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Rhetorics of Literacy

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chapter six

Annotated Dialect

Claude McKay and Langston Hughes

The move from Maggie Pogue Johnson's dialect poetry to the dialect poetries of Claude McKay and Langston Hughes is admittedly a difficult one. For most readers, still influenced by James Weldon Johnson's pronouncement, the early work of McKay and Hughes represents a dramatic rupture, a change from dialect-as-artifice to dialect-as-natural-expression, or, to put it another way, a change from the mask of dialect to the true face of vernacular. If these modern dialect poetries reveal at last a true face, however, why do McKay and Hughes produce so much multiplicity not only in the form of dramatic monologue (as Dunbar, Harper, and Maggie Pogue Johnson did before them) but also as editorial intrusion? Through my treatment of the notes to Hughes's *The Negro Mother and Other Dramatic Recitations* and to McKay's *Songs of Jamaica*, I argue in this chapter that the divided condition of these books, a presentation that Charles Bernstein calls "schizophrenic" in his reading of *Songs of Jamaica*, is symptomatic of the continued and deliberate interplay between suggestions of orality and literacy found in earlier dialect work such as Dunbar's and Maggie Pogue Johnson's.¹ As such, the work of McKay and Hughes is more of a continuation of work begun by the earlier poets than a complete change of direction.² Although the notes to *Songs of Jamaica* are appended by McKay's patron Walter Jekyll and the notes to *The Negro Mother* by

Hughes himself, the effects of the division are nevertheless comparable: in separating the main text from the marginal text, the dialect poem assumes an even more pronounced air of orality, and the apparatus, in framing it, is designated literate. This chapter will address the effects and purposes of designing these books in such a manner; that is, how McKay and Hughes direct their readers to engage with the divided presentation of their work, and how the reception and publication histories of these books were determined by their use of dialect.

When Hughes and McKay began their careers, the practical importance of Dunbar's example had not yet been completely devalued for most readers. In fact, an advertisement for *The Negro Mother* declares that the book presents "widely known and well-beloved Negro characters delineated in a broadly popular manner not associated with Negro poetry since the death of Paul Lawrence [*sic*] Dunbar." Readers, editors, and publishers were on the lookout for the next Dunbar. McKay, too, was compared to Dunbar in reviews of his work. The two poets responded to Dunbar's example in different ways: McKay quickly turned away from dialect writing altogether; Hughes contended with the figure of Dunbar more assertively.

As a public poet, Hughes stands stylistically and thematically between Walt Whitman on one hand (perhaps his clearest literary predecessor³), and Dunbar on the other. Many readers have pointed to Hughes's indebtedness to one side or another of this heritage without mentioning what an uncomfortable position this puts him in, considering the inherent incompatibility between these two distinct branches of American poetry. True, both branches share what they would characterize as a popular, demotic approach; both use, or aim to use, language that is plain or common.⁴ But Dunbar (and his model James Whitcomb Riley) exceeded Whitman in popularity, and the two rigidly metrical and rhyme-conscious poets expressed strong disapproval of what they considered Whitman's unrefined verse.⁵ As Riley and Dunbar's significance waned—in fact, as their poems became, to different degrees, relegated to the status of literary-historical curios—Whitman loomed larger and larger into the early twentieth century, auspiciously when American literature was becoming more and more an acceptable subject for university study and for collection in anthologies.

By the 1920s, Dunbar's dialect writing was no longer treated as the graphic trace of his authenticity (as it usually was during his lifetime) but as a marker of his inauthenticity. James Weldon Johnson, after turning away from the Dunbar-like dialect writing he practiced early in his career, denigrated "the artificiality of conventionalized Negro dialect poetry" and

declared repeatedly that it was capable only of “two emotions, pathos and humor, thereby making every poem either only sad or only funny.”⁶ By the time he published the revised 1931 edition of his *Book of American Negro Poetry*, the shift away from artificial dialect was definitive, with Hughes and his contemporaries ushering in a new era of representing speech in American verse. Johnson could claim, two years later, that “[n]o Negro poets are today writing the poetry that twenty-five years ago was considered their natural medium of expression.”⁷ The artifice of the previous generation, the supposed mask under which the authentic poet was crafting his lines, gives way in the 1920s to the true “natural” dialect poetry written by Hughes, which was barely marked by apostrophes, strange orthography, and other visual manifestations of the attempts to represent speech by poets before him. Johnson’s attitude toward artificial dialect poetry betrays his faith in the possibility of an authentic or natural dialect poetry, neglecting the fact that any dialect poetry that depends upon visible manipulation automatically calls attention to its inauthenticity, whether it is as difficult to read as Dunbar’s or as relatively easy to figure out as Hughes’s.

From Showman to Spokesman: The Unlettered Poet

Hughes’s twin lineages of Dunbar and Whitman result in a body of work that is unprecedented in American literature, providing a hybrid sense of what it means to compose poetry in a Wordsworthian “language of men.” Was writing in dialect to be understood as entertainment, produced and manufactured by a writer seeking popularity above all, or was it to be understood as educative, seeking to draw audiences in order to instruct them, whether through advocating literacy or through reproducing or channeling authentic cultural expression in order to assert the value of orality? Although turn-of-the-century dialect poetry usually strove for both goals, Hughes’s didactic intentions are closer to the surface. In fact, in a 1926 review of *The Weary Blues*, Alain Locke articulates the view, soon to become the commonly held view, that the major difference between Dunbar and Hughes, aside from their artificial and natural voices respectively, concerns the former’s frivolity and the latter’s substance. The former is critically insincere for his studiedness and his artfulness; the latter, by extension, sincere for his spontaneity and his artlessness. “Dunbar,” he writes, “is supposed to have expressed the peasant heart of the people. But Dunbar was the showman of the Negro masses; here is their spokesman.”⁸

A spokesman's position requires him to be sincere and transparent, a mouthpiece for those he represents; a showman is marked by his artifice. However, Hughes's status as earnest spokesman, "express[ing] the peasant heart of the people," was already compromised by the fact that he was composing his poetry in dialect orthography in the first place. As much as he may have seemed to be a departure from Dunbar to readers such as Locke, many readers (including Locke himself, elsewhere⁹) saw Hughes as continuing in the Dunbar tradition, even if he was modernizing it and even if his representation of dialect appeared to be more firmly grounded in speech. As poet and novelist Kenneth Fearing argues, in a review of Hughes's verse, "[d]ialect of any kind, it seems, automatically reduces a poem from the adult to the miniature plane, to a state of unreality. Paradoxically, though the language may be straight from life, a work in dialect is always slightly stagey, a tour de force."¹⁰ This paradox, it turns out, is at the heart of the spokesman/showman distinction that Locke makes. A dialect poet—especially the dialect poet who embarks on a reading tour to "perform" his work, as Hughes did to promote *The Negro Mother*—is inevitably both spokesman *and* showman. Through his control of the production and reception of this book, Hughes attempted to distinguish between performance (with its attendant connotations of artificiality and theatricality) and recitation (which intends to have some edifying purpose) in order to conform to his own and Locke's assessments of him as more spokesman than showman. Recitation could allow him not only to serve as a mouthpiece, or representative voice, of a community, but also to serve as a model for other representative voices who could enact his verse.

To put it another way, Hughes conceives of himself as the type of poet William Charvat would describe as a "public poet": "Representativeness *in his time* . . . is the differentiating quality of the public poet, and it is the quality that makes the fundamental difference between his verse and that of the private poet. For to be a spokesman he must speak in a vocabulary and syntax familiar to his audience in his time."¹¹ For a lyric poet, Hughes strongly asserts the topicality of his poetry and often eschews the particularity of the private lyric voice even as he maintains the specificity of his subject. For instance, the dramatic monologues of *The Negro Mother* each require the embodiment of a culturally specific emblematic figure belonging to what Hughes would call the "great masses": "The Colored Soldier," "The Negro Mother," "The Big Timer," etc. They are types. This is remarkably different from the way Dunbar understands what it means to be representative, to speak for a people, as expressed in his essay "Representative American Negroes," cited in the previous chapter. For Hughes,

the opposite is true: the people make it possible for the poet to speak, as he makes clear in “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain,” in which he proposes that the “low down folks” or the “common people will give to the world its truly great Negro artist.”¹²

Although the work of Hughes-the-spokesman assumes educational value, Hughes is wary of aligning himself with traditional educational institutions. As he wrote in a 1925 letter to Carl Van Vechten, “If I ever get in the school books then I know I’m ruined.”¹³ This critical attitude toward higher education may sound familiar following my discussion of Dunbar, but the change in perspective from Dunbar’s ambivalently critical and Maggie Pogue Johnson’s favorable positions to Hughes’s contemptuous one (or, to generalize, from the turn of the century to the 1920s and 1930s) derives in part from the development of the black middle classes and the success of the ideology of uplift during the first few decades of the twentieth century. As Michael Fultz writes, “By the 1920s, . . . when the middle class was more secure in its leadership position in the black community, the highly prescriptive discussions of education so characteristic of 1900–1910 had virtually disappeared.”¹⁴ Dunbar’s contradictory stance toward African American institutions of higher learning was in some ways the product of a cultural atmosphere in which criticism of the values of uplift was almost tantamount to siding with reactionary arguments against educating African Americans, such as the one published in the *Atlantic Monthly* that I mentioned earlier. In the 1920s and 1930s, when Hughes was beginning his career, the black middle classes censured literature deemed “unrespectable” and, because middle-class respectability was a distinct and easily recognizable ideology, challenges to it were more precise. In 1930, Sterling Brown, for example, mocks the predictability of the reactions of “respectable” African Americans to literature that does not depict the “best” of the culture: “These are sample ejaculations: ‘*But we’re not all like that.*’ ‘*Why does he show such a level of society? We have better Negroes than that to write about.*’ ‘*What effect will this have on the opinions of white people?*’ . . . ‘*More dialect. Negroes don’t use dialect any more.*’ . . . ‘*Negroes of my class don’t use dialect anyway.*’”¹⁵ As Henry Louis Gates, Jr., writes, noting how Hughes’s attitude toward the respectability of the black bourgeoisie shaped his approach to dialect poetry, Hughes “undertook the project of constructing an entire literary tradition upon the actual spoken language of the black working and rural classes—the same vernacular language that the growing and mobile black middle classes considered embarrassing and demeaning, the linguistic legacy of slavery.”¹⁶ Dunbar was determined to distinguish himself from the

“lowly,” despite the fact that the success of his career was dependent upon that association, but the cultural tenor of the 1920s and 1930s permitted Hughes to openly embrace the so-called common man.

Hughes’s early essays show that he was disturbed by some of the effects of higher education upon African Americans, believing that it encouraged schisms within the race. Like Dunbar, Hughes published an essay that focuses his criticism through a study of the residents of Washington, D.C. “In no other city,” Hughes writes in “Our Wonderful Society: Washington,” “were there so many splendid homes, so many cars, so many A.B. degrees, or so many people with ‘family background.’” Everyone seemed college educated.

She is a graduate of this . . . or he is a graduate of that . . . frequently followed introductions. So I met many men and women who had been to colleges,—and seemed not to have recovered from it. Almost all of them appeared to be deeply affected by education in one way or another.¹⁷

Behind the neutral sense of the word “affected” to mean “influenced” lurks the negative sense of “pretentious” or “full of affectation.” We are reminded of Dunbar’s Mandy, who, after “[h]aving mounted in position / [t]o a loftier condition,” has been “deeply affected” by her implied education and middle-class respectability.

Many historically black colleges and universities in the early twentieth century, especially in the South, were fairly conservative, with disproportionate emphasis upon manners and refinement. Hughes, himself a graduate of a historically black university, argued that as a result they were “doing their best to produce spineless Uncle Toms.” In a 1934 essay titled “Cowards from the Colleges,” he complained of the archaic and anachronistic environments they fostered, claiming that “[t]o set foot on dozens of Negro campuses is like going back to mid-Victorian England” and that “Negro schools rival monasteries and nunneries in their strictness.” While the restrictions enforced by many early-twentieth-century black colleges were put forward in the name of refinement,¹⁸ Hughes argues instead that the collegiate culture facilitated a top-down transmission of submissiveness from administration to faculty to student body, like a virus from which it was difficult to recover (to borrow his term in “Our Wonderful Society: Washington”), and few who were exposed were spared. As he puts it, “both teachers and students of Negro colleges accept so sweetly the customary Jim-crowding of the South that one feels sure the race’s emancipation will never come through its intellectuals.”¹⁹

Hughes's distaste for college graduates, expressed so scathingly in essays such as "Cowards from the Colleges" and "Our Wonderful Society: Washington," leads him to turn to the uneducated—or, in his view, the unindoctrinated—as the true representatives of the race. Pointing to the need for schools to produce men and women who would serve "as an antidote to the docile dignity of the meek professors and well-paid presidents who now run our institutions," Hughes proclaims that "American Negroes in the future had best look to the unlettered for their leaders."²⁰

The "unlettered" to whom Hughes refers certainly would include those who haven't read the "right" books, and perhaps those who haven't read any books—the so-called culturally illiterate. This is the primary sense of "unlettered" here. As Hughes himself writes, "I seek to employ colloquial Negro speech as used in some strata of colored life, but *not* in the educated classes" (emphasis added).²¹ Not surprisingly, his poetics appear to be informed partly by his unfavorable opinion of those whom he calls the "cowards from the colleges." However, "unlettered" here also means "illiterate" in the conventional sense; in referencing oral-based art forms in his work, Hughes directs his appeal to those who cannot read or write at all.

Having attended Columbia and Lincoln Universities, Hughes was of course well educated. But, in a manner reminiscent of Riley, he cultivated this persona of the unlettered poet, speaking for and to the unlettered masses as ambassador, and this pose was upheld by his critics. A 1927 review that grouped *Fine Clothes to the Jew* with poetry collections by Ezra Pound, John Crowe Ransom, and Mark Van Doren, distinguishes between Hughes and the others, unsurprisingly pointing to the educational background that the reviewer says the white poets share, an education that she claims is patently visible in their work. They are "all three learned and, for the most part, urbane gentlemen, whose poetry is fed in almost equal streams by literature and life." On the other hand, the reviewer notes, "[t]he verses of Langston Hughes are completely unliterary, often willfully illiterate," pointing in her choice of "illiterate" to the absence in Hughes's work of literary tradition, as T. S. Eliot uses the term in "Tradition and the Individual Talent," more than to the dialect spellings that readers sometimes associated with illiteracy—in other words, to the primary sense of "unlettered" rather than the secondary.²²

This group of three terms ("unlettered," "unliterary," "illiterate")—the first Hughes's own and the other two imposed upon him by a reviewer—and the distinctions between them, form a kind of background for my discussion of *The Negro Mother*. Although the three are etymologically

(but not connotatively) almost identical, and all three can oppose the word “learned” used by the reviewer to describe Pound, Ransom, and Van Doren, the various senses of “literacy” informing these three negative constructions, as they are commonly used, bear upon Hughes’s work in distinct but related ways.

McKay’s *Songs of Jamaica*, which preceded Hughes’s book by twenty years and which I will address later in this chapter, serves as a provocative comparison to Hughes’s *The Negro Mother* in its use of accompanying notes; McKay’s notes, however, consist largely of footnotes appended by Walter Jekyll. Hughes’s notes to *The Negro Mother* compete with the poem for primacy, and the reading experience generated by this competition signals a departure from the idea of dialect poetry as an exclusively oral art form. The innovation of *The Negro Mother* comes from its vision of what an instructive collection of poems—one that strives to build upon orality and literacy separately—should look like. The key term of this chapter’s penultimate subtitle, “marginal literacy,” points both to Hughes’s apparent attitude toward poetry that presented itself as literary or literate, and to a generic division or boundary separating the main text from its margins—perhaps the most immediately visible textual feature of *The Negro Mother*.

Hughes’s Typography

Before approaching *The Negro Mother*, let us turn to Hughes’s other early formal experiments that work against any implications that orality is more essential to his poetry than literacy. Hughes’s later experiments with visual elements, such as in *Ask Your Mama* and *Montage of a Dream Deferred*, have been subject to numerous studies of late.²³ But, in the 1920s and 1930s, Hughes manipulated typography to create texts that appear to work as scores for performance, texts that seem “oral” and yet are in fact impossible to perform—the essentially unreadable poem “Wait,” for example, published in 1933, consists of a main text which is flanked by two marginal lists of repeating words in capital letters (such as “SCOTTSBORO,” “COMMUNISTS,” “STRIKERS”) and is followed by a detritus-like paragraph of the same words at the bottom of the page. In addition, “The Cat and the Saxophone (2 A.M.),” which appears in *The Weary Blues*, alternates between lines of lowercase and capital letters; Countee Cullen wrote of it, “This creation is a *tour de force* of its kind, but is it a poem [?]”:²⁴

EVERYBODY
 Half-pint,—
 Gin?
 No, make it
 LOVES MY BABY
 corn. You like
 liquor,
 don't you, honey?
 BUT MY BABY
 Sure. Kiss me,
 DON'T LOVE NOBODY
 daddy.
 BUT ME.
 Say!
 EVERYBODY
 Yes?
 WANTS MY BABY
 I'm your
 BUT MY BABY
 sweetie, ain't I?
 DON'T WANT NOBODY
 Sure.
 BUT
 Then let's
 ME,
 do it!
 SWEET ME.
 Charleston,
 mamma!
 !²⁵

The capital letters, read fluently, are the words to the popular 1924 song “Everybody Loves My Baby” by Jack Palmer and Spencer Williams. Hughes’s incorporation of such a familiar and ubiquitous song is purposeful; he wrote in a 1925 letter to Carl Van Vechten that “a man died in front of [him] at the theatre,” and jokingly cites the reason of death as “[h]eart failure, caused doubtless by having to hear, for the ten thousandth time, ‘Everybody Loves My Baby.’”²⁶ The song is interspersed with dialogue between two lovers, or potential lovers, who end the poem dancing the Charleston. The poem’s structure forces a comparison between these

lovers and those who make up the love story related in the song, but the two couples end up being fairly dissimilar. The song lyrics are fluent, easy to follow and repetitive, consisting of one speaker's very assertive declarations of belovedness, whereas the accompanying conversation (with the lover present and participating) is choppy even read separately, and full of questioning. The assertiveness of the song is accentuated by the capital letters, while the implied furtiveness and whispering of what might be masking an indecent conversation is reflected in the lowercase. Moreover, the pet-name featured in the song, "baby," is never used in the conversation, but the lovers refer to each other instead by every other slangy pet-name: "honey," "daddy," "sweetie," and "mamma."

In approaching the first half of the poem, the reader has little difficulty determining what is going on, but the second half is much more visually radical—without the benefit of having read the first half, a reader would be puzzled. The lines (especially the last nine) become much shorter and more fractured, some consisting of monosyllables and one consisting only of an unpronounceable exclamation point. The separate threads begin to merge at this point, as neither one is able to sustain an independent narrative for long. Although the poem begins with a line from the song, the Charleston couple's dialogue takes up more space early on in the poem, only to succumb later to the dominance of the song. Just as the poem is ending, however, the Charleston's couple's dialogue begins to take precedence once more. The dialects of "The Cat and the Saxophone (2 A.M.)" are treated as if equivalent languages; neither dialect is meant to represent standard English, but neither is visually off-putting or jarring, and neither is framed by the other.

Because of this alternating technique, "The Cat and the Saxophone (2 A.M.)" is much more easily read silently than aloud. Although it incorporates a song, it doesn't "sing" itself, as one reviewer says of Hughes's dialect poems.²⁷ Visually, a reader may understand each separate narrative thread (the song and the Charleston couple) as well as the way both work together. The typographical shifts, from capital letters to lowercase, indicate that the two threads come from different sources. Despite the fact that the shifting cases reflect the respective assertiveness and secrecy of the song lyrics and the Charleston couple's conversation, they do not indicate any increase or decrease in volume or intensity, as we might expect in a score for performance. Neither does the exclamation point at the end of the poem correspond to sound or attach to a word: were there no exclamation point after "mamma" in the penultimate line, we might chalk up the lone exclamation point to an unconventional line-break. Were there no

period at the end of the last line from the song—“SWEET ME”—we might consider the exclamation point to be the final resurfacing of the song. Instead, we are left with an exclamation that intensifies nothing and carries no sound. In isolation, it exists as a visual mark of exclamation only, or a signal of affect, as Jennifer DeVere Brody might argue. In a discussion of Poe’s “The Gold Bug,” Walter Ong argues that punctuation marks “are even farther from the oral world than the letters of the alphabet are: though part of a text, they are unpronounceable, nonphonemic.”²⁸ Besides being unpronounceable, the exclamation point, as a physical and nonverbal gesture, may refer to the unrepresentable act for which the Charleston—*risqué* enough itself—substitutes.

Hughes’s Marginal Literacy

The visual elements upon which “The Cat and the Saxophone (2 A.M.)” depend, isolated punctuation marks and alternating cases among them, make it look at first very different from the poems of *The Negro Mother*. Easily identifiable as a collection of recitation pieces, *The Negro Mother* was published in 1931 in part as an attempt by Hughes to reach audiences through public readings. He turns to recitations when only a few years earlier he complained to Van Vechten, “My own poems are about to bore me to death, I’ve heard them so much in the mouths of others recently. I didn’t think free verse was quite so easy to remember.” Furthermore, he claims to doubt the value of his own poetry performance and poetry performance in general, telling Van Vechten, “Don’t bother about coming to my reading. Readings always bore me sick, just like church, and I am forever amazed at the people who go to them.”²⁹ He even recalls, in his autobiography *The Big Sea*, two childhood experiences with poetry recitation—one his mother’s and the other his own—that he deliberately ruined in order to deflate the pompous and theatrical atmosphere surrounding them. *The Negro Mother*, then, represents a clear shift in Hughes’s strategies for his reception, aiming to make readers into performers—into representative voices—and giving them the opportunity to participate in his didactic mission. Although it is a minor book of poems, *The Negro Mother* is one of several so-called minor books of poetry that were brought out, significantly, between a pathbreaking collection of dramatic monologues (*Fine Clothes to the Jew* in 1927) and what Steven Tracy calls Hughes’s explicit invitation to “performance and audience participation” (1942’s *Shakespeare in Harlem*). I call it a “minor book” but at the same

time I propose revising that distinction; according to a 1938 letter from Knopf, *Fine Clothes to the Jew*—which is perhaps the book most closely associated with Hughes today—sold only a few hundred copies more than *The Negro Mother* managed to sell even without the benefit of the Knopf imprimatur.³⁰

The book consists of several declamatory poems, in the form of monologues, all with black speakers, and alongside several of these poems runs a set of notes ostensibly designed to guide the person reciting. These notes don't, however, quite qualify as stage directions. Stage directions, because they are notes for performance, cannot be characterized as paratextual, according to Gerard Genette. In *Paratexts*, he introduces an example of a note from *Tartuffe* that is not really a note but a stage direction: "It is a scoundrel who says this." He writes, "The 'note' in *Tartuffe*, which evidently serves as commentary, is nonetheless provided—in parentheses between two lines of verse—as a direction for the actor: please deliver this monologue in such a way that the public clearly perceives the speaker to be a scoundrel and not the gentleman and truly pious person he claims to be."³¹ And in so doing Genette effectively dismisses the possibility of paratext in dramatic literature. Although there are many examples of the *Tartuffe* sort in *The Negro Mother*—for example, the notes to "The Big-Timer" direct the performer to "[a]ssum[e] a false and bragging self-assurance, and a pretended strength he doesn't really feel"³²—there are also several moments that cannot be ascribed fully to the author's intention to direct his performer. These moments resemble more closely an example from *Faust* cited by Frederick A. Kittler as the "first unperformable stage direction in European theatrical history": "he seizes the book and mysteriously pronounces the sign of the spirit."³³ (Goethe gives no indication of what this pronouncement might be.)

Hughes's set of notes, or the apparatus (as I will call it, in order to include all of the paratextual material that appears alongside the poem), essentially competes with what we would think of as the substantial part of the text. Hughes's glosses in effect become parallel poems themselves, running alongside the poems proper, with the two texts using interdependent parallel headings. What is most significant here about the apparatus is its availability to the reader, not the listener—strange, given the intention of the book to build upon orality. The poem, in other words, may present itself as oral, as many have argued about Hughes's poetry in general, but the apparatus does not. It is a silent text. The listening audience hears the poem, but has no access to the notes used by the performer to present it. The prefatory note may be read before the recitation—at risk of

disrupting the dramatic illusion or of being redundant—but nothing can be done to incorporate recitation of the notes along the side of the text without producing an unorthodox listening experience. Hughes’s notes to *The Negro Mother*, then, complicate the book’s posture as belonging strictly to an oral tradition. The reader ends up with something very different from what the listener ends up with. The book as it is designed produces in readers the disruptive experience of processing competing silent and performed texts simultaneously, processing the “literate” alongside the “unlettered.”

To all appearances, though, Hughes expected and hoped that much of his audience would encounter his poetry through hearing it read aloud. In a promotional letter apparently sent to reviewers along with the book,³⁴ Hughes stated clearly his intentions:

In recent Negro poetry, I have felt that there has been a distinct lack of rhymed poems dramatizing current racial interests in simple, understandable verse, pleasing to the ear, and suitable for reading aloud, or for recitation in schools, churches, lodges, etc. I have felt that much of our poetry has been aimed at the heads of the highbrows, rather than at the hearts of the people. And we all know that most Negro books published by white publishers are advertised and sold largely to white readers, and little or no effort is made to reach the great masses of the colored people.

I have written “THE NEGRO MOTHER” with the hope that my own people will like it, and will buy it.

As this letter demonstrates, *The Negro Mother* is born as the book that most clearly exemplifies Hughes’s poetics of accessibility. Carl Van Vechten sent the book to Gertrude Stein, writing, “Langston one day bemoaned to me the fact that Negro elocutionists had nothing to recite like Kipling, or *The Boy Stood on the Burning Deck*.”³⁵ Elizabeth Davey points out that *The Negro Mother* was written with this hope in mind:

The distinctly dramatic presentation of the poems of *The Negro Mother* suggests that Hughes thought that a mass black audience for black literature would be built through public readings, rather than the private consumption of books. Even after his tour ended, by using *The Negro Mother* as a script, Hughes’s readers could continue to nurture audiences in economically and educationally marginalized black communities.³⁶

It was the first of two books published by Golden Stair Press, a small press founded by Hughes and artist Prentiss Taylor. Because the books were self-published, Hughes and Taylor had control over their content, appearance, advertisement, and distribution, to a much greater degree than Hughes did with his two previous Knopf collections (so we can assume that the advertisement comparing *The Negro Mother* to Dunbar's work, although written by Van Vechten, was essentially Hughes's own assessment). Selling a cheap pamphlet edition of *The Negro Mother*—the book sold for twenty-five cents, and broadsides of individual poems with illustrations for ten cents—he managed to reach large numbers of readers and listeners. It may seem that the “ripple-effect” strategy of reading performance (in other words, Hughes's strategy of selling books to his listening audience, who would then read the poems aloud to still other listening audiences) is designed to exploit the orality of Hughes's work, but his impressive book sales during his tour tell another story. The idea for the 25-cent *Negro Mother* came from Hughes's decision that the occasional one-dollar printing of *The Weary Blues* that Knopf put out for Hughes to sell on tour might be too expensive for his Depression-era audiences.³⁷ In the end, he managed to sell over 1700 copies total of the 25-cent pamphlet,³⁸ indicating that in fact he was also spreading the ideals of literacy along the way; he ends up advocating the “private consumption of books” that he would otherwise seem to repudiate. (One can only speculate, after the dismal sales of *Fine Clothes to the Jew* a few years earlier, what may have motivated Hughes to market his pamphlet so well.³⁹)

If Hughes launched his reading tour through the South in order to reach the “unlettered” by reading his poems aloud to them, then who bought these books?⁴⁰ Who were Hughes's reading (as opposed to listening) audiences? Hughes himself contends that “few white people bought [the] book. But to Negroes [he] sold three large printings,” with seven printings in total.⁴¹ The census taken one year before *The Negro Mother* was published indicates that, though African Americans were behind whites in literacy rates in 1930, it is highly likely that most of Hughes's black listening audience would have had the basic literacy skills necessary to read Hughes's undemanding diction. Furthermore, most of his readings during this tour were at the same historically black colleges and universities Hughes had attacked in “Cowards from the Colleges” and “Our Wonderful Society: Washington,” where, he writes, “Thousands of students heard me, and I sold many books.”⁴² Effectively, “thousands of students heard me, and [therefore] I sold many books.” Presumably, he was not reading to the “unlettered.”

African American readers were not an insignificant demographic in the early twentieth century. Elizabeth McHenry emphasizes how much the African American literate culture that was cultivated in the nineteenth century has been overlooked.⁴³ Literary societies were being formed in significant numbers as early as the 1830s, by secular groups and by churches. In fact, McHenry and Shirley Brice Heath cite an 1892 issue of the *Brooklyn Eagle*, in which the reporter claims, “Almost every church in Brooklyn had a literary society. There was no class of its city’s citizens fonder of literary pursuits than the Afro-American.”⁴⁴ Nationwide, the postbellum period saw significant decreases in African American illiteracy.⁴⁵ Specifically, Penelope L. Bullock writes that in 1870—the year Harte’s “Plain Language from Truthful James” was published—“79.9 percent of the Negro population ten years of age and over was recorded as illiterate. By 1900 this figure had dropped to 44.5 percent and by 1910 to 30.4 percent.”⁴⁶

Hughes’s 1931 tour included Virginia, North Carolina, South Carolina, Alabama, and Michigan—states with comparatively high rates of illiteracy (all three or more percentage points higher than the national average for African Americans at that time).⁴⁷ However, it is also important to consider the remarkable *change* in literacy rates, particularly in the South. The percentage of literate African Americans in the South was less than 50 in 1890, but it had grown to more than 80 in 1930. While the number of Southern whites who could read increased only 32 percent during this period, the number of literate Southern blacks almost doubled, as Henry Allen Bullock points out in *A History of Negro Education in the South*. As he puts it, “long before mid-century the charge that Southern Negroes supplied the South with massive illiteracy had become statistically less justifiable.”⁴⁸

Hughes’s desire to tour the states with the lowest rates of literacy, regardless of the fact that they were states with the most dramatic increases in literacy, reflects his dream—whether or not it was the reality—of reaching and educating people who rarely encounter literature. He makes this clear in his autobiography *I Wonder as I Wander*, writing that his “audiences ranged all the way from college students to cotton pickers, from kindergarten children to the inmates of old folks homes.”⁴⁹ Where just a few pages earlier he had chosen to emphasize the fact that “thousands of students heard [him], and [he] sold many books,” he now emphasizes the all-inclusive range of his audience: they are of all ages, all educational backgrounds, all socio-economic groups. His sentence could be extended, presumably, to include the literate on one hand and the illiterate on the other—the lettered and the unlettered. This desire to address his poetry to

illiterate as well as literate audiences is also curiously consistent with his efforts to tap into, and enact, the oral features of African American artistic culture. Operating under the conceit that his audience's appreciation of his poetry is dependent upon aural and not literate reception goes along with a poetry that pretends to be exclusively oral.

As much as Hughes's dedication to orality seems to encourage the inclusivity and collectivity implied by public performance, the performance of Hughes's work is restricted to his interpretation of it. Strangely, Hughes's position as annotator becomes didactic and textually bound in a way that reaches back to an elocution tradition from a century before: guiding the reader through a proper enunciation of the poem, and framing an oral work with the literary apparatus deemed necessary to understand it. Hughes-as-annotator is anachronistically rigid and prescriptive in his instructions for performance.

Take, for example, Hughes's prefatory note to *Shakespeare in Harlem*, which, Steven C. Tracy writes, illustrates the importance of orality for Hughes. This note states that the poems should be "read aloud, crooned, shouted, recited, and sung. Some with gestures, some not—as you like. None with a far-away voice."⁵⁰ Superficially, this directive does suggest that Hughes envisions his readers performing the poems as they see fit. However, what's strange here is that Hughes seems to offer his reader some freedom in interpretation ("Some with gestures, some not—as you like") but immediately follows this offer with a restriction ("None with a far-away voice"). Of course, the "far-away voice" likely refers to an outmoded elocution voice a modern poet would want to avoid, but the parallel structure set up by Hughes seems intended to spotlight, even if ironically, the opposition between freedom and restriction in performance. Beginning the book in this way may be intended to open up multiple possibilities, but—determining the terms for its recitation ahead of time—the book leaves little room for spontaneity.

One of the few critics to address *The Negro Mother* in any depth, Davey mentions Hughes's glosses, but only to say that using them in performance enriches the poems, providing aural enhancement as guides for performance: "Although the language of these poems is simple in both diction and rhyme patterns, Hughes's scripting—the layout of the text, illustrations, and directions for the performance at the head of each poem and running down the outer margin—would have produced musically and emotionally complex performances."⁵¹ We know something about one such performance because Hughes describes it in *I Wonder as I Wander*. At one reading during his reading tour, Hughes tells us that he "closed

with ‘The Negro Mother’ from my new booklet. ‘Imagine,’ I said, ‘a black woman of old in her starched white apron and bright bandanna.’”⁵² Following this prefatory statement, Hughes then proceeded to read the poem. Hughes read some instructions for performing the poem; he did not actually perform them. And because he did not attempt to assume the persona of the Negro Mother, nothing prohibited him from reading all of his notes, but for some reason he did not. The notes included in the book for use in performing “The Negro Mother” read, “A poem to be done by a woman in the bandana and apron of the Old South—but with great dignity and strength and beauty in her face as she speaks. The music of spirituals may be played by a piano or an orchestra as the aged mother talks to her modern sons and daughters.”⁵³ It appears that he neither read nor performed these notes in full, despite the fact that the notes, Davey claims, “would have produced musically and emotionally complex performances.” In neither case would these prefatory notes have had the optimal desired effect upon Hughes’s audience. The audience could see or could imagine, from the start, the woman’s dress, but neither see nor imagine the more powerful aspects of her appearance—her “dignity,” “strength,” and “beauty”—and the interregional and intergenerational import of the poem indicated by the mention of “the Old South” and by the distance between “the aged mother” and the “modern sons and daughters.”

Hughes’s notes aren’t simply subordinate to the poem. Contrary to Genette’s claim that “No matter what . . . a paratextual element is always subordinate to ‘its’ text,” the notes to *The Negro Mother* do not exist simply to support the text.⁵⁴ Neither are they really part of the text. “The Colored Soldier,” for example, contains parallel narratives in “The Mood” and “The Poem”; by the end of the reading experience, “The Mood,” as literature, often rivals “The Poem.” These narratives coexist and entwine, like the interwoven discourses of “The Cat and the Saxophone (2 A.M.),” but they diverge on occasion and, in so doing, assert their autonomy. We might think of “The Mood” and “The Poem” as rivals for our attention, and Prentiss Taylor’s illustrations add an additional medium that demands our notice.

In “The Colored Soldier,” the first poem of the collection, the “mood” offers information not available in the poem proper. The poem tells the story of a young man who returns from war overseas having lost his brother in battle, and realizes that the democratic values for which they fought do not extend to black people in America.⁵⁵ The third stanza begins with the speaker, disgusted with present social conditions, telling us of a dream in which the spirit of his brother appeared to him. In fact, “The

Mood” tells the reader that he should be representing a speaker “[q]uietly recalling the vision.”⁵⁶ Throughout most of the text, “The Poem” and “The Mood” appear to be synchronized: the recitation of particularly poignant and tragic lines should be delivered as if “remembering with a half-sob,” and, when reading lines clearly reflecting the speaker’s frustration, the reader should become “suddenly fierce and angry.” However, the final stanza breaks from this expectation.

<i>Then he sadly recalls the rows of white crosses in France.</i>	Then I woke up, and the dream was ended— But broken was the soldier’s dream, too bad to be mended. And it’s a good thing all the black boys lying dead Over There Can’t see! And don’t know! And won’t ever care!
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It is strange that delivery of the last couplet here should not also be “suddenly fierce and angry,” considering the impassioned exclamation marks. Instead, these lines should be uttered, inexplicably, while “sadly recall[ing] the rows of white crosses in France.” This is the first disjuncture between notes and text that is anticipated by the line, “The dream was cruel—and bitter—and somehow not right.” What is “not right” about the dream, clearly, is that the brother’s naïve hopes about the racial situation in the United States following the war have now been turned into nothing but delusions. But, what is also “not right” about the dream, in the structural context of the poem, is its duality: the brother’s hope for equal rights (his “dream”) and the speaker’s vision coincide at this point in the poem to form one “dream,” only to separate in the first and second lines of the poem’s final stanza. “[T]he dream was ended” refers to the speaker’s vision; the “soldier’s dream” to the brother’s expectations. Two dreams are shattered at once. True, the speaker’s dream simply and anticlimactically “ends,” while his brother’s is violently broken, “too bad to be mended.” But, it goes without saying, the brother’s dream is also, or was also, the speaker’s dream. The “colored soldier” of the poem’s title is not only the brother, but the speaker, too.

The crosses remembered by the speaker in “The Mood,” although mentioned briefly earlier in the poem, are not featured in the corresponding part of the text proper; they are, however, realized in the illustrations on this page and the first page. How Taylor’s stylized illustrations (or “decorations,” as they are called on the title page) might have contrib-

uted to the production of “musically and emotionally complex performances,” as Davey writes, is unclear. Are speakers expected to reproduce the scenes depicted in them regardless of the fact that they do not exist in the poem? Hughes’s preliminary directions only specify how the performer should look, what the lighting should be like, and if there should be musical accompaniment—nothing about visual setting and backdrop.

Framed, like his first vision, by the word “recalls,” the speaker’s vision of crosses sparks what might be the most dramatic and profound disjuncture between the “Poem” and “Mood.” They effectively oppose each other: in the former, the “dream was ended” but, in the latter, the second vision is just beginning. Unlike the first vision, which is the memory of a memory (“Quietly recalling the vision”), the second vision can be described as a sort of waking dream, and recreates an actual scene as memory (“recalls the rows of white crosses”). Hughes’s treatment of memory shifts: images, as immediate experience, enter into the “Poem,” as in the line, “I saw him standing there, straight and tall”—rather than, for example, “I imagined (or remembered) him standing there, straight and tall”—but the “Mood” consists mainly of indirection, re-creations of or emotional reactions to memory, as in the note, “remembering with a half-sob.” They refer to events in the text proper. With the introduction of the crosses, an independent image—an image of a cemetery the speaker may never have seen in life—enters into both Mood and illustration, bypassing the text itself.

All of the words signaling memory, such as “recalls” and “remembers,” occur in the “Mood,” not the “Poem.” And to include memory in a text designed to function exclusively as a recitation note is problematic because it cannot be presented: the audience will register the “half-sob” but not what, exactly, is being remembered. Even more problematic, however, is the inclusion in the Mood of recollection not experienced across the page, as is the case with the recollection of white crosses.

Aside from the fact that many of these directions are impossible to carry out literally—how can a speaker convey to his audience that he is imagining visiting a cemetery without telling them?—the fact that “The Mood” at this point carries and conveys more narrative information than the narrative proper complicates the poem’s stance toward oral communication. Because the directions contain information impossible to relay in performance, “The Mood” is only really accessible to readers, and *The Negro Mother* is then designed for silent reading as well as performance.⁵⁷

As a book that is written for recitation, *The Negro Mother* intends to participate in a history of elocution and performance traditions, but it’s

a confused history. Early in the nineteenth century, elocution was a tool used in moral education, but poetry performance became more closely associated with entertainment by the end of the century. As I mentioned earlier in this study, this shift coincided with the increase in performances of dialect poetry, by professionals and amateurs, and by readers and poets. Although the late-nineteenth-century debasement of the recitation movement would seem to render Hughes's effort less ambitious than he intended, the larger audiences that came along with this debasement can situate Hughes's attempt as a more expansive revision of the earlier recitation tradition that saw reading aloud as a means toward edification. In fact, Hughes's effort to keep dialect to a minimum, for the most part, in *The Negro Mother* could be ascribed partially to a desire to sidestep the qualities many associated with dialect poetry performance.⁵⁸ In other words, Hughes was trying to move his recitations away from the frivolity linked with entertaining dialect poetry, while still maintaining the more popular and less elitist audience that these entertainments could attract. As Cary Nelson notes, Hughes similarly uses a "rather mild form of dialect" for his "Letter from Spain," another "Colored Soldier" poem written a few years later, perhaps with the same intentions.⁵⁹

In this negotiation, Hughes's efforts echo those transitional efforts in the mid-to-late nineteenth century to maintain the illusion that recitations were purely educational in the face of growing theatricality. In an essay about reading aloud and Victorian theater, Alison Byerly writes that, "[a]lthough readings became increasingly theatrical in the course of the nineteenth century, the Victorians continued to consider them—or conveniently pretended to consider them—educational as well as entertaining."⁶⁰ After recitation had lost much of its currency as moral instruction, but before it was relegated to the realm of entertainment through dialect poetry, readings were understood as a less corrupt alternative to the theater, as Byerly, Mark Morrisson, Philip Collins, and others point out.⁶¹ However, the theatricality of presentation, which was precisely the problem for many nineteenth-century Americans, was picked up by Hughes as something valuable about recitation. What he rejected, in *The Negro Mother*, was *content* that was not explicitly related to education. He would borrow, piecemeal, the elements he wanted from the turn-of-the-century recitation tradition—for example, its break from elitism—but revert to an earlier recitation tradition in his intent to educate his listeners: part showman, part spokesman.

The silent form of *The Negro Mother's* apparatus ends up overshadowing the book's voiced (and implicitly oral) poetic text as a whole. More-

over, the depictions of knowledge in the individual poems themselves, represented through the most inspirational and respected figures of the collection, also privilege literacy. In the titular poem, “The Negro Mother,” the speaker recalls a preliterate state very negatively: “I couldn’t read then. I couldn’t write. / I had nothing, back there in the night.” The speaker of “The Black Clown” serves as a negative example, beginning his address to the audience by saying that he is:

Not the same as you—
 Because my mind is dull,
 And dice instead of books will do
 For me to play with
 When the day is through.

Finally, the last poem of the collection, “Dark Youth of the U.S.A.,” begins by positioning the poem’s speaker as a student and reader: “Sturdy I stand, books in my hand,” with books thus becoming necessary props in performing the work. Later in the poem, he declares that “[t]o be wise and strong, then, studying long, / Seeking the knowledge that rights all wrong— / That is my mission.” In other words, the knowledge that is accorded the power to right all wrongs is found in literate and not in oral information, and the student’s purpose—his “mission”—is linked inextricably to his literacy. Of course, gaining strength individually and collectively through literacy was, as I mentioned in the previous chapter, a longstanding subject for the African American literary tradition that preceded Hughes. Hughes’s emphasis on the value of orality only gives the appearance of a turn from this tradition: literacy, and the results that would flow from it (to quote Frederick Douglass), are still depicted in *The Negro Mother* as the “mission” of the characters presented in the book. And in having performers embody these characters, Hughes was imagining them and their audiences not as unlettered but as literate. When the Black Clown, who will have nothing to do with books, says that he is “[n]ot the same as you,” he is addressing his listening audiences as readers.⁶²

Hughes was certainly more concerned with preserving the impression of orality in his poetry than, for example, Dunbar was, as he revised his earlier dialect poetry to reduce what Stanley Schatt calls the “Dunbar-like dialect that [he] had enjoyed using in his late teens and early twenties.”⁶³ Generally, he turned away from Dunbar’s reliance upon orthographical peculiarity and toward syntactical dialect features that could be perceived by a listening audience just as well as a reading one. Hughes revised his

poems more frequently than one might think, as several of his readers have pointed out.⁶⁴ Van Vechten's introduction to *The Weary Blues* suggests that the naturalness of Hughes's work is only the semblance of naturalness; he says of his poems, "[t]hey are the (I almost said informal, for they have a highly deceptive air of spontaneous improvisation) expression of an essentially sensitive and subtly illusive nature."⁶⁵ The "spontaneous improvisation" suggested by Hughes's verse is, of course, designed to look spontaneous and improvised, and Hughes's interest in oral art forms leads him to try to approximate the spontaneity often fundamental to the composition of those forms.

Although reading aloud was still a common activity through the late nineteenth century and taught in schools, by the time *The Negro Mother* was published, silent reading—and more specifically silent *educational* reading—had become more or less entrenched in the United States. This development, of course, has important consequences for Hughes's composition of a book of recitations at this time. Reciting poetry, especially as a travelling bard, did not feel modern; as Charles Chesnutt wrote to Hughes about his performance tour of the South, "It suggests the wandering minstrel of medieval times."⁶⁶ The various formats of *The Weary Blues*, *Fine Clothes to the Jew*, and *The Negro Mother* suggest that Hughes wanted to think of his poetry as belonging to an oral tradition, and that his strategies for exploiting that connection were constantly evolving. His early books figure as responses and challenges to the shifts in reading culture that, by the early twentieth century, were privileging silent reading, but they were also subject to these shifts. In a book titled *The Applied Psychology of Reading: With Exercises and Directions for Improving Silent and Oral Reading*, published in 1926 (the same year coincidentally as Hughes's first book, *The Weary Blues*), psychologist Fowler D. Brooks writes, "Silent reading is far more important for the adult than oral reading. This fact is so widely recognized now that we need not discuss it at any length." Poetry, however, has always been the exception. Brooks claims that poetry is peculiarly resistant to silent reading, and that it is "almost impossible" to read poetry without oral reading. He writes, "The reader may observe his own silent reading of poetry and see the importance of inner articulation. One may begin by reading silently a poem which he enjoys, but as he proceeds he often reads it aloud, or with noticeable vocalization."⁶⁷ One can't help it, or so he would have us believe. Even early-twentieth-century educators who strongly urged against oral reading, such as Herbert G. Lull and H. B. Wilson in their 1921 *The Redirection of High-School Instruction*, permit the qualification that "inner articulation habits devel-

oped by good oral reading which involve feelings of inflection, pitch, tone quality, and rhythm have some value for silent reading, especially the silent reading of poetry.”⁶⁸

This understanding of the process involved in reading poetry—as distinct from other kinds of reading—persists today, as most poetry in general appears to require the use of oral models of reading, reception, and composition. The divergent modes in *The Negro Mother* that encourage readers to respond to it as both oral and literate reflect not only Hughes’s dual concerns, but a larger cultural shift that had been happening for decades in silent reading practices. Subvocalization, or “inner articulation,” functions as something like a loophole in the less-than-total triumph of silent reading, and allows the silent reading of poetry to exist with still some trace of performance. This is true to an even greater degree in the reading of dialect poetry. In *The Negro Mother*, the difficulty of reading the poems aloud arises from the perceived discordance of and tension between competing oral and literate modes of communication, and Hughes’s appeal to poetry listeners, by distancing the oral and literate parts of the book from each other, ends up ironically reasserting their combination as indispensable to an appreciation of the book. Today, Hughes is recognized more than he is read and, when he is read, his work is treated as a celebration of orality. Ironically, in a book of recitations, we find a complementary celebration of literacy.

McKay’s Dialects and Poetic Diction

Like Hughes’s *The Negro Mother*, Claude McKay’s early work in *Songs of Jamaica* was surrounded by an apparatus framing the book. McKay’s apparatus confirmed that the book contained “the thoughts and feelings of a Jamaican peasant of pure black blood.”⁶⁹ Readers are thus instructed to think of all of the characters presented in *Songs of Jamaica*, male and female, young and old, to be versions of McKay. Hughes stipulated how dark- or light-skinned performers of the *Negro Mother* poems should be, giving instructions that “The Black Clown” be done by “a pure-blooded Negro” and “The Colored Soldier” by a “young brown fellow,” but the intraracial diversity of the characters effectively creates space for a community of readers to step in and out of the text rather than presenting one archetypal character through which to understand the book’s various speakers. The diversity contained in McKay’s book, on the other hand, is leveled by Jekyll’s introduction. Jekyll, McKay’s patron early in his career,

writes an introduction to *Songs of Jamaica* that is notably not evaluative in a literary sense; it is clear that only authenticity and purity of expression matter to him. In an essay titled “Boyhood in Jamaica,” McKay recalls that, upon meeting Jekyll and asking his opinion on a group of poems that were all in standard English but one, Jekyll disliked the poems in “straight English” but of the dialect poem he told McKay, “this is the real thing.”⁷⁰ As Michael North points out, “McKay came to him already speaking and writing perfect standard English, which Jekyll urged him to drop, at least on paper, in favor of the Jamaican dialect,” because “[i]t was vitally necessary to his white patrons and readers that he be ‘real.’”⁷¹ An English folklorist living and collecting tales in Jamaica, Jekyll impressed upon McKay the importance of presenting himself as “the real thing” in his poetry.

In response to Jekyll’s rejection of his “straight English” poems, McKay wrote mainly dialect poems for *Songs of Jamaica*, a book that Heather Hathaway calls “an act of mediation.”⁷² Similarly, Charles Bernstein writes that, “[l]ike Dunbar’s *Complete Poems*, McKay’s dialect poetry is a schizophrenic presentation, foregrounding two unequally powerful readerships, black and white”; one is constantly reminded of “the controlling hand of white editorial authority [that] is always present on the page.”⁷³ Robert Stepto’s treatment of slave narratives and their structures provides a set of terms that prove helpful in understanding the relationship between McKay’s text and the “authenticating” material appended to it by Jekyll. Although the generic differences and historical distance between nineteenth-century slave narratives and an early-twentieth-century book of dialect poetry make the application of Stepto’s terms inexact in this case, his categorizations at least heighten our awareness of the anachronicity of Jekyll’s appended introduction. Bernstein’s comparison to Dunbar might be slightly more appropriate, as Howells’s authentication also revolves around the “purity” of Dunbar’s blackness. Although this comparison should take into account the sixteen years and the national borders that separate the publications of *Lyrics of Lowly Life* and *Songs of Jamaica*, it is also worth noting that *Songs of Jamaica* was actually published one year before the first edition of Dunbar’s posthumous *Complete Poems* (the former in 1912, the latter in 1913).

Before Hughes, McKay was treated as yet another first real black literary “spokesman” and as a significant departure from Dunbar. Max Eastman, in an introduction to *Harlem Shadows* that is often outrageously racist, writes that “[t]hese poems have a special interest for all the races of man because they are sung by a pure blooded Negro. They are the first significant expression of that race in poetry. We tried faithfully to give a

position in our literature to Paul Laurence Dunbar. We have excessively welcomed other black poets of minor talent, seeking in their music some distinctive quality other than the fact that they wrote it.”⁷⁴ These remarks by Eastman, coupled with Jekyll’s introduction, even in attempting to distance McKay from Dunbar, ironically amount to a rereading of the authenticating material Howells provided for Dunbar’s *Lyrics of Lowly Life*.

At first, in *Songs of Jamaica*, Jekyll extends the “purity” of McKay and his countrymen to their language: “What Italian is to Latin, that in regard to English is the negro variant thereof. It shortens, softens, rejects the harder sounds alike of consonants and vowels; I might almost say, refines.”⁷⁵ This perspective reflects what North points to as a common view that saw dialect as “‘purer’ than the standard written language because it was less affected by printing, education, and ‘elocution masters.’”⁷⁶ Ultimately, however, the pronunciation differences Jekyll points out (“d” for “th,” for example) are to him evidence of linguistic laziness, and only two pages later the implications of “refinement” are very different. Jekyll writes, “The negro has no difficulty whatever in pronouncing it clearly: it is merely that he does not, as a rule, take the trouble to do so. . . . And here let me remark, in passing, that in one breath, the black man will pronounce a word in his own way, and in the next will articulate it as purely as the most refined Englishman.”⁷⁷ “Refinement”—he could have alternatively written “cultivation”—shifts here from the province of the black man to the province of the white, specifically Englishman, reminding us of the hesitancy behind Jekyll’s “I might almost say” in his original statement. His assertions that Jamaican English is more “refined” than “English,” and yet those who speak it are necessarily less “refined” than those who do not, produce a critical contradiction.⁷⁸ In other words, as nonsensical as it sounds, articulating a word in a refined way must differ, for Jekyll, in some way from articulating a word as if one is refined.

The idea behind Jekyll’s second statement, that the black man can switch from speaking “in his own way” to speaking as “the most refined Englishman,” stands in marked contrast to the assumptions that drive poems such as Harte’s “The Spelling Bee at Angel’s” or Johnson’s “Aunt Cloe’s Trip to See Miss Liza Kyle,” in which the “refined” conditions of the event of the spelling bee or a visit to the city respectively find the characters unable to shift registers. In fact, the most basic level of humor in Harte’s and Johnson’s poems comes from the fish-out-of-water situations in which the dialect speakers find themselves, from the unlikely fact that the characters are not able to alter their speech or behavior at all depend-

ing upon their circumstances. But in Jekyll's remarks we get a hint of what seems to be the threatening underside of dialect poetry and its "charms": the dialect speaker is essentially duplicitous and inscrutable. This perceived threat is at the heart of Jekyll's shifting sense of "refinement."

Like the dialect in which the "unrefined" black man expresses himself, by association considered now to be *unrefined* and *impure*, the speaker of the poem is essentially illegible and refuses to be fixed. Why else include such extensive pronunciation notes and appendices, longer than McKay's poems in some cases? A note to "Quashie to Buccra," North writes, "conjures up a dramatic scene before the first-time reader thinks to ask why there *are* notes."⁷⁹ And, as Bernstein points out, *Songs of Jamaica's* "many compromising aspects" include "running translations and glosses at the foot of each page, providing unnecessary and misleading translations of dialect words."⁸⁰ It is certainly true that many of the glosses are unnecessary. For example, Jekyll's treatment of the final stanza of McKay's "Heartless Rhoda" consists of a summary longer than the text itself. Here is the final stanza, followed by Jekyll's accompanying note:

Life I only care to see
 In de way dat udders live;
 I experiment to be
 All dat fate can mek o' me:
 Glad I tek all whe' she give,
 For I'm hopin' to be free.

A free paraphrase will best explain the meaning of these six lines. Rhoda sees other girls marry, and out of pure curiosity she wants to find out what married life is like. So she makes the experiment,—though this [marriage] is only one of the things that Fate has in store for her. And she takes gladly whatever Fate gives, always hoping (and meaning) to change the present experience for another.⁸¹

In addition to this lengthy note, Jekyll offers his readers a note translating "udders" as "others." This is in case, I suppose, readers should think that the poem's speaker would like to live as a cow's udder!

Many notes, moreover, call attention to redundant words that seem to improve rhythm, as does "say" in the line "But I can tell you say" from "Fetchin' Water." Occasionally, though, Jekyll will make his estimation of the poetic value of extraneous words explicit in a way that he never does in his introduction, as he does in his note to the line "Joanie, when you

were me own a true sweetheart” from McKay’s “Pleading.” Jekyll writes, “There is a delicious caressing sound about this intrusive ‘a.’” Even so, the notion that this language might be “literary” is never admitted, despite the fact that redundancies are also a common strategy in heightened poetic diction (think of, for example, the semantically extraneous second “and go” of “I will arise and go now, and go to Innisfree” from William Butler Yeats’s “The Lake Isle of Innisfree,” a poem whose archaic structures never really cross over into dialect writing). The excesses of Jekyll’s apparatus serve a purpose for him, and for the audience he imagined for McKay. Any trace of inscrutability that might remain in the text would threaten the standard-English-speaking reader, who imagines that the language of the poem would be perfectly accessible, legible, and natural to any black reader.

The apparatus’ presence in *Songs of Jamaica* can be attributed to Jekyll’s insistence that the poet and his invented dialect speakers must be interpreted. It is clear from Jekyll’s introduction that he thinks of literary dialect as insufficiently literate on its own. This is not to say that Jekyll did not value the Jamaican dialect; clearly, he did. But Jekyll has something at stake in directing McKay toward dialect writing: the resultant text depends upon Jekyll’s perception of the division between ordinary language (that of the dialect poems) and literary language (that of the apparatus). Bernstein is right to say that the most obvious of Jekyll’s notes are his translations, but a significant number guide pronunciation; for example, a footnote to the word “do’n” reads, “‘Down’ is pronounced very short, and is a good rhyme to ‘tongue.’”⁸² In fact, Jekyll’s entire introduction, save the paragraph about McKay’s “purity,” is comprised of directions for pronunciation. Jekyll’s notes indicate, in other words, that he understands *Songs of Jamaica* as a profoundly oral composition, and his notes as a literate companion.

Jekyll’s consistent and determined treatment of *Songs of Jamaica* as the awkward transcription of oral poetry amounts to an attempt to force McKay into the paradoxical role of an illiterate writer. Stepto claims, in his reading of Henry Bibb’s narrative as an “eclectic narrative” (or, a first-phase narrative, in which the authenticating material is appended to and not integrated into the text), that “Bibb’s removal from the primary authenticating documents and strategy (that is, from the ‘Introduction’) weakens his control of the narrative and . . . relegates him to a posture of partial literacy.”⁸³ This is also true, to some extent, in McKay’s case; his literacy is obscured by Jekyll’s introduction.

Of course, McKay was ill-equipped to fill the role Jekyll prescribed for him. The poems themselves smack of a culturally specific and Anglophilic

kind of literary artifice. In his introduction to *Harlem Shadows*, McKay describes the kind of education he received in the British colony, pointing out that “the language we wrote and read in school was England’s English. Our textbooks then, before the advent of the American and Jamaican readers and our teachers, too, were all English-made.”⁸⁴ In fact, Bitá’s poetry-inspired reverie in *Banana Bottom* could have been modeled after McKay’s own childhood educational experiences. When she comes across “some of those verses that had been prescribed during her elementary-school days as ‘recitations to develop the love of poetry in children’” and “the ‘memory gems’ that did service as ‘little moral lessons in short poetic flights,’” she sits, “shut entirely off from her surroundings and was back in school again, absorbed in the blue-covered reader and the poems (how she did love to prattle them!).”⁸⁵ Bitá’s absorbing reading brings to mind the literary appetite of the young McKay, whose reading material included “anything that was thrilling”: first, mainly novels, and then, “with [Jekyll’s] excellent library at [his] disposal, . . . *Childe Harold*, *The Dunciad*, *Essay on Man*, *Paradise Lost*, the Elizabethan lyrics, *Leaves of Grass*, the lyrics of Shelley and Keats and of the late Victorian poets.”⁸⁶ The speaker of McKay’s “Old England,” one of the poems included in *Songs of Jamaica*, gushes at the prospect of visiting Westminster Abbey to see Milton, Shakespeare, Wordsworth, and Gray. Although Bernstein believes that “Old England” “overplays the sentiment” and therefore can be read ironically, McKay himself, in *A Long Way from Home*, writes, “In my young poetic exuberance in the clean green hills of Jamaica, I had chanted blithely and naively of ‘chimney factories pouring smoke,’” apparently referring to this poem.⁸⁷ The product of British instruction, McKay valued the English literary canon—Whitman stands out as an odd and unexpected exception—and his writing as a result privileged the oral elements Jekyll wanted only with difficulty.

As Hathaway writes of *Songs of Jamaica*, the “language . . . does not ring true. Frequently, what appears to be McKay’s voice, that of one who speaks in the ‘cultivated’ tongue of ‘straight English,’ interrupts the mood and tone of the dialect that is intended to characterize the peasant speaker.”⁸⁸ To this I would counter that the language of written dialect poetry, in any case, can never “ring true,” because readers must decode each writer’s invented dialect. Hathaway’s use of the words “voice” and “tongue” in the sentence above reveal an unproblematic association of dialect writing with orality. Words such as “whe” in McKay’s “Heartless Rhoda,” although they may make contextual sense, render the poem for a moment less legible. The reader must figure out, even if for a split second, what “whe” might signify, while “o’er”—another contraction that

represents a similarly nonstandard pronunciation—would cause no such problems and would be instantly recognizable, being already part of our literate inheritance. “Whe’” is not, on the other hand, a word English language readers are used to seeing in print.

Using Charles Dickens, Thomas Hardy, Herman Melville, and Mark Twain as examples, Michael Toolan writes that readers “negotiate those pages . . . where some other dialect than the familiar standard is rendered in a spirit of enforced labour. No doubt there are effects of charm and quaintness achieved, but by and large the sense of alienation predominates.”⁸⁹ In many cases, ironically, the more phonetically precise the dialect is, the more difficult it is to read. In reading a linguistically detailed dialect poem by the nineteenth-century African American poet James Edwin Campbell, Mark Balhorn decides, “Except for the eye dialect, there is a lot to recommend this piece from the standpoint of linguistic accuracy, but as is evident when one first tries to read it, as literature, it is not very effective. Since the rendering is difficult to process, the resulting voice sounds inarticulate, even inscrutable.” Like McKay’s “whe’,” Campbell’s dialect “[s]pellings such as ‘lib’ for ‘live,’ ‘hunner yurs’ for ‘a hundred years,’ and ‘ebbry tings’ for ‘everything,’ are not automatically recognized and the reader must consciously analyze the string in order to retrieve lexical meaning. . . . [R]eading of the text remains a labor.”⁹⁰ That both Toolan and Balhorn describe the dialect reading experience as “labor” demonstrates just how thoroughly readers abandon phonics as they achieve competency, making the processing of unfamiliar written words hard work. In other words, readers would recognize “o’er” instantly, but “whe’” produces an instance of defamiliarization that requires some degree of exertion to figure out. As Bernstein puts it, “[t]ranscribed speech, for example, may seem more unnatural than the idealized conventions for representing speech. . . . The ordinary erodes and resists the standard, just as standard English and normative verse forms exoticize and defamiliarize the ordinary.”⁹¹ Or, to put it in terms outlined in an earlier chapter, “whe’,” like Riley’s child-writing, forces the reader to revisit the phoneticization and subvocalization of early literacy. “O’er,” however, does not. Reading it effortlessly is an indicator of familiarity with the English poetic tradition.

Because Jekyll reads McKay’s dialect as “the real thing” and implicitly argues for literary dialect as the most “natural” medium for McKay’s poetry in his introduction, while McKay’s poetry necessarily presents dialect writing as just as artificial as the standard English writing, both literary dialect and poetic diction strain legibility in McKay’s case. This seems to me distinct from “code switching,” the oral practice that Lee M. Jen-

kins invokes to describe the shifting registers in McKay's "Sukee River" (the only dialect poem, Jenkins points out, that McKay translates later into standard English).⁹² Moreover, like Dunbar's early poetry collections, the poems in *Songs of Jamaica* are written in several different dialects, all straining legibility to different degrees and in different ways, demanding that readers shift registers constantly. In other words, McKay poses a challenge to the writer cited in this book's introduction who claimed that "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."⁹³ "To E.M.E.," for example, is one of several poems in a less obtrusive dialect (the poem begins, "You see me smile: but what is it? / A sweetened pain—a laughin' fit—," with only "laughin'" being a dialect spelling, and a conservative one at that).⁹⁴ Another poem, "A Country Girl," is a dialogue of two distinct dialects, both distinctly Jamaican. Those poems not in dialect are almost invariably written in such self-consciously poetic diction that they call attention to themselves, such as "A Dream," with the lines, "Day broadens, and I *ope* the window wide" and "I lightly *gambol* on the school-yard green" (emphasis added).

Rather than thinking of these artificial standard-English poems as failures, as Jekyll might, we can think of McKay's approach to poetic diction as a variation of his approach to dialect poetry. As Donald Wesling writes, "In principle, reading [dialect] poetry is the same kind of literary experience as reading a heavily elaborated diction in Alexander Pope."⁹⁵ McKay recognized this. In his introduction to *Harlem Shadows*, McKay defends his habitual use of heightened poetic diction. He writes:

I have not hesitated to use words which are old, and in some circles considered poetically overworked and dead, when I thought I could make them glow alive by new manipulation. Nor have I stinted my senses of the pleasure of using the decorative metaphor where it is more truly and vividly beautiful than the exact phrase. But for me there is more quiet delight in "The golden moon of heaven" than in "The terra-cotta disc of cloud-land."⁹⁶

McKay's remarks, published in 1922, read almost as a rebuttal to the sort of Imagist prescriptions favoring precision to abstraction set forth by Pound. Pound's "A Few Don'ts by an Imagiste" warns writers, "Don't use such an expression as 'dim lands of *peace*.' It dulls the image. It mixes an abstraction with the concrete. It comes from the writer's not realizing that the natural object is always the *adequate* symbol."⁹⁷ In fact, "A Dream"'s

embrace of the “poetic” extends beyond word choice to inversions of word order: for example, “Sadly the scenes of bygone days I view.”⁹⁸

According to definitions of poetic language that distinguish it from ordinary language,⁹⁹ dialect verse is paradoxically both: literary dialect claims to represent speech almost as closely as a phonetic transcription might, but, as literature, it is initially off-putting and illegible to the reader. Stanley Fish argues that “the very act of distinguishing between ordinary and literary language, because of what it assumes, leads necessarily to an inadequate account of both,” and dialect poetry would provide Fish with a peculiar case study: dialect writing as “ordinary” language defines itself against literary conventions, but requires all of the labor associated with literary language.¹⁰⁰ On one hand, dialect writing is plain and prosaic. On the other hand, it becomes—almost despite itself—literary, appealing to its readers on a visual and literate level. In its attempted closeness to orality, with its seeming phonetic accuracy, literary dialect ends up even more literary (i.e., extraordinary) than “o’er” is. In his analysis of Gerard Manley Hopkins, Cary H. Plotkin claims that Hopkins’s use of dialect “heighten[s] current language into poetic language . . . by virtue of the attention that dialect words draw to themselves as words rather than as transparent vehicles of meaning,” thus “making the components of language obtrude into the foreground of the poem.” As a result, dialect words “constitute a supplementary resistance to reading.”¹⁰¹ Literary dialect, then, seems to have it both ways, being both natural and unnatural, ordinary and poetic.

Many of the features associated with poetic diction are just as present in dialect verse as they are in “poetic” verse, and are used to the same end. Perhaps most notable among these features is elision. Like his use of inversions and poetic diction generally, McKay’s use of poetic elisions is deliberately antiquated.¹⁰² For example, the omitted “v” in “o’er,” a “poetic” elision, is visually equivalent to the present participle’s omitted final “g,” a common “dialect” elision. This is an obvious and readily apparent point *visually*, but it is also almost counterintuitive. In fact, Otto Jespersen’s brief genealogy of poetic elisions in his 1905 *Growth and Structure of the English Language* provides an historical reinforcement to this perhaps unexpected parallel: “*howe’er, e’er, o’er, e’en* were at first vulgar or familiar forms, used in daily talk. . . . [T]he short forms were branded as vulgar by schoolmasters with so great a success that they disappeared from ordinary conversation while they were still retained in poetry. And now they are distinctly poetic and as such above the reach of common mortals.”¹⁰³ The cultural capital attached to poetic elisions obscures their origin as so-called ordinary language and their connections to dialect elisions.

Because literary dialect is the genre of poetry thought to be closest to speech and poetic diction the furthest from it, the two modes would seem to be at opposite extremes. McKay's poems, again, emphasize the continuities between the two types of language. Unlike poets who conceive of literary dialect as a deviation from poetic diction, McKay demonstrates that literary dialect and poetic diction are not in opposition. Literary dialect's resemblance to other types of literary language in its strangeness leads McKay to conceive of writing sometimes in dialect and other times in the most elevated poetic diction as parts of the same project. This is a different way to look at what Daniel T. McGee writes of as "McKay's lifelong interest in the possibility of an alternative to both dialect and standard, a language that would neither imprison the poet in the stereotypes of minstrelsy nor force him to adopt the pose of a white poet"; in seeking an "alternative," McKay's dialect and standard English verse lay bare the similarities between the two modes.¹⁰⁴ His poetry reflects an awareness of the shared resources of literary dialect and literary language. Despite valuations of dialect poetry as dependent upon its naturalness, McKay demonstrates that writing in dialect can never be natural.

In addition to the continuities and apparent alternation between dialect and nondialect writing in *Songs of Jamaica*, many of the poems' elisions are at once literary conventions and literary dialect. The strained legibility to which I referred above often manifests itself as a mingling of poetic diction and dialect writing in poems that are difficult to categorize as either dialect or nondialect. For example, Hathaway discusses a poem, "The Hermit," in which "words of dialect and formal English clash against one another." She points out that sometimes the diction (including the word "pelf") and the word order ("the inversion of 'ever are'") "appear artificial in the context of the surrounding dialect."¹⁰⁵ However, rather than keeping the linguistic resources of dialect and poetic diction discrete and in conflict, McKay makes it difficult for his readers to determine whether a particular elision or archaism is meant to indicate a speaker's use of dialect or poetic diction. It is not unusual, for example, for McKay to use "o'er" in a dialect poem. "Old England" contains the lines "I would view Westminster Abbey, where de great of England sleep / An' de solemn marble statues o'er deir ashes vigil keep." The Oxford English Dictionary claims that "ope" is "Chiefly, and since the 17th c. exclusively, poet[ic]," and it is used as such in the quotation from "A Dream" above, but "Old England" includes another line using "ope" as, presumably, a dialect word ("I would ope me mout' wid wonder at de massive organ soun").¹⁰⁶ Other examples of elisions that can be used as

both dialect and poetic are “’neath” and “’cross,” as in the lines, “Which send their search-rays ’neath the time-worn log, and “I scamper quickly ’cross the fire-burnt soil.”¹⁰⁷ This indeterminacy recalls that described by James Edward Smethurst in his reading of one of Hughes’s poems in *The Negro Mother*, “The Black Clown.” He writes that Hughes’s use of “the word ‘yonder’ is both ‘poetically’ archaic in the context of ‘standard’ English and colloquial in African-American vernacular English,” adding that the word also “appears in the vernacular poem ‘Broke’ of the same collection.”¹⁰⁸ Similarly, Plotkin notes that Hopkins “exploit[ed] the Janus-like properties of a body of words that overlapped the boundary between standard and dialect English.”¹⁰⁹ Clearly there is a trend here: perhaps Hopkins, Hughes, and McKay are not peculiar exceptions in this practice. Perhaps this peculiarly deliberate overlap is intrinsic to dialect writing itself.

Hathaway’s conclusion that “McKay’s linguistic irregularities . . . do not occur in an identifiable system or pattern” and therefore amount to a “subtle invalidation of the vernacular” and “an inconsistent and, in many respects, unconvincing volume of poetry” assumes that McKay’s mingling of several registers can only indicate ambivalence.¹¹⁰ She assumes, in other words, that McKay’s chief goal in *Songs of Jamaica* is to be “convincing.” It is precisely because of the conspicuousness of the constant shifting and mingling of registers (sometimes, as Hathaway points out, mid-poem) that I contend that *Songs of Jamaica* strains legibility. The book is built upon the alienating effects that this shifting has on all readers.

The alienating experience of reading dialect described by Toolan and Balhorn is, of course, not limited to standard English speakers. However, the standard English speaker has internalized the equivalence between his or her dialect and the written language to such a degree that it seems as if nonstandard dialect speaking is more closely related to dialect writing. In McKay’s case, we appear to have his corroboration on this point: “Besides, poems in the dialect were ‘so much easier to write than poems in straight English.’ McKay did not elaborate on why dialect poems proved easier for him to write.”¹¹¹ It is fairly easy to conclude that, because McKay speaks in “dialect,” he would find it effortless to write dialect. But there are more reasonable ways to read McKay’s remark. As we have seen in Jekyll’s response to his poetry, McKay found that there was a bias toward dialect in the reception of his work, just as there was a bias toward dialect in the reception of Dunbar’s work. It is more likely to be the case that the dialect poems were under less scrutiny. Because of dialect writing’s perceived orality, McKay may have found it easier, especially early in his career, to please readers who wanted the exotic and unpolished.

Bernstein's claims that McKay's contribution to the composition of *Songs of Jamaica* is in conflict with Jekyll's do appear, as I have suggested, to be true in terms of the felt opposition between orality and literacy: Jekyll conceived of his apparatus as the "literature" that would make the "oral" verse in the book intelligible. As I mentioned in the previous chapter, Bernstein borrows from Michel de Certeau's concept of "la perruque" (meaning "wig") to view this tension in McKay's use of "pentameter dialect [as] the ruse or wig that allows a running double play of ingratiating and defiance."¹¹² In a sense, McKay's overturning of Jekyll's "controlling hand," as Bernstein puts it, comes from his replication of the larger-scale shifting between apparatus and text inside the microcosmic space of his poems. McKay uses poetic diction that is designated literate alongside language that is thought of as oral, and he acknowledges no real difference between them. In doing so, he asserts that his contributions to *Songs of Jamaica*, the poems, are not substantively different from Jekyll's framing contribution, rendering the framing structure meaningless.

In using language that can pass for either—and in being equally adept at both—McKay demonstrates his awareness of the unnaturalness of literary dialect and the arbitrary nature of the distinction between it and literary language. For example, McKay claims to have written "Strokes of the Tamarind Switch," another poem written in standard English, in a moment of Wordsworthian spontaneous overflow, which he leaves "rugged and unpolished as [he] wrote it at the moment."¹¹³ These poems serve as counter-attacks to Jekyll's introduction, just as much as "Quashie and Buccra" does, as North points out.¹¹⁴ The poems that seem most polished are in fact those that come "naturally." And the suggestion is, of course, that conversely those that seem to come naturally in fact were products of much labor. McKay's practice illustrates his belief that neither the "unrefined" literary dialect nor the "refined" poetic diction (to quote Jekyll) is more legible than the other. In his biography of McKay, Wayne Cooper criticizes McKay's "Old England," claiming that it "contained abundant examples of McKay's dialect verse at its worst—painfully forced rhymes, worn poetic clichés ('to sail athwart the ocean an' to hear de billows roar')."¹¹⁵ But this is the point: McKay infuses dialect with the most conventional poetic diction in order to show how "painfully forced" and overworked dialect can be. "Athwart" and "billows" are as overwrought as "gambol." Both dialect and literary words are chosen by McKay so that he can "make them glow alive by new manipulation," as he writes in his introduction to *Harlem Shadows*.

To call dialect writing "forced," as I assume Cooper means it, amounts to calling it unsuccessful if naturalness is the goal. In fact, Gates writes,

after citing a “trite” example of nineteenth-century literary dialect, “The speech sounds forced, of the sort written but never spoken or sung.” It is as if Gates forgets that the poem is written. Gates mentions one of the poet’s choices—“doin’”—as indicative of a failure to suggest orality. He writes, “If one pronounced ‘doing’ as ‘doin’ is intended to suggest, its spelling would be closer to ‘duen.’ ‘Doin’ is a poor literate translation, meant for the eye of the uninitiate, not meant to suggest a sound.”¹¹⁶ Gates neglects entirely the literate axis of the poem at the expense of the oral.

The divergent modes in Hughes’s *The Negro Mother*, a book that prompts readers to respond to it as both an oral and a literate expression of a single writer, together eventually reinforce literacy even as they appear to promote the aural dissemination that can be achieved through recitation. The registers of *Songs of Jamaica*, however—a book in which the apparatus and poem come from different and apparently conflicting sources—shift between the apparatus and poems (as Jekyll insists upon his distance from McKay) but also within the poems themselves. In both cases, however, these apparently simple and minor books promote difficult reading and listening experiences. The strained legibility resulting from McKay’s constantly alienating effects essentially levels differences between readers and between types of language. McKay alerts all readers to their distance from various dialects, at various times and places, in his questioning of the concepts of “purity” and “standard language” to which he and his poetry were subject.

Considering that the dialect poets discussed in this book wrote in an environment that was, beginning in the late nineteenth century, filled primarily with advanced alphabetic readers—that is, readers who read nearly automatically—they knew that reading such altered language would challenge their audiences’ reading experiences on a very basic level. In *Discourse Networks, 1800/1900*, Frederick A. Kittler discusses how research into aphasia and other language disorders at the turn of the twentieth century helped illuminate understandings of normal reading and speaking processes. He writes of a 1905 physiological study that “reconstructs the path from the speechless patches of light and noise the infant perceives to the ordering of images and speech sounds” and that finally “comes to the conclusion: ‘We proceed like poets.’”¹¹⁷ The creative labor involved in the reading of dialect poetry forged a commonality between dialect poets and their readers that was distinct from the commonality previously supposed, that of rustic familiarity. As I argued in the third chapter of this book, Dunbar turned his subject in “Happy! Happy! Happy!” into a dialect poet. Here I add, in closing, that Dunbar also turns his reader into a dia-

lect poet. Dialect poems worked by turning all of their readers into poets, responsible for actively ordering and piecing together familiar words from unfamiliar bits of written language, as Harper's Aunt Chloe does when she "put[s] the words together / And learn[s] by hook or crook." Rather than operating through the nostalgic myth of residual orality that surrounded the reception of late-nineteenth-century and early-twentieth-century dialect poets, the dialect poem in fact emphasized the role of literacy as equally necessary to its appreciation and popularity.