

"African American Review" Special Issue: Introduction

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African American Review Special Issue— Introduction

Paul Laurence Dunbar was one of the best-known writers in the United States at the time of his death in 1906. His pioneering work in poetry, fiction, and nonfiction prose, which appealed to blacks and whites alike, has continued to shape African American literature. Yet Dunbar's impact on American culture has rarely received the attention it deserves. The articles in this special issue of *African American Review* reexamine the nation's first professional African American author to reveal a figure who merits a more prominent place in the critical and cultural landscape today.

These articles emerge from the Paul Laurence Dunbar Centennial Conference, which was held at Stanford University, California, in March 2006 and was organized by the guest editors of this volume. Scholars of literature, history, American Studies, African American Studies, visual culture, and performance studies, together with some of the nation's leading contemporary poets and writers, gathered at Stanford to bring new critical perspectives to bear on the full range of Dunbar's career as a poet, novelist, short story writer, dramatist, and journalist.

True to the spirit of the conference as a whole, the essays presented here highlight Dunbar as an artist challenged by complex psychological, aesthetic, social, and political pressures at a crucial moment in US history. They seek to uncover neglected aspects of Dunbar's artistic achievements and cultural contexts, such as the subversive role of religion in Dunbar's fiction and poetry; the relationship between Dunbar's poems and the Hampton Camera Club photographs that framed them in Dunbar's immensely popular gift books; and his three novels that feature virtually all-white characters—books generally ignored by critics. Along the way, these reconsiderations challenge a number of assumptions about aesthetics, naturalism, realism, and modernism in the early years of the last century. Forms and genres that Dunbar helped to pioneer, such as epistolary dialect poetry, are examined closely for the first time. Dunbar's engagement with the racial politics of both the Civil War era and the post-Reconstruction era receives more attention than it has in the past, as does his interest in the elegy and in the lyrics of 17th-century England, and his key role in the birth of American cosmopolitanism and modernism. Other essays relate Dunbar's work to discourses about law and evidence that were characteristic of his era; explore his long-term relationship with the *Century* magazine; trace the reception of his work in China; and chart some of the social, cultural, and political controversies that shaped Dunbar's reputation during the century after his death. We hope that, taken together, these essays build a firm foundation for a new century of Dunbar scholarship.¹

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Note

1. The Paul Laurence Dunbar Centennial Conference at Stanford may be viewed and listened to online in its entirety, or by individual paper or session, at the following web addresses: <http://www.stanford.edu/dept/dunbar>; for MACs: <http://vodquik.stanford.edu/ish/dunbar/01/01.qtl> (QuickTime is required); for PCs: <http://vodreal.stanford.edu/ish/01/01.smil> (RealPlayer 9 or later is required). Using wireless technology significantly slows the viewing, and is not recommended.

Guest Editors

Shelley Fisher Fishkin is Professor of English and Director of American Studies at Stanford University. She is the author, editor, or co-editor of forty books, including *Lighting Out for the Territory*; *Was Huck Black? Mark Twain and African American Voices*; *From Fact to Fiction: Journalism and Imaginative Writing in America*; *The Oxford Mark Twain*; and most recently, *The Sport of the Gods and Other Essential Writings by Paul Laurence Dunbar*, co-edited with David Bradley. She is the author of over eighty articles, essays, and reviews, the most recent of which is "Race and the Politics of Memory: Mark Twain and Paul Laurence Dunbar," in *Journal of American Studies* (UK) (2006). She co-edited Oxford's "Race and American Culture" series with Arnold Rampersad, and is past-president of the American Studies Association.

Gavin Jones is Associate Professor of English at Stanford University, where he teaches courses in American literature from 1840 to 1940. He holds a PhD from Princeton University, and is a former member of the Society of Fellows at Harvard. Professor Jones is the author of *Strange Talk: The Politics of Dialect Literature in Gilded Age America* (1999), and has published articles on writers such as George W. Cable, Theodore Dreiser, W. E. B. Du Bois, and Paule Marshall in journals such as *American Literary History*, *New England Quarterly*, and *African American Review*. His second book, *American Hungers: The Problem of Poverty in U.S. Literature, 1840-1945*, will appear this year from Princeton University Press.

Meta DuEwa Jones is Assistant Professor of English at the University of Texas at Austin, where she teaches courses on jazz performance, visual culture, and innovation in American poetry and African American literature. She received her BA from Princeton and her PhD from Stanford. Her essays have appeared in journals such as *African American Review* and *Callaloo*. She is currently co-editor (with Cherise Smith) of a special issue on "Visual Culture and Collaboration" for *Callaloo*, expected in 2007. Her forthcoming book is entitled *The Muse is Music: Jazz, Poetry, and Spoken Word Performance*.

Arnold Rampersad is Sara Hart Kimball Professor in the Humanities and a member of the English Department at Stanford. A former senior associate dean for the Humanities at Stanford and a MacArthur Foundation fellowship winner, he is the author or editor of more than a dozen books on figures such as W. E. B. Du Bois, Langston Hughes, Richard Wright, and Jackie Robinson. He recently published *Ralph Ellison: A Biography* (Knopf, 2007).

Richard Yarborough is Associate Professor of English and Faculty Research Associate with the Ralph J. Bunche Center for African American Studies at UCLA. He has lectured and published on African American literature and on race in US popular culture, with essays on writers such as Frederick Douglass, William Attaway, Charles W. Chesnutt, Harriet Beecher Stowe, and Richard Wright. Associate General Editor of the *Heath Anthology of American Literature*, he is also editor of the University Press of New England's *Library of Black Literature* reprint series.