied male speaker a social event similarly marked by excess.⁶⁵ At the celebration, both men and women are

wearing their best. Three stanzas are devoted to masculine dress, including the following lines:

Dey wo' dese long jimswinger coats,
Wid big leg pantaloons,
High silk hats wid broad red bands . . .

Only two stanzas, however, are spent detailing women's dress. Even then, the details are vague, and it is clear that the speaker is describing them from a masculine point-of-view: "Der dresses had sich great long trains, / We stood back wid de res'." The "we" who "stood back wid de res'" is clearly a masculine speaker, but it isn't until late in the poem that the "we" is absolutely characterized as a man: "De wimmen folks was helped fus' / To all de kins ob meat, / En den we men was helped." The sexes are separated as they enter the party, when they receive their food, and when they eat ("De wimmen dey was near de stove"), and their elaborate and distinct clothing styles facilitate that segregation.⁶⁶ Unlike Harper's plain brown dress, which resists both sexualization and gendering in its plainness, the men's and women's apparel in Johnson's poem, in its frippery, moves men and women more decisively toward their socially determined gender roles. A version of Harper's plain brown dress, however, is advocated in Johnson's "De Men Folks ob Today" by an older speaker who, complaining of the behavior of contemporary young men, focuses her critique on clothing. She warns the men that

. . . when you courts de wimmen,
Dey don't lub you fo' yo' clo's,
Dat wud be a sinnin',
En ebery body knows.

Dey lubs you fo' yo' winnin' ways,
En not fo' dressin' fine,
Lub fo' clo's dese days don't pay,
Is what's been on my min'.

You stylish dudes who's settin' roun',
Ef you wants to marry,
Take off dem stylish frocks en gowns,
Use common sense, don't tarry.

Put on some good ol' wukin' clo's . . . ⁶⁷

The stripping down (as well as the dressing down) of these “stylish dudes” not only removes all pretense, it effectively diminishes the decorative differences between men and women. The “good ol’ wukin’ clo’s,” male and female, are humble and also equalizing in their simplicity. A similar charge is raised against the young people’s elaborate fashions in Johnson’s “De Wintah Styles,” when an older woman claims that “way back in my time / No sich styles as dese, / Ever cums befo’ de folks,— / We dressed den as we pleased.” The old-fashioned and simple styles have evolved into “hifer-lutin fine” styles so complex that they are buffoonish and exaggerated.⁶⁸

De hats dey am so bery high,
 Wid feathers all aroun’,
 You can’t tell what dey’s made of,
 Or eben see de crown.

En chicken feathers, too,
 Dyed blue, red and green,
 En folks wid hats a struttin’
 De same as eny queen.

De wimmen walkin’ fru de streets,
 Wid diamon’s in dey har,
 En on dey hats ol’ tuckey tails,
 A danglin’ in de air.⁶⁹

This extravagance, she fears, has the potential to cross into the taboo of transvestism. Ironically, “good ol’ wukin’ clo’s” that are effectively genderless are unassuming and therefore not disruptive to the social order, but gender-specific costumes, in their neverending complexity, no longer can be trusted to reinforce gender difference as they did in “Krismas Dinah” and are becoming increasingly difficult to read. The men of “De Men Folks ob Today” wear “frocks en gowns.”⁷⁰ Young women in “De Wintah Styles,” already wearing “coats like long jimswingers, / Vest, too, like de men,” will soon complete the transformation: “I’se lookin’ fer de time to cum / When dey will w’ar men’s pants, / Dey’s settin’ back a lookin’, / En waitin’ fer de chance.” This supposed abomination will inevitably be answered by God, who “will say ‘enuf,’ / En take dem up on high, / Whar he kin set de fashions.”

Unlike her older female speakers, however, Johnson rejoices in the newfangled and complex performances of fashion even as they trouble gender categories. In fact, although Johnson’s “I Wish I Was a Grown

Up Man” appears to be written from the perspective of a young boy, it is worth pointing out that he waits—just as the women in “De Wintah Styles” do—to “get a chance, / To wear those great high collars, / Stiff shirts, and nice long pants.”⁷¹ When republished decades later in Johnson’s 1951 *Fallen Blossoms*, the poem resolves this ambiguity by gaining an epigraph that makes it clear that the speaker is a boy—her son, in fact—and not a woman (“written for Walter W. Johnson, Jr., to be recited when he was Four years old”) but the context of the poem’s first publication highlights the fact that the boy’s sartorial initiation into manhood is the exact same performance that the woman’s cross-dressing is.

But even when women wear conventional women’s clothes in Johnson’s poetry, it is usually in a manner that draws attention to their theatricality. Perhaps the most interesting of her poems about women’s wear is “Aunt Cloe’s Trip to See Miss Liza Kyle,” one of Johnson’s most popular poems and one she performed frequently, sometimes reciting it accompanied by a woman who pantomimed the events of the poem.⁷² Johnson’s Aunt Cloe lives in the country, and the poem humorously recounts her preparations for a visit to a city-dwelling friend. Not wanting to seem rustic and unsophisticated, she asks her friend about the latest fashions so that she can have a seamstress sew her a dress that will make an impression and won’t be “called so countrified.” In a manner reminiscent of Dunbar’s “Happy! Happy! Happy!,” the poem contains two letters in distinct registers; the first, from Aunt Cloe, is in dialect, and the second, from Liza Kyle, is in a supercilious mode of standard English:

“You must wear a hobble skirt,
 Your hair in puffs must be,
 With a band of ribbon round your head,
 Where a bow you’ll fix, you see.

“Your shoe heels must be very high,
 And make yourself look small;
 Be careful, too, just how you walk,
 Or else you’ll have a fall.

“You’ll have to take short steps
 In your hobble skirt, you see,
 But that’s the latest thing,
 And in style you must be.

“Your hat must be extremely large,
 With a feather quill behind,
 And then you’ll be a model sure,
 Aunt Cloe, you’ll just look fine.

“I enclose a picture here,
 Cut from a fashion book,
 To show exactly how
 The hobble skirt will look.

“Now imitate the picture,
 The skirt looks rather tight,
 But lace your stoutness down,
 And then you’ll be all right.”

Liza Kyle uses the imperative throughout her letter, even grammatically mirroring the strictures of female dress. Unfortunately, Aunt Cloe’s simulation is a complete failure. Following the instructions of a “fashion book,” she orders four yards of fabric—two yards of red and two of green—even though it is only barely enough for the seamstress to piece together the different colors to manufacture an unflattering motley construction. Because of Cloe’s failure to reproduce the fashionable look, Liza refuses to even acknowledge her friend when she steps off the train. One of the messages of the poem is that Cloe has not been successfully initiated into the world of feminine clothing, which necessitates the woman’s restriction and discomfort. Thus, when she chases an embarrassed Liza in order to force acknowledgment, Cloe commits crimes of both fashion and propriety by removing her high-heeled shoes and ripping the back of her skirt to lengthen her stride and add to her comfort. When initially invited to visit by Liza in order to “joy de city life, / De pleasure en de style,” little did Cloe know that her own style, or lack of it, would be sufficient reason for her friend to snub her.⁷³

In Harryette Mullen’s “Off the Top,” a brief essay appended to *Trim-mings* (a series of prose poems most of which revolve around clothing as a learned aspect of feminine identity), she writes, “I don’t think there is necessarily any ‘feminine language’ except in the sense that there is feminine clothing,” and Liza Kyle’s letter to Aunt Cloe demonstrates how learning an exotic vocabulary is necessary in order to induct women into a socially accepted version of womanhood.⁷⁴ We see this also in the aforementioned

“De Wintah Styles.” Although Johnson celebrates frippery, some women who are attempting to be stylish only succeed in embarrassing themselves because “[d]ey don’t know de dif’rence” between the turkey feathers they wear and “[d]e fines’ ostrich tips.” Even if we consider Aunt Cloe to be “the sympathetic character,” as Dickson D. Bruce argues, claiming that “Johnson turned the rhetoric of the dialect tradition upside down, implying a kind of falseness in the assimilated black American” represented by Liza Kyle, Johnson still depicts Cloe as a fool in her failure to interpret the city style.⁷⁵

Just as fashions dictate whether or not one belongs to a social or cultural group, dialect—as a fashion of speaking—can create generational and regional schisms between those who are deemed in style and those who are not. Even Cloe’s name, familiar not just to readers of Harper but also to readers of Harriet Beecher Stowe, marks her as a dialect-speaking caricature of unfashionability. To borrow from the language of a couple of texts discussed in the introduction of this book, Loomis’s story “The Dialect Store” and the anonymously published essay “The Pike Poetry,” Cloe buys a cosmopolitan dialect “by the yard,” but the dress she makes of it shows “to the world its seams and ravellings and tattered linings.” In fact, Cloe’s patchwork visually illustrates her inability to move effortlessly—seamlessly—from one dialect to another. She is as unnatural as a dialect story made from purchases from the Dialect Store would be. In Harper’s *Iola Leroy*, the rural black dialect speaker is similarly contrasted against an urbane bourgeois character who speaks standard English but, as James Christmann argues in an essay about *Iola Leroy*, the two speech styles “occupy discrete spaces and yet interact and intersect in community-building exchanges”—at first.⁷⁶ Even if one would argue, as Deborah E. McDowell does, that the language of the dialect speakers of *Iola Leroy* “must be mediated and legitimated by the more accepted language of the major characters,” one would likely concede that Harper does not mock the dialect speakers.⁷⁷ However, unlike Harper’s novel, the success of “Aunt Cloe’s Trip to See Miss Liza Kyle” depends upon mocking her failed attempts to master not one but two styles, despite the fact that Johnson herself attempts the same mastery as she alternates between poems in standard English and in dialect.

Johnson’s Education and Idleness

The title page of Johnson’s first known book of poetry, published in 1910, reads:

VIRGINIA DREAMS
Lyrics for the Idle Hour.
Tales of the Time
Told in Rhyme

The preface that follows justifies the publication of the collection: “At the sollicitaion [*sic*] of a few friends, I have selected several of my poems, and if the perusal of them brings pleasure to you, dear reader, the object of this volume will have been accomplished.” In part, this is an all too familiar mock-humble move, similar to Christina Moody’s in “To My Dear Reader,” although Johnson is casual and cultured where Moody is embarrassed and lacks “training.”⁷⁸ Johnson’s language in these prefatory materials, among the first paratexts a reader will encounter, points toward leisure. These poems are written “for the Idle Hour,” some free time shared happily by both writer and reader. (A second book, published in 1915, reinforced the idea with the title *Thoughts for Idle Hours*.⁷⁹) Her readers are friends and her friends are readers. Furthermore, the poems are intended for her reader’s “perusal,” and to bring him or her “pleasure.” To peruse a book implies close examination or study, but to be simply pleased by it brings to mind the shallowness Dunbar associates with the dilettante. The implied tension between perusal and pleasure sets the stage for *Virginia Dreams*, from the start seemingly unable to decide whether it will be a tool of education or idleness, two ideals between which it observes a difference. Ultimately, however, even apparently passive education is always achieved through labor in this book, whether through “representative” black characters (Booker T. Washington, for example) or “non-representative” dialect-speaking black characters, and, although the reading experience she claims to encourage is one of leisure, Johnson’s ideal man of culture would not choose to devote his time to leisure activities.

As I argue in a previous chapter, Dunbar was ambivalent about higher education, associating university study with “flow’ry beds of ease,” and we can trace this ambivalence in part to his own lack of opportunity. Johnson was educated at the Virginia Normal and Collegiate Institute; taught school for two years; was President of the Literary and Debating Society in Covington, Virginia; and, as the wife of a physician, we can assume that she lived relatively comfortably.⁸⁰ In the 1930s, she wrote a pageant titled *Lifting as We Climb* for the Virginia State Federation of Colored Women’s Clubs that was also performed at Hampton Institute and the National Federation of Colored Women’s Clubs.⁸¹ In addition, her poetry reflects her commitment to the ideology of racial uplift, which entailed university education. Johnson describes the historically black university in a feminine

and messianic manner, conflating the classical image of the open-armed *alma mater* with the description of Ethiopia in Psalms 68—“Ethiopia shall soon stretch out her hands unto God”—a line that reverberated through much African American writing, including Harper’s.⁸² Johnson’s “The Negro Has a Chance” personifies the college with a similar line: “With outstretched arms the college stands.” Another poem, “The V.N. and C.I.,” also describes the school as if a woman, recalling those “[w]ho’ve toiled within her walls,” and proclaiming, “Her situation is beautiful, / As loftily she stands / Facing the Appomattox, / So picturesque and grand.”⁸³

But, although the landscape pictured in Johnson’s book is dotted with feminine black colleges and universities, it is also dotted with great men.⁸⁴ Johnson honors in her poetry all manner of educated black people, and Washington, partly for his role as leader of an educational institution, is the brightest star in her firmament. Another college professor is lauded in a poem titled “James Hugo Johnston,” as Johnson guides her reader geographically, leading us directly to the home of the president of her alma mater, Virginia Normal and Collegiate Institute (now Virginia State University): “On a hill near Petersburg, / Facing the old historic town, / There lives a model Negro— / One who’s won renown.” His example serves as a beacon, leading students to him “thro’ the land” and encouraging them to his “paths . . . retrace,” avoiding the “deepened mire / Of folly and disgrace,” as if following his example would amount to a physical journey through a treacherous but character-building landscape.⁸⁵ He is exemplary in the way that Harper’s Aunt Chloe is; both serve as models of educational achievement and moral strength for readers to follow.

A book titled *Evidences of Progress among Colored People* devotes a few revealing paragraphs to a brief history of the Virginia Normal and Collegiate Institute. Following a description of the school and its aims is an engraving and brief biography of Johnston, “president and Professor of Psychology and Moral Science.” Johnston is described as “a self-made man,” whose “first work in life was that of a newsboy on the streets of Richmond”; he even “kept his paper route for some time after he began teaching in the public schools of that city.”⁸⁶ Clearly, Johnston was far from idle. He serves as a strong example for Johnson of what it means to belong to an elite social class that is committed to hard work. The examples of Johnston and other “great men” like him serve, in themselves, a purpose for Johnson similar to the education they represent. In *Up from Slavery*, Washington advocated the idea of an education consisting of discourse with great men, with General Armstrong as his “perfect man.” “The older I grow,” he writes, “the more I am convinced that there is no

education which one can get from books and costly apparatus that is equal to that which can be gotten from contact with great men and women. Instead of studying books so constantly, how I wish that our schools and colleges might learn to study men and things!”⁸⁷ Likewise, Johnson’s poem to Johnston demonstrates her belief that simply being in the presence of great men can, as if through osmosis, benefit the student.

In other words, Johnston is Johnson’s idea of a representative man of the race. To cite Dunbar’s essay “Representative American Negroes,” “To have achieved something for the betterment of his race rather than for the aggrandizement of himself, seems to be a man’s best title to be called representative.” It is worth noting that most of Dunbar’s examples of representative men in his essay are educators, and he in fact addresses this imbalance:

It may be urged that too much time has already been taken up with the educational side of the Negro, but the reasonableness of this must become apparent when one remembers that for the last forty years the most helpful men of the race have come from the ranks of its teachers, and few of those who have finally done any big thing, but have at some time or other held the scepter of authority in a school. They may have changed later and grown, indeed they must have done so, but the fact remains that their poise, their discipline, the impulse for their growth came largely from their work in the school room.⁸⁸

Not surprisingly, Dunbar’s representative men are, as Kenneth Warren points out, “members of the turn of the century black elite”; representative men “would not ever include . . . many of the figures whom he represents through the means of dialect verse.”⁸⁹ What is unconventional about Johnson’s books of poetry is that she goes back and forth between representative men as Warren characterizes Dunbar’s definition, such as Washington and Johnston, and “non-representative” dialect speakers, treating both types as inspiring and allowing the types to mingle within poems.

Johnson’s attempt to aggrandize her professorial subject stands in stark contrast to, for example, Longfellow’s desire to downplay a perceived class difference between himself and his general audience. Although “literary commentators frequently referred to him (sometimes flatteringly, sometimes pejoratively) as ‘Professor’ Longfellow,” Charvat writes, “in his works he avoided reference to his specific academic status. ‘Poet’ and ‘Scholar’ are common symbols in both his verse and prose, but not ‘Professor.’”⁹⁰ Johnson, not being a professor, neither faced the same personal

dilemma nor benefited from the same racial privilege or fame, and partly for these reasons she took the opposite stance, choosing to emphasize her bourgeois standing by selecting university professors as the subjects of so many of her poems. Take, for example, “To Professor Byrd Prillerman”:

Dar’s a skool in West Virginny,
 Dat I hears dem call de Farm,
 Whar dey raises ebery t’ing to eat,
 En has de bigges’ barns,—
 Whar de ho’ses en de cows,
 In restin’ spend de night,
 And w’ar away de hours,
 To dey own heart’s delight.

’Tis dar dey teaches ebery t’ing
 In de wuken line,
 As much as folks kin well take in
 Upon de common min’;
 Dey l’arns you how to cook,
 Dey l’arns you how to sew;
 In fact, dey teaches ebery t’ing
 Dat you wants to know.

Has you eber seed de president
 Ob dat skool, de Farm?
 De man who bosses ebery t’ing,
 From de skool room to de barn;
 I tell you he’s a great man,
 To meet him you kin see
 De ’telligence beamin’ from his face
 As blossoms from a tree.

He’s hammered on de chillun’s heads,
 Fo’, lo, dese thirty years,
 Poundin’ knowledge in dem
 ’Mid dumbness en ’mid fears;
 He’s bro’t dem from de dunce stool
 Ob ignance en disgrace,
 En trained dem in his skool
 To lead folks ob de race.

He's one de oldes' teachers,
 In West Virginny State,
 En what dat man don't know
 Ain't worthy to relate;
 So, when you wants to go to skool
 To be sho to l'arn,
 Go to dat Cullered Institute
 Dat some folks call de Farm.⁹¹

Not only is Professor Prillerman a “great man,” intelligence is said to be “beamin’ from his face / As blossoms from a tree.” The “flow’ry beds of ease’ method” through which Dunbar was reluctant to gain his education is reconfigured here: Professor Prillerman is depicted as if he generates and emanates flowers, as if his education manifests itself in flowery beds of ease on his person. But, while these blossoms can be conceived of as university laurels, hence signifying masculine achievement (and Johnson uses flowers in this way in a poem about Dunbar titled “Poet of Our Race”: “Thy victor’s crown is won”), there is no avoiding the association of floral decoration with femininity, especially considering the choice of the word “blossom,” which carries the connotation of fruit-bearing and girlish development. The professor’s flowery words, according to Johnson, resemble the efflorescence of Dunbar’s verse, whose “words, as sweetest flowers, / Do grow in beauty ’round us here / To cheer us in sadest [*sic*] hours.” And the “flow’ry beds of ease” Dunbar claimed to want to avoid coincidentally resurface in Johnson’s poem to him, which addresses him as “thou, adored of men, / Whose bed might been of flowers.” Johnson’s Dunbar is surrounded by flowers, speaks in flowers, and interprets the flowers for us (“The language of the flowers, / Thou hast read them all”).⁹² Although masculine “great man” poems appear throughout Johnson’s books, the men at the center of these poems are often festooned with the feminine signs of cultivation. It is not only the fashionable young everyman, then, wearing “stylish frocks en gowns,” who feminizes himself in order to advance socially, but also the great man. Unlike Harper’s public persona, that a segment of her audience had to perceive as masculine in order to see or hear her, Johnson argues that it is only when these men are “feminized” by education—by the university that is coded female—that they achieve public greatness.

The emanation “beamin’” from Professor Prillerman resembles the transformative glow associated with Booker T. Washington in “To See Ol’ Booker T.,” an account of an old man’s journey from Virginia to Tuskegee

for the sole purpose of seeing the great man, who takes on the proportions of a messianic figure, similar to James Hugo Johnston and the figure of the *alma mater*.⁹³

So I pray de Lawd to keep
Bof me en my ol' mule,
En spar us till we git
To dat Cullered Skool.

En gib our eyes de light,
Dat we can cle'rly see,
Dat Alabama lan' so bright,
En dear ol' Booker T.

Later in the poem, the same sentiment is expressed:

. . . I'll set en look at him,
En he will look at me,
En fo' my eyes get dim,
While I kin cl'erly see.

Including the title, the words “see” and “seen” are used fourteen times in the poem, the words “look” and “eye” used two and three times respectively; clearly the spectacle of university life is what’s important here. Even the dialect spelling helps to emphasize that association: the word “expect” is written as “specs,” and it is used twice.

The transformative effects of seeing the great man and the educational institution he represents are equivalent, in this poem, to having done actual labor. The most idle-seeming aspect of receiving instruction, sitting and looking, is seen as real work rather than idleness. The speaker is aware of the school’s curriculum and offerings—“Dey teaches you all kin’s ob wuk / En how to write en read, / En figger in de ’rithmetic / En ebery t’ing you needs”—but he needs only to see Washington to receive his education. Once one has seen, one can die: “I’s seen dis great, great cullered man, / I’s ready now to go” and “So now my eyes clos’ to res’.” The old man has “stood de tes’,” as labor (or “tas’”) becomes education (or “tes’”) by the end of the poem.

The transformative touch—along with the power of his reciprocal gaze, the second extraordinary physical sense Washington possesses and offers as generously to his pupils as he does to world leaders—is another part of the education the old man hopes to receive. As he puts it:

Dat eben kings en queens so great
 Did strive to shake his han'
 En welcome Booker T.
 To der native land.

Now, you know he mus' be great . . .⁹⁴

The old man feels sure of Washington's greatness in part because it has been confirmed physically by world leaders. He wants to "shake [Washington's] willin' hand'" and "take his gracious han' / Widin my trimblin' grasp," just as Washington himself advocated the study of "men and things." (The physicality of teaching and learning appeared also, if more violently, in "To Professor Byrd Prillerman," as the professor "hammered on de chillun's heads, / . . . / Poundin' knowledge in dem.") The speaker of "To See Ol' Booker T," whom Dunbar would likely not have characterized as "representative" because he speaks in dialect, qualifies for Johnson as a valued model and inspiring product of education (or, rather, *potential* product of education, since the poem is written in the conditional mood).

Both Harper and Johnson attempted through their dialect poetry to emphasize the value of education without detracting from the value of dialect, as many readers would have believed education and dialect speech to be at odds. The "great man" poem used by Johnson in order to make this argument also ironically emphasizes the cultivating effect of feminization in producing representative men, both dialect- and standard-English-speaking. As I will discuss in the following chapter, the dialect poetries of Claude McKay and Langston Hughes go even further in their scrutiny of dialect performance and its relationship to education and silent reading.