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Mushtaq Abdulhaleem Mohammed Fattah¹ 
Anan J. Lewis Alkass Yousif² 

The racialization of nature in Paul Dunbar's
selected poems

¹ Al-Iraqia University
Saba' Abkar, Baghdad, 10011, Iraq
E-mail: mushtaq_muhammed@aliraqia.edu.iq

² University of Baghdad
Bab Al-Moatham, Baghdad, 10071, Iraq
E-mail: anan.jameel@coart.uobaghdad.edu.iq

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Abstract. Known as the poet laureate of the Negro Race, Paul Laurence Dunbar (1872-1906) explores the complex relationship between African Americans and the natural world in his poetry. While lynching poetry of the black American South was directed to the white audience and concerned with the image of the black body, Dunbar accentuates the rural South as a place of binary oppositions of inspiration and threat, beauty and slave labor, solace and oppression. His nature poems emphasize the value of ecological thinking in relation to black identity. This paper argues for a rereading of Dunbar's nature poetry that offers a more complex notion of black naturalism and eco-history of violence. It explores his artistic, cultural, and social understanding of nature, questioning the representations of the natural world and the plantation tradition. Dunbar's poems display the connection between black people's activity and both a hostile and empathetic environment – a geographical place of violence and racialized space. The questions this paper tends to explore are: How does Dunbar articulate the natural world as a place of inflicted pain and refuge, beauty and danger, and sympathy and antipathy? How do black people's experiences extend to natural and geographical scenes in his poetry? And how do they impact the landscapes they inhabit via interdependent bonds? Frantz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961), including concepts like “Manichaeon world” and “national consciousness,” as well as W. E. B. Du Bois' “double consciousness” mentioned in *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903) are applied to Dunbar's selected poems to comprehend his poetics of nature and how it is related to lynching and racism.

Keywords: Dunbar; Fanon; Du Bois; Black nature; Raciality; Geographical landscape; Rural south

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Introduction

Depicting the natural world as a site of racial struggle, Dunbar underlines that the legacies of slavery and racism are still visible and go beyond being a mere geographical location of the American South. Dunbar's selected nature poems, which epitomize natural places of the South as spaces of terror and violence as well as the African Americans' joys and sorrows, hopes and fears, challenge the mainstream reading of nature poetry. His reflection of an encounter of the self with nature as an occurrence of pathetic fallacy for poetic descriptions reveals the mild and unreceptive environment that African Americans faced. Dunbar's concern with African American history of lynching in a hostile and unjust white society correlates with the concept of racialization and the construction of people's identity.

Dunbar reckons that the natural world has its impact on black life and vice versa. This discloses how valuable postcolonial thinking is to black culture and literature. Being a symbol of the creative and intellectual American Negro, Dunbar describes his natural surroundings in a language (standard and dialect), proving that "the American landscape itself endures or absorbs the experiences of cultural haunting and trauma." The lynching of African Americans on trees and its effects on them is not only an instrument of death but also a legacy of racial terror. Poems, such as "The Poet and His Song," "Sympathy," "Whip-Poor-Will and Katy-Did," "To the South: On Its New Slavery," and "The Haunted Oak," tackle racism, lynching, fieldwork, slavery, and freedom. They also refer to "the politics of nature," "nature's historicity," and how a racialized space is socially constructed (Alexandre, 2012: 55).

The Purpose of the Paper

This paper aims to provide a new interpretation of Paul Laurence Dunbar's nature poetry, which reveals a more nuanced understanding of black naturalism and the ecological history of violence. It examines how Dunbar portrays the natural world as a

site of both suffering and solace, beauty and peril, and affinity and hostility for African Americans in the rural South. It also applies the theoretical frameworks of Fanon and Du Bois' concepts of postcolonialism and sociology to explore his poetic representation of nature and its relation to lynching and racism.

Material and Methods of Research

This paper conducted a qualitative content analysis of Paul Laurence Dunbar's poems written in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. It selected five poems from three poetry collections, which reflected the poet's literary tradition of standard and dialect poems. Combining textual analysis methods, this paper examined the corpus of scholarship produced about the poet, his literary works, and the historical and cultural, political contexts to interpret the intentions and messages behind the texts. It acknowledged that close re-readings of literary works were not sufficient on their own; they needed to be supported by background knowledge. It relied on reputable libraries to obtain relevant journal articles and book chapters, which were read, analyzed, and cited.

African American poetry's racialization of nature is a nuanced investigation that touches on social, cultural, and historical aspects. The study of nature in Dunbar's selected poems is placed within the larger framework of racial identity and representation in literature. To highlight the relevance of Dunbar's selected poems in this context, one has to combine critical viewpoints from a range of academic works: The use of nature by Dunbar as a reflection of racialized violence and the specter of lynching in the American landscape is emphasized by Alexandre (2012) and Marsden (2017) who analyze Dunbar's portrayal of nature as a place rife with racial tension, where the natural world becomes a canvas for the violence and challenges encountered by African Americans. Dunbar's use of nature in his poems touches on topics related to African American poetics and culture. The

improvisational quality of African American poetry is emphasized by Bolden (2004) and Wagner (1973), who also stress how Dunbar's interaction with nature reveals a sophisticated strategy for cultural expression and resistance. Licato (2019) explores Dunbar's metapoetic techniques, illuminating how his depiction of nature functions as a means of subverting and redefining literary tropes. Furthermore, the eco-literary traditions found in African American literature by utilizing the ecocritical lens as proposed by Dungy (2009) and Ruffin (2010), emphasize how Dunbar's poetry interacts with nature and provides a means of reframing the connections between race, environment, and identity. Dunbar's writing in the larger context of African American literature and history is exemplified by Dray's (2003) and Du Bois's (2007) seminal works: two important references that offer important frameworks for comprehending the historical and sociopolitical context against which Dunbar's poetry arose. This synthesis of academic viewpoints from several fields and analytical vantage points demonstrates the complex character of Dunbar's poetry investigation into the racialization of the natural world. Through the integration of historical, cultural, literary, and ecological lenses, this review provides a thorough grasp of the intricacies present in Dunbar's chosen poems' examination of nature.

Findings and Discussion

Published in *Lyrics of Lowly Life* (1896), Dunbar's "The Poet and His Song" reflects nature's numerous caprices, impositions, and expectations within a negro's song. By using song genre, Dunbar not only introduces his artistic style skillfully but also highlights it as an antidote to the labor and frustrations produced by nature. The persona describes nature as horrible and tough to him being on the farm working and toiling. Singing out pain and suffering may comfort that difficulty:

My days are never days of ease;
I till my ground and prune my trees.
When ripened gold is all the plain,
I put my sickle to the grain.

I labor hard, and toil and sweat,
While others dream within the dell;
But even while my brow is wet,
I sing my song, and all is well.
(Dunbar, 1896: 5)

The persona's life is difficult for economic, racial, and environmental reasons. The circumstances of farming from the process of farming to harvesting under the scorching sun are so hard that nothing makes them easy in comparison to others except for singing. Singular, personal, and possessive pronouns such as "I" and "my" are employed to intensify the whole atmosphere that the land and trees are closely related to him.

Symbolically, he keeps laboring, toiling, and sweating throughout the seasons. By referring to his song as the only solace in hardship, Dunbar integrates nature with art. For instance, from time to time, the burning and "unkindly hot" sun can easily turn his green field into "a desert spot" and "a blight upon a tree" can take all his "fruit away." This is a death scene in which the whites are lynching the blacks on trees. He becomes passionately "rebellious" because of the "throes of bitter pain." He pacifies himself by singing "life is more than fruit or grain":

Sometimes the sun, unkindly hot,
My garden makes a desert spot;
Sometimes a blight upon the tree
Takes all my fruit away from me;
And then with throes of bitter pain
Rebellious passions rise and swell;
But – life is more than fruit or grain,
And so I sing, and all is well. (Dunbar,
1896: 5)

For Dunbar, the black struggle with the black death in the middle of nature does not mean that his art ends there, rather it continues to be the extended part of the American landscape – the trees, the animals, the birds, and the insects.

The process of decolonization is always violent because the colonized people must radically reject the colonial order and regain their right to self-determination. How

psychological and social diseases like racism, alienation, inferiority complex, and violence are caused by colonialism affect both the colonizers and the colonized is the main concern. In this respect,

[T]he colonized subject acknowledges no authority. He is dominated but not domesticated. He is made to feel inferior but by no means convinced of his inferiority. He patiently waits for the colonist to let his guard down and then jumps on him. (Fanon, 2004: 16)

Dunbar's poem is a reflection of his dissatisfaction with his poetic output that was appreciated during his life. As he wrote in both standard English and dialect, Dunbar was praised for his dialect poems that depicted the lives of rural black people humorously and sentimentally; he felt that these poems were limiting his artistic expression and reinforcing racial stereotypes.

As an African American poet, Dunbar addresses topics of racism, oppression, and injustice in more serious poems. He contrasts his happy singing with his dejected heart, performing for the enjoyment of his audience and to overcome his struggles, aspiring for acceptance and freedom at the same time (Dunbar-Nelson, 1996: 14). Dunbar's desire to write in standard English can be seen as a form of assimilation or adaptation to survive in a hostile environment. His dialect songs, a rebellion against his oppressors, are forms of submission or compromise with his oppressors, too. The African American poets' connections to America's environment are "accidentally or invisibly or dangerously or temporarily or inappropriately on/in the landscape." Their "treatments of the natural world [...] are historicized or politicized and are expressed through the African American perspective" (Dungy, "Introduction," 2009: xxvii).

Published in *Lyrics of the Hearthside* (1899), "Sympathy" became so famous that it has been recited by black schoolchildren throughout the generations all over the country. Even Maya Angelou (1928-2014)

used its last line as a title for her 1970 autobiography, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. The poem's radical pastoral mode is dominant, presenting a caged bird suffering bondage. Provoking the human persona to sympathize with the bird because s/he has suffered or still suffering a similar fate. The poem does not say that the persona is a black slave. Yet, the speaker suffers physically and mentally, feeling frustration over his bondage (Wagner, 1973: 33-35).

Biographically, while doing his job at the Library of Congress, Dunbar showed no interest in the medical and scientific books that he cataloged and shelved all day. The "iron gratings of the book stacks in the Library of Congress suggested to him the bars of the bird's cage." The hot Washington summer makes Dunbar imprisoned, recalling his free boyhood beside a river in Dayton. In this respect, "[t]he dry dust of the dry books [...] rasped sharply in his hot throat, and he understood how the bird felt when it beat its wings against its cage." This results in "Sympathy," a best-loved poem (Dunbar-Nelson, 1996: 332).

Historically, the most "dreadful scene of agonizing torture" is expressed by St. John de Crèvecoeur, a French writer, when he saw a negro tortured and died inside a cage, stating:

I perceived a Negro, suspended in the cage and left there to expire! I shudder when I recollect that the birds had already picked out his eyes, his cheekbones were bare; his arms had been attacked in several places, and his body seemed covered with [...] wounds. From the edges of the hollow sockets and from the lacerations with which he was disfigured, the blood slowly dropped and tinged the ground beneath. (de Crèvecoeur, 2021: 143)

As depicted in "Sympathy," Dunbar's bird is likened to de Crèvecoeur's negro since both of them were caged, tortured, and suffered for their freedom. Cruel nature is represented by other birds and insects: As soon as the birds left, insects engulfed this

poor creature, eating his damaged flesh and sipping his blood.

Choosing an image to be an embodiment of African Americans' supposed freedom from slavery, Dunbar associates the feeling of restrictive effects with the social, physical, and mental constraints of Jim Crow's life in America:

I know what the caged bird feels, alas!

When the sun is bright on the upland slopes;

When the wind stirs soft through the springing grass,

And the river flows like a stream of glass;

When the first bird sings and the first bud opes,

And the faint perfume from its chalice steals –

I know what the caged bird feels!
(Dunbar, 1899: 40)

As its title refers, the poem elicits the feeling of sympathy which implies a connection between two people rather than a distance between a human and an animal. Employed as catharsis, "Sympathy" is about watching from a distance but not about being in the throes of pain with the actors. It forces an obscure connection upon them both (Patterson, 1999: 124).

Though the bird may "feel" and "beat" its wings, it becomes immortalized through singing: its sufferings are transmitted into a piece of art that connects both the heavenly and earthly worlds. Like the caged birds' songs, human ones symbolize their sufferings, agonies, and frustrations:

I know why the caged bird beats his wing

Till its blood is red on the cruel bars;

For he must fly back to his perch and cling

When he fain would be on the bough a-swing;

And a pain still throbs in the old, old scars

And they pulse again with a keener sting –

I know why he beats his wing! (Dunbar, 1899: 40)

The condition of the black race in America is symbolized by the image of a caged bird. When the bird tries to escape its cage, it just hurts itself and makes its misery worse. Like the bird, the speaker yearns for freedom and feels the same anguish and agony as the bird when he claims to know how the bird feels.

Dunbar produces a melodious impact that contrasts with the terrible reality of the bird's plight by using the rhyme pattern AABBC. The line "I know why" is repeated to highlight the speaker's grasp of the bird's motivations. The image of the bird pounding its wing against the cruel bars till it turns crimson with blood suggests anger, desperation, and psychological and physical harm caused by racism and slavery. Similarly, Dunbar highlights the value of songs within the African-American culture as not joy or glee, but blue notes of sorrow. African Americans passed down negro song melodies from the rivers, jungles, and deserts, incorporating grief into their music, expressing sorrowful tenderness, and occasionally aiming for the sublime. Dunbar reflects on the source of a song to the African Americans. He longs for Africa, its deserts and rivers, being the source of the sad songs. Yet, such sorrow would end in hope.

W. E. B. Du Bois (1868-1963), an African American sociologist, historian, and civil rights activist, describes the African Americans' sorrow songs as "the music of an unhappy people, of the children of disappointment; they tell of death and suffering and unvoiced longing toward a truer world, of misty wanderings and hidden ways." These songs, influenced by travel, geographical landscapes, spaces, continents, and nations are great influencers (Du Bois, 2007: 169). African Americans pursue "a world where people can no longer be dislocated, silenced, denied their 'living', or categorized according to their color, religion, or nationality, a place where there is no more

wailing and annihilation of humanity.” The songs mark the various ways in which African Americans have influenced the formation of these spaces (Alkass Yousif, 2014: 48).

Besides, the ideas of giving to the American nation without taking a turn, African Americans’ sacrificing lives, and weaving selves actively in the fabric of this country are asserted. African Americans fought the whites’ battles and shared the whites’ sorrow:

[G]eneration after generation have pleaded with headstrong, careless people to despise not Justice, Mercy, and Truth, lest the nation be smitten with a curse. Our song, our toil, our cheer, and warning have been given to this nation in blood-brotherhood. Are not these gifts worth the giving? Is not this work and striving? Would America have been America without her Negro people? (Du Bois, 2007: 175)

“Sympathy” is a potent representation of Dunbar’s emotions as a black poet who experienced racism and discrimination throughout his life and career.

The repetition of the phrase, “I know why the caged bird,” shows that Dunbar is watching and experiencing the bird’s feeling, beating, and singing:

I know why the caged bird sings, ah me,
When his wing is bruised and his bosom
sore, –
When he beats his bars and he would be
free;
It is not a carol of joy or glee,
But a prayer that he sends from his
heart’s deep core,
But a plea, that upward to Heaven he
flings –
I know why the caged bird sings!
(Dunbar, 1899: 41)

The poem is not about a mere caged bird; it is about a lack of freedom. The speaker is saying that he “knows how caged bird feels,” and then continues describing how

terrible its life is. A carol of delight or glee, which is what one might anticipate from a singing bird, is also contrasted with the bird’s song by the speaker. The bird’s song is a plea, indicating that the bird needs heavenly assistance and is in a grave predicament. The word “flings” suggests that the bird sings in a powerful, urgent, defiant, and rebellious manner.

The caged bird becomes a metaphor for the speaker’s oppression and lack of freedom. The bird’s imprisonment represents African Americans’ oppression at the beginning of the twentieth century. Through such an aching image, Dunbar wonders how it feels like to live without freedom, judging from the bird’s experience; it is a miserable life. In this vein, African Americans follow “certain religious practices, economic habits, and behavioral actions [...] if they seek freedom from continual subjugation by the white community” (Shafiq, 2002: 391).

Dunbar’s “Sympathy” depicts African American life as a blend of both agrarian and urban settings, and it has the meaning of American citizenship through the American geographical landscape only. Like farmers and slaves, Dunbar serves as a mediator between the demands of nature and society, between the risks and privations of the raw, untamed environment and the overbearing restrictions of civilization. His poetry embodies pastoralism in its purest form (Licato, 2019: 135). Mediation in pastoral poetry is as equivalent to double consciousness as:

[The Negro’s] sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness, – an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder. (Du Bois, 2007: 8)

Chosen or not, African Americans' position is so unique that it could mediate polar worldviews. For them, the function of pastoral poetry, similar to double consciousness, is to affirm the means of perception and the end of survival.

Dunbar describes nature following a philosophy of wearing the mask: for African Americans, survival means to "wear the mask." Dunbar's nature poems through the mask of nature's gaiety reveal nature's more sober and grim face. His consistent use of face personification in his nature poems and how African Americans are probably represented metonymically by a natural face. In this respect,

[Dunbar's] technique is to assume that the face of nature (like the faces of people) is often masked, occasionally hiding something unsightly. So often did Dunbar endow nature with human abilities throughout his poetry that it certainly would not take that much of a mental leap to envision nature as similarly Janus-faced. (Alexandre, 2012: 65)

In personifying nature, Dunbar employs apostrophe – a figure of speech in which the poet addresses an absent person, an abstract idea, or even a thing – to reinforce humans' alienation from others and to assert interconnection between humans and nature.

Dunbar's relationship with the natural world showcases sympathy for its plights such as falling leaves, crying birds, and hunted animals. It is an awareness of the unsavory of human beings' social circumstances, "namely, lynching violence, human bondage, false accusations, and the eventual meting out of unjust punishment to innocent black bodies." The relationship between human and nonhuman worlds is mutual and reciprocal; nature's feelings toward human beings vary from "feelings of empathy and sympathy to feelings of downright antipathy" (Alexandre, 2012: 67).

Using the example of a caged bird that yearns for freedom and sings despite its

misery to illustrate symbolically the anguish of those who are oppressed by prejudice and unfair laws, Dunbar focuses on the violence and injustice of the colonial situation and the need for resistance and liberation from the oppressors. Acknowledging the psychological and emotional toll of oppression, and the difficulty of maintaining hope and dignity in the face of brutality and humiliation, both Dunbar and Fanon use metaphors to convey their messages, such as the caged bird, the sun, the wind, the blood, the fire, and the knife. Appealing to the universal human values of freedom, justice, equality, and solidarity, they call for a collective awakening that ends colonial exploitation:

For a colonized people, the most essential value, because it is the most meaningful, is first and foremost the land: the land, which must provide bread and, naturally, dignity. But this dignity has nothing to do with "human" dignity. The colonized subject [...] can be arrested, beaten, and starved with impunity; and no sermonizer on morals, no priest has ever stepped in to bear the blows in his place or share his bread. (Fanon, 2004: 9)

Fanon emphasizes the importance of the land for the colonized people, and how it relates to Dunbar's image of the caged bird that longs for the freedom of nature.

Dunbar's dialect poem "Whip-Poor-Will and Katy-Did," which was published in *Lyrics of Love and Laughter* (1903), envisions the natural world as being in cahoots with social customs of racism. As its title suggests, the poem deals with two calls of a whippoorwill bird which evokes the punitive decree to "Whip, [poor] Will!" and of an innocent insect, the katydid which automatically summons an accusation: "Katy did" something for which she must be punished. Dunbar begins the poem with a falling night to add a gloomy atmosphere to its tone:

Slow de night's a – fallin',

An' I hyeah de callin,
Out erpon de lonesome hill;
Soun' is moughty dreary,
Solemn – lak an' skeery,
Sayin' fu' to "whip po' Will."
Now hit 's moughty tryin',
Fu' to hyeah dis cryin',
'Deed hit 's mo' den I kin stan';
Sho' wid all our slippin',
Dey 's enough of whippin'
'Dout a bird a'visin' any man. (Dunbar,
1903: 68)

The poem uses the voices of two insects, the whip-poor-will and the katydid, to express the speaker's feelings of loneliness and regret. The whip-poor-will is a bird that sings a mournful song at night, while the katydid is a grasshopper that makes a loud noise by rubbing its wings.

The speaker hears the whip-poor-will saying "whip po' Will," as if blaming him for his troubles, and the katydid saying "Katy did," as if accusing him of hurting a woman named Katy. The speaker wishes he could silence the insects, but he knows they are only echoing his conscience, wondering:

[W]as the cry "Whip-poor-will" a command, or was it "Whip-poor-will" a pathetic question and hope of Will's final exoneration? It was a whimsical turn that he gave to the cry of the night-bird, and the shrill insistence of the katy-did in the little poem "Whip-poor-Will and Katy-Did," when he wants to know why one must "Whip-poor-Will," when we know from the song of the insect that it was Katy who did? (Dunbar-Nelson, 1996: 127)

Known for his dialectic verse, Dunbar used to capture the rhythms and expressions of his culture. Dialect poems like "Whip-Poor-Will and Katy-Did" reflect the speech of African Americans in the South.

Listening to the sounds of nature at night, the calls of the whip-poor-will and the katydid, two nocturnal insects that are commonly found in the Southern United

States, the speaker notices that the whip-poor-will's call is mournful, while the katydid is lively and cheerful. The differences between the two creatures suggest that the whip-poor-will's song is a "cry of pain," while the katydid's is a "song of glee." Contemplating the meaning of life and the inevitability of death, Dunbar finds comfort in the beauty and music of the world (Wagner, 1973: 3):

In de noons o' summah
Dey 's anothon hummah
Sings anothon song instid;
An' his th'oot 's a – swellin'
Wid de joy o' tellin',
But he says dat "Katy did."
Now I feels onsuhtain;
Won't you raise de cu'tain
Ovah all de ti'ngs dat 's hid'
W'y dat feathahed p'isen
Goes erbout a – visin'
Whippin' Will w'en Katy did? (Dunbar,
1903: 68-69)

It is suggested that this difference in attitude is reflective of the human experience, where some people are happy and carefree, while others are burdened by pain and suffering. The poem ends with the speaker musing on the nature of existence and the inevitability of death, noting that even the whip-poor-will and the katydid, with their vastly different attitudes towards life, will both eventually meet the same fate (Bolden, 2004: 34).

A political inference is drawn from the insect and the bird which represent the pervasive police and surveillance of black people during the Jim Crow era. The conflict is between who accuses, who is accused, and who is punished. These two creatures' calls make an amazing parable: the bird and the insect are regarded as oppressive forces that once worked meticulously and violently to falsely accuse, duly punish, and publicly or privately dispense black bodies (Marsden, 2017: 105). As a part of the American fauna, these creatures are accused of conspiring to get rid of black individuals. They embody the understanding through a black speaker.

Nature for African Americans is different from that of the Romantics:

[T]he same land, trees, and birds about which the Romantics rhapsodized begin conspiring against blacks, this reversal of things suggests that the Romantic and the black perceptions of Nature are on a collision course. The Romantic notion that nature [...] is a “universally inviting” sanctuary with moral authority is turned on its head; the value and goodness of the land are reappraised to seem quite hostile and unjust instead. (Alexandre, 2012: 80)

Unlike the White authority and superiority which are attributed to nature from a romantic point of view, the bird and insect in the grass are the kinds of nonhumans that do not have the final word. The bird and the insect are merely Jim Crow’s followers who cannot harm themselves. They are like the police.

Dunbar’s poem is a common ground on which humans, animals, and insects meet, based on the shared vulnerabilities, social hierarchies, consciousness, and finally living space. Such a poem refers to the relations between the black race and space or culture versus nature binary. Likewise,

Dunbar actually dramatizes the [...] history of the injustices suffered only by black American *men* through the seemingly pleasant voices of the American natural landscape – sweet voices, which ultimately belie their malicious intentions. To be sure, the question that ends Dunbar’s “Whip Poor Will and Katy Did” essentially asks, “Why is it poor Will who is getting whipped when it was actually Katy who transgressed in some way and did something wrong?” (Alexandre, 2012: 204)

The natural world, for Dunbar, is neither an objective nor a fixed environment. The natural world is more antipathetic to black male bodies than it is to female bodies.

The whip-poor-will represents the colonized people who are burdened by pain and suffering under the oppressive system of colonialism. The katydid represents those who can maintain their joy and happiness in the face of oppression. The poem suggests that these two experiences are interconnected and can coexist within the same community and that the liberation struggle is a complex process that requires a deep understanding of these differences. The differences in experience between colonized people and the complexity of their struggles for liberation are emphasized (Bolden, 2004: 34).

Considering how the dialect reflects the colonized identity of the African American speaker and the resistance to the dominant culture is common in Fanon and Dunbar’s views. Violence is a vital tool for liberation, and the colonized must take back their language and culture from the colonizer. Dunbar utilizes the dialect to express himself artistically and to keep alive his forefathers’ oral traditions. In this respect, “modes of thought, diet, modern techniques of communication, language, and dress have dialectically reorganized the mind of the people” (Fanon, 2004: 161).

Projecting the humor and joy of the colonized people, despite their oppression and marginalization, Dunbar critiques the colonizer’s view of the colonized as inferior and ignorant and cheerily celebrates the colonized’s humanity and creativity. Human’s ambivalent relation to nature, regardless intimate or not, is associated with that sixth sense: “Foreknowing is one of the gifts of the poetic mind, and a poet is no more philosopher than prophet or seer” (Wiggins, 2003: 298).

“To the South: On Its New Slavery,” which was published in *Lyrics of Love and Laughter* (1903), expresses Dunbar’s ability to oppose the emergent Jim Crow system. Dunbar, who condemns the “new slavery,” referred to in the title, reflects his experience in developing the “Cultural Reconstruction” which means: “A writer’s legitimacy to speak sprang from his or her association with a

regional culture.” Race disturbed and complicated Dunbar’s blackness which was Southern and rural, not Western (Scott-Childress, 2007: 396).

His closeness to numerous whites allowed Dunbar to develop intimate relationships and familiarity with the local color and its writers. This background makes Dunbar dubious about the source of his identity: his race, region, blackness, and Westernness. However,

Dunbar’s “marginal” status would cause him to struggle with the question of identity throughout his short life, both personally and professionally. It forced him simultaneously to employ and reject the regionalism of Cultural Reconstruction. (Scott-Childress, 2007: 396)

The poem mixes all the above factors and addresses Southern society to curb racism and respect blacks. African American “self is crushed as [it] struggles to gain psychic wholeness in a hostile world.” Although the African American identity is not fragile, it “has to do with the terrible reality that the marginal self has to cope with to become a true human being outside the Western discourse” (Taher, 2019: 76).

Dunbar begins his poem by praising the South’s natural beauty and longing for the old days. Then, he associated African Americans’ history and legacy with violent aspects of the environment:

Borne on the bitter winds from every hand,

Strange tales are flying over all the land,
And Condemnation, with his pinions
foul,

Glooms in the place where broods the
midnight owl. (Dunbar, 1903: 148-9)

Dunbar’s pride in his forefathers’ history is expressed with difficulty and spread in inhabitant places. He expresses his ideas in association with natural elements like “winds” and “owls,” emphasizing the sacrifice of the

African Americans whose “blood-washed,” “honored head” proved to be “loyal dead.”

With such a sacrifice, African Americans can be found everywhere in the South: on every “plain” and “hill.” Dunbar asserts that African Americans lived in the South by their bodies and souls and when they died or were killed, their souls continued haunting places:

Blood-washed, thou shouldst lift up
thine honored head,

White with the sorrow for thy loyal
dead

Who lie on every plain, on every hill,
And whose high spirit walks the
Southland still. (Dunbar, 1903: 149)

The speaker ascribed the good traits of the African Americans to their parents, a caring mother for the children and a courageous father for the adults:

Whose infancy our mother’s hands have
nursed.

Thy manhood, gone to battle
unaccursed,

Our fathers left to till th’ reluctant field,
To rape the soil for what she would not
yield. (Dunbar, 1903: 149)

From a postcolonial view, raping the soil means colonizing it. Both the soil and people would not yield and oppose physical and cultural colonialization.

Examining the dehumanizing effects of colonialism on colonized people, readers have to be familiar with the binary opposition between the colonizer and the colonized: the former is presented as superior, civilized, and human, while the latter is introduced as inferior, savage, and animal. Dunbar echoes this idea by describing how African Americans are treated as “brutes” and “beasts” by their white oppressors. Colonialism destroys the culture, identity, and dignity of colonized people.

Like Dunbar, Fanon asserts that colonialism forces colonized people to adopt a foreign language, religion, and culture which saps their originality and creativity. He

also describes the colonial world as having a binary opposition between the colonizers and the colonized, the white and the black, the light and the dark, the good and the wicked. Fanon refers to this binary opposition as “The Manichaeic world.” He contends that this separation makes the colonized people feel subjugated and dehumanized: “For a colonized people, the most essential value because it is the most meaningful, is first and foremost the land: the land, which must provide bread and, naturally, dignity” (Fanon, 2004: 9).

Colonialism is a form of dispossession and dehumanization that deprives colonized people of their material and spiritual resources. Dunbar bemoans the loss of African Americans’ ancestral history and the imposition of a fake patriotism for a nation that deprives them of their rights. He also aspires to change “an extremely terrible existence marked by human pain, poverty, suffering, oppression, misery, exploitation, violence, sickness, corruption, and immorality” (Al-Douri and Saba, 2022: 5).

Dunbar, who longs for the South and its places, has been prevented by “new slavery” from being there. Dunbar’s aim in this poem is to “protest against the “new slavery” practiced there since the Civil War, in the form of peonage, disfranchisement, and the lynching of blacks.” This poem is Dunbar’s outcry, “Oh, Mother South, hast thou forgot thy ways, / Forgot the glory of thine ancient days” (lines 72-73). The Speaker concludes that continual pain and suffering are expected if racism will not be ended: “Till then, the sigh, the tear, the oath, the moan, / Till thou, oh, South, and thine, come to thine own” (lines 78-82). The poem represents Dunbar’s heartfelt adherence: “the South is the black’s true homeland” (Wagner, 1973: 88).

A clear example of a relationship between humans and the natural world, specifically trees, full of feelings and emotions is Dunbar’s “The Haunted Oak.” Published in *Lyrics of Love and Laughter* (1903), “The Haunted Oak” is a ballad that highlights the exploitation of nature for the

sake of doing society’s dirty work. The poem’s title is very significant in that it shows multiple, implicit, and explicit meanings. The word “haunted” suggests horror and terror and “oak” is a reference to love and death at the same time. The poem, opening with a human persona’s apostrophe and a question to an oak tree, is about a personified tree that feels remorse and distress because a black man’s body was lynched on it. Based on Dunbar’s conversation with a former Alabaman regarding a lynching tree that had mysteriously started to lose its leaves and wither, the poem reflects the trauma inflicted on the American natural landscape in the aftermath of a lynching (Dray, 2003: 80).

Despite never having been a slave, Dunbar had a strong affinity for freed people – possibly because his parents had been slaves themselves. One of them he met enjoyed hearing him talk about historically upsetting events before the Civil War. Based on these recollections, Dunbar produced some poems and short stories about a visit from an ex-slave who told a horrible story about the lynching of his nephew, a young man who was falsely accused of a crime:

“Night riders” – local whites acting under cover of darkness – had snatched the youth from his jail cell and carried him off. Denying him a trial, they hanged him from a mammoth oak tree. From that time forward, while most of the tree flourished, the branch from which his nephew had hung dried up and died. People whispered that the nephew’s ghost haunted the tree, the old man said. (Reef, 2000: 6)

Dunbar was deeply touched by the incident and wrote about it. It was known in 1892 that more than 160 African Americans had been executed by the white mobs. The following lines express that relationship clearly:

Pray, why are you so bare, so bare,
Oh, bough of the old oak-tree;

And why, when I go through the shade
you throw,
Runs a shudder over me? (Dunbar,
1903: 153)

Being bare and old, a tree cannot give shade or protection. Instead, there is a kind of sympathetic relationship that demonstrates how they need each other.

Writing about a talking lynching tree, Dunbar proves that African Americans become vulnerable, particularly within a racist society, when they speak out against social injustice. He also protects them from those very dangers, to begin with. In this sense, “the tree absorbs the potential violence that would have been or that could be the preserve of black people who might lament and protest the various forms of violence directed against them” (Wagner, 1973: 32).

Full of sorrow and depression due to the lynching of a guiltless victim, the oak tree is throwing its green leaves and losing its vital energies. It says:

My leaves were green as the best, I
trow,
And sap ran free in my veins,
But I saw in the moonlight dim and
weird
A guiltless victim's pains. (Dunbar,
1903:153)

The tree is burdened with the guilt of the lynched man who settles into the tree's bark and bough, drying, haunting, and consigning them to eternal ill health. Undeniably, “the tree's health has been compromised or violated by a man's defiled innocence – its structural integrity impaired by the weight of its own guilt about the integral role it played in the lynching” (Alexandre, 2012: 68):

I feel the rope against my bark,
And the weight of him in my grain,
I feel in the throe of his final woe
The touch of my own last pain.
And never more shall leaves come forth
On the bough that bears the ban;

I am burned with dread, I am dried and
dead,
From the curse of a guiltless man.
(Dunbar, 1903: 155)

More importantly, the tree is feminized not only through this discourse of “riding” but also in its complaint regarding the briefness of the incubus' visit and the use of masculine pronouns as well. By making the tree as a woman who feels unfairly and cheaply used, Dunbar, underscores the exploitation of the tree, its powerlessness as immobility, and the sexual underside of lynching trees in general. Similarly,

In being sexualized, mortified, and feminized in this manner, the tree begins to look less like an oppressor complicit in the lynching and more like a member of an oppressed group – that is to say, the tree is an exploited object and not an exploiter. (Alexandre, 2012: 69)

From a postcolonial perspective, a lynching tree is regarded as one of the casualties of social injustice in general or white supremacy in particular. It also brings to mind the relations of social policies between and among humans and environmental policies or between humans and nonhumans.

The human victim and the haunted tree have much in common: they have been deployed as usable, exploitable objects and they have rendered a lynched victim and a lynching tree respectively. What makes the tree a complementary part of the human being is its immobility and immortality. Because the lynched ghost resides in the limbs of the tree, it makes the lynching site an integral and shameful landmark within the American landscape (Wagner, 1973: 45).

Symbolically, the tree has many functions in literature in general and in African-American poetry in particular. With its branches and roots, the tree is similar to human beings' lives and also signifies the absented black body:

The tree is simultaneously the lynched victim's diacritical other and its own [...] sympathizer, because, on the one hand, the tree's immobility may serve as a foil to the swinging, uprooted body, while its speaking abilities, on the other hand, may serve as a kind of advocate for that body in speaking its pain, in voicing its grievances. (Alexandre, 2012: 70)

As a rural and violent crime, lynching seems to confirm that human bodies and natural objects are inextricably bound and to offer evidence that talking about nature is lacking without talking about culture and vice versa.

The poem has a romantic tendency to imply supernatural and religious elements. Attributing the lynched body ghost as a talking tree brings to mind the two prominent poems, Christian and Romantic poems respectively, in English literature: "The Dream of the Rood" and "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner." In the first, nature is involved in diabolical schemes to oppress men; and the rood recalls its origin as a tree – as if a human being recalled his/her innocent childhood – to reveal its helplessness in Jesus Christ's murder. Thus, the tree is abused and exploited: its innocence is converted into an instrument to torture Christ.

To describe Romanticism's tendency "to naturalize the supernatural and to humanize the divine," the phrase "natural supernaturalism" is employed. These "characteristic concepts and patterns of Romantic philosophy and literature are a displaced and reconstituted theology" (Abrams, 1973: 65, 68). In the second, the albatross' curse continues haunting the mariner because the latter killed it with no reason in mind. Therefore, in "The Haunted Oak," an element of the supernatural is infused to identify anthropomorphized nature for black humanity's sake. Christ is refigured as a human lynched body not to make a hero or a stoic martyr of the body, but to intensify

the "dread," the gothic effect of having a body return from the dead in search of revenge.

In "The Haunted Oak," the tree gives a promise to the dying victim and recounts how the mob took the man out of his detention cell. The mob leader mocks the victim and tells him that his tears are futile as he weeps for his fate. He warns him that one day his murderers will repent of their deeds and be afraid of him. Ironically, the leader attempts to defend his crime by saying that he is protecting the victim from more serious injury. Yet, he acknowledges that he is breaking the law:

Oh, foolish man, why weep you now?

'Tis but a little space,

And the time will come

when these shall dread

The mem'ry of your face. (Dunbar, 1903: 155)

Meanwhile, the tree must suffer for its unintended complicity in the lynching crime. This is an eye-for-an-eye revenge between nature and humanity, as "a haunted tree for a dead black body":

The interconnectedness of the tree, the ghost, the black body, and the spectral presence of Jesus Christ exhibit black people into a holistic realm of understanding that endows them with a broader and more perceptive worldview based on their keen sense of always being in tune with the conversations that take place above, beyond, and – at least according to the Great Chain of Being – ostensibly below the interhuman level. (Alexandre, 2012: 72)

From a different perspective, "The Haunted Oak" suggests that white people are unaware of their crimes' consequences, bragging about killing innocent black people and animals:

And ever the judge rides by, rides by,

And goes to hunt the deer,

And ever another rides his soul

In the guise of a mortal fear. (Dunbar, 1903: 156)

Ironically, the whites are pursuing the hunt, they are being hounded by the ghost of the lynched black men. Dunbar's condemnation of white supremacy and solipsism is obvious.

Although "The Haunted Oak" dramatizes the aftermath of lynching black bodies and its destructive consequences within the natural world, it meditates on the black soul. Dunbar demonstrates that the lynched body is connected to its soul metaphysically. Such a metaphysical relationship refers to the religious and political implications of the lynching ritual:

[L]ynching's role in a general design [is] to deport and exterminate blacks off [the] southern ground [... It] had intentions of denying black bodies a place on a celestial plane as well. (Patterson, 1999: 125)

Historically, white people were seeking bodily trophies, prizes, or souvenirs from the event. Black men's bones, teeth, lips, fingers, toes, ears, knuckles, and even genitals, were chopped off and plundered after the lynching. Some of these body parts ended up in store-front windows as a "horrible warning to blacks of the consequences of stepping out of line," and others were burned, and destroyed; the ashes scattered across the earth for superstitious reasons. Southerners had faith that

the souls of monstrous criminals could be kept from rising on the day of Judgment if their remains were burned or otherwise obliterated. Thus, lynch mobs that roasted their victims, chopped them into little pieces, and parceled out the remains were not simply rejecting a court of law's opportunity to pass judgment on the accused but denying God the privilege as well. (Dray, 2003: 82)

Hence, it can be concluded that natural supernaturalism is contradictory in terms of

residing in the grain of the tree which contributes to a face-to-face encounter between the natural world and the lynched victim through the death of the black body.

Lynched black bodies had not been associated with the resistance against the lynching mob so that the African Americans did not suffer the consequences. Instead, the oak tree became a symbol for anti-lynching reform and the only witness to testify against the mob, in particular, and the cruel injustice, in general. Ironically, the tree, or what remains after the lynching, has its parts harvested and pieces buried. Thus, the tree is an innocent bystander who is bound to the victim unwillingly and often burned in the process (Fattah and Alkass Yousif, 2023: 617).

The tree is in a unique position that does not allow it to feel the black body's pain but to speak aloud on his behalf. Indeed, the damaged remains have a negative side to the environment and demonstrate how horrible the crime committed against a black human body is. Furthermore, the racial prejudice in American society reaches the farthest nonhuman populated spaces with the help of compliant limbs of trees: American geography is racialized since it is associated with the history of violence against blacks that began in that same space.

Significantly, the conversation between the haunted oak and a passerby about the tree's poor shape signifies the relationship between human history and natural history and the worlds of the dead lynched victim and tree. This dialogue between the living and the dead as well as between the human and nonhuman indicates a hopeful way of being. It resists both the objectification of the nonhuman other and the autonomy of the human self. Nonhuman life is given the dignity to express emotions, but human life is provided a soul to be immortal. Dunbar concludes that the African American body can die but the soul is eternal and never leaves the South which is represented by the tree, bough, trunk, and almost every part. It is a haunted and everlasting curse against those who

committed such a crime against an innocent man:

And ever the man he rides me hard,
And never a night stays he;
For I feel his curse as a haunted bough,
On the trunk of a haunted tree. (Dunbar,
1903: 156)

It is argued that the terror of lynching history is reflected in the transformation of human subjectivity into representations of natural space which is remorseful and indifferent. The American landscape, geographically, becomes a victim of human violence.

Dunbar draws attention to words like “rides,” “curse,” and “haunted.” As if the tree was a female whose guilt is doubled because it did nothing to the victim and to itself. By gendering guilt, Dunbar emphasizes the discourse of “riding” to evoke the spectral persona of the seductive incubus who rides “its victim in order to exact confession, expiation, and anything else that the immaterial power might want” (Spillers, 2022: 76).

Landscape can repent of its complicity in violence or repeat the violence witnessed, absorbed, and experienced. Although Dunbar’s viewpoint of nature has similarities with that of the English Romantics – in terms of celebrating nature and its sublimity –, he understands it as closely entangled with black people’s daily routines. Hence, Dunbar’s nature does not take place without man’s agency and willingness. Dunbar, through art, deals with nature and follows S. John Mill’s opinion:

Art is as much Nature as anything else, and everything which is artificial is natural – Art has no independent powers of its own: Art is but the employment of the powers of Nature for an end. (Mill, 2009: 67)

Art is the space that conjoins the natural and the artificial, the human and the nonhuman, and the white and the black. For instance, lynching, a topographical feature of

the American geographical landscape, induces nature as an art to be expressed.

Lynching violence shows what humans say or react to when their lives are extended through the lives of plants and animals. This is true in terms of elegy as a form. The modern elegy represents an involvement with loss, a result of the Black Death. Such a poem and many others composed by blacks are not intended to forget the lynching violence but to associate the black experiences with pain, trauma, grief, terror, and violence in nature itself, as well as the restrictions placed on black testimony at that time (Ruffin, 2010: 33-4).

The natural environment in Dunbar’s poem is treated ambivalently as an accomplice and as an innocent bystander: a frenemy. As if the poet wanted to say that lynching is personified by the limbs of unknown people who were those of trees, of nature. African Americans have a paradoxical relationship with the natural environment. The significance of ecological thinking in their culture is introduced as strange and noticeable simultaneously. African Americans recall painful, shameful, and fearful memories of being back-broken farmers and slaves of the plantations, following their masters’ racial commands. They are viewed as representatives of urban life. They have no firm sense of the natural environment. Subsequently, they are eco-illiterate (Wiggins, 2003: 296-8).

Conclusion

As a complicated subject, nature in Dunbar’s poems is described multidimensionally: beautiful, violent, indifferent, and painful. Dunbar presented a whole range of nature’s many-faced expressions. Nature is introduced as neither sympathetic nor empathic, rather it is antipathetic toward black bodies. Like African Americans, nature wears the mask(s) that hide trauma, suffering, and pain. Dunbar has consistently focused on the relations between African Americans and the natural environment in his poetry.

Dunbar's nature poems dramatize the African American history and experience which were full of oppression, injustices, and suffering through the natural voices that can be found in the American natural landscape. Still, Dunbar's poems were not like the Romantics'. The goodness of the land is reappraised to be more hostile, unjust, and violent. Dunbar's poems employ nature including, trees, animals, and birds to express his protest against violent lynching, human bondage, false accusations, racial discrimination, and unjust treatment of African Americans. They present nature as a place of both beauty and danger, suffering and solace, and empathy and hostility.

The natural world is not simply a backdrop for Dunbar's poems; it is a place where African Americans can find beauty, pain, hope, and resilience. Dunbar's poems on nature are marked by a profound awareness of its beauty and ability to provide peace and refuge as well as a recognition of its potential to cause sorrow and danger. His writing has an impact on readers today because of the way he uses the natural world as a metaphor for the complexity of the human experience.

Dunbar creates a particular African-American voice and viewpoint on nature by combining dialect, imagery, symbolism, and allusion. The prevalent white narratives of nature as a source of beauty, freedom, and harmony are challenged by Dunbar's poems, which instead highlight the contradictions, conflicts, and oppressions that form the Black experience of nature. Dunbar's poems attack the racial injustice and environmental degradation that endanger their lives and landscapes in addition to celebrating the tenacity and inventiveness of African Americans.

Dunbar's poems provide a significant and nuanced contribution to American literary and cultural history. Dunbar's poems serve as a helpful reminder that the natural world actively participates in human history rather than serving as merely a backdrop. Black people's lives have been profoundly impacted by the natural environment, and the natural

world has been shaped by black people. Dunbar's poems help in comprehending this nuanced and dynamic relationship.

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Mushtaq Abdulhaleem Mohammed Fattah, M.A. in English Literature, Assistant Professor, Department of English, College of Arts, Al-Iraqia University, Baghdad, Iraq.

Anan J. Lewis Alkass Yousif, Ph.D. in English Literature, Assistant Professor, Department of English, College of Arts, University of Baghdad, Baghdad, Iraq.