"Work and Wait Unwearying": Dunbar's Georgics

MARGARET RONDA

PAUL LAURENCE DUNBAR'S LEGACY AS A POET HAS BEEN LARGELY determined by the critical debates about his dialect poetry. The persistent emphasis on dialect originates in William Dean Howells's description, in his introduction to Dunbar's 1896 *Lyrics of Lowly Life*, of the poet's dialect verse as the marker of his "artistic completeness." Dunbar's dialect poems, Howells argues, illuminate the "precious difference of temperament between the races" and offer unique "divinations and reports of what passes in the hearts and minds of a lowly people" (xvii–xviii). Howells's pronouncement on the aesthetic merit of Dunbar's poetry reverberates across a century of criticism that debates the capacity of dialect to graph racial difference.[1] Whether influenced by New Negro tenets, Black Arts politics, or poststructuralist or new historicist reading practices, however, Dunbar's critical readers often share Howells's verdict that dialect poetry represents Dunbar's most notable achievement, even if they do not share Howell's patronizing rhetoric.[2] These critics' methodologically divergent readings all regard linguistic difference, codified in dialect's orthography and rhythms, as the key measure of racialized expression in Dunbar's poetics. They force his poetry into the neatly dichotomous categories "standard" and "dialect" and foreground the literary coding of racial authenticity as his poetry's essential stake.[3]

However instructive these dialect debates have proved, they have necessarily circumscribed critical approaches to Dunbar's various body of work. While racial performance, as Gavin Jones's *Strange Talk* cogently argues, is a central dimension of fin de siècle American culture, its pervasiveness in critical discourse on Dunbar has overshadowed his perhaps more powerful considerations of everyday racial constraint. In this essay, I argue that such constraint is

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vividly present in Dunbar's portrayals of labor and that these georgic meditations represent his most incisive thinking about the hardships of African American life in the post-Reconstruction era. In Dunbar's dialect and standard-English poetry, labor is the first principle, the common necessity, of life itself. As Dunbar puts it in "The Seedling," "Every child must share life's labor / Just as well as every man." The master trope of labor bears a racial inflection in Dunbar's work: labor as suffering without redemption remains the lot of a burdened few. For African Americans at century's end, life is work—difficult, necessary, and often without reward. The overarching theme of many Dunbar poems echoes a key passage in Vergil's *Georgics*: "Everything / was toil, relentless toil, urged on by need" (1.145–46). Georgic poems define labor as grounded in lack, as necessary for bare survival, and as hostage to larger forces that threaten to undermine its progress—themes that echo throughout Dunbar's verse.[4]

Dunbar's sustained emphasis on the work of life responds to the labor-centered racial problems of his historical moment: the emergent forms of conscripted labor and the enduring reduction, both discursively and materially, of African Americans to laborers rather than citizens. His georgics articulate an imaginative "turning South," to borrow a phrase from Houston Baker, Jr., presenting the hard agrarian work characteristic of the rural Black Belt as the image of African American life at the turn of the century (26). I focus here on georgics from *Lyrics of Lowly Life*, Dunbar's first commercially published book and a text reflecting larger debates over African American productivity as a precondition for participation in national life. In its images of labor without respite or recompense, *Lyrics of Lowly Life* represents Dunbar's most sustained response to the agrarian myth of racial freedom achieved through agricultural work. Written in the context of Jim Crow laws, vagrancy statutes, and other coercive means of restricting black mobility and extracting compulsory labor, these poems disarticulate manual labor from discourses of racial self-improvement and emancipation. At the same time, Dunbar's georgics assert the sympathetic humanity and blamelessness of African Americans in the face of virulent institutional racism.

To shift critical emphasis from performance to work is to turn from questions of authenticity, accommodation, and subversion to different representational issues in Dunbar's writing: those of necessity and constraint. By foregrounding its georgic strain, I argue that Dunbar's poetry deemphasizes romantic portrayals of poetic enslavement or resistance in favor of an examination of labor's tragic, nonredemptive nature. While capitalist modernity is defined above all by the transition from slave labor to "free" labor—to a system in which workers own and sell their labor power—Dunbar's poetry illustrates a mode of labor that fits neither category. The problem of occupying this nebulous middle ground between modes of production, where the laborer is neither free nor enslaved, is at the heart of these georgics, which depict the African American subject as consigned to an inferior position by forces of economic modernization. If the georgic encodes confrontations between transhistorical understandings of work (as effort, burden, foundation of civilization) and labor's historically specific determinations, Dunbar's georgics reveal the material effects of the uneven modernization of racialized labor in the post-Reconstruction era.

"The Shadow of a Deep Disappointment"

Georgic derives from the Greek terms for "earth" or "field" and "work," and georgic poetry attends to manual and particularly agricultural labor, taking the laborer as its central protagonist (Lilly 20). Georgic poetry, from its roots in Hesiod and Vergil forward, "argue[s] against . . . the idealism of a natu-

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ral spontaneity," of imagination or earthly bounty, and instead insists on the need for sustained and correctly applied effort (Putnam 152). Work is compulsory and difficult, undertaken in the face of potential failure, and valued for the hard-won knowledge it yields. In Vergil's *Georgics*, the master text of this mode, the ravages of disease and blight, the unknowable whims of the gods, the vicissitudes of political turmoil, and the ruinous power of storms shadow the everyday labors of the farmer. The achievements of manual effort are continually threatened by the entropy of natural and historical forces. In a georgic, the farmer inhabits a diminished world where hard work and the knowledge that this work generates guarantee neither rest nor reward.

The georgic mode thus contains what Anthony Low calls a "double vision" of labor as at once a "curse and a blessing" (11). Work alone, in a georgic poem, has the potential to civilize the self, master the chaotic forces of nature, and stabilize society. Yet labor is also the sign of the reduced nature of human life, its everyday suffering, and stands for the need for discipline to combat the entropic forces that threaten survival. In their attention to the dual nature of work, georgics illuminate the polarities evident in the etymologies of *labor* and *work*. Hannah Arendt points out in *The Human Condition*, "All the European words for 'labor' . . . signify pain and effort and are also used for pangs of birth. *Labor* has the same etymological root as *labare* ("to stumble under a burden"); *ponos* [Greek] and *Arbeit* [German] have the same etymological roots as 'poverty'" (48). Yet *labor* also carries the positive meaning of industry that produces worthy ends ("Labour"). The etymology of *work* similarly stresses necessity and painfulness, as well as the moral quality of effort and the achievement of the artifact produced ("Work"). This dialectic of pain and gain, dehumanizing burden and humanizing virtue, grounds georgic poetry's examination of human exertion, working less to resolve these polarities than to illuminate how they operate in a specific historical context. In the case of Dunbar's poetry, his georgics examine what W. E. B. DuBois calls the "double-aimed struggle of the black artisan" in the postbellum years—"on the one hand to escape white contempt for a nation of mere hewers of wood and drawers of water, and on the other hand to plough and nail and dig for a poverty-stricken horde"—a struggle that necessarily ends in disappointed failure, despite the laborer's earnest efforts (6).

Dunbar's invocation of georgic themes is not sui generis but emerges from a long-standing, if little acknowledged, georgic tradition in American literature. As Timothy Sweet points out in his *American Georgics: Economy and Environment in Early American Literature*, georgic has largely been subsumed into pastoral in American literary criticism, such that the inheritance of georgic is rechanneled into broader interpretations of environmental literature or what Leo Marx calls "complex pastoral" (Sweet 2–3).[5] Yet the two modes are distinct, as Joseph Addison's 1697 "Essay on the Georgics" points out. Addison characterizes pastoral and georgic as divergent "class[es]" of poetry: where the pastoral employs a deliberately simplified or rustic style that imitates its shepherd protagonists, the georgic offers "instructions" in its descriptions of rural life, expressing "moral duties" and "philosophical speculations" through its representations of the processes of everyday work. Georgic didacticism occupies a simultaneously narrow and broad frame of reference, conveying what Addison calls the "rules of practice" of agrarian labor and inquiring into their connection to larger historical forces such as the nation-state, imperial expansion, and global commerce (155). With critics such as William Dowling, Larry Kutchen, and Juan Christian Pellicer, Sweet has charted a significant georgic presence in American literature of the eighteenth through mid–nineteenth centuries that draws on the

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topoi of eighteenth-century British georgics—the ideology of improvement and the "moral obligation" of labor—to laud the civic virtues of nation building (10). While this agrarian-nationalist georgic mode, associated with the poetry of Timothy Dwight, Philip Freneau, and Joel Barlow and the prose of J. Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur, Thomas Jefferson, and James Fenimore Cooper, fades by the mid–nineteenth century as the development of a differentiated national economy renders a unifying agrarian ideal outdated, georgic's characteristic theme of necessary labor persists across nineteenth-century American literature. In the postbellum era, the georgic—as what Kurt Heinzelman calls a "protean discursive form" rooted in but not limited to poetry—becomes a medium for reflections on uneven modernization, national reunification, and the decline of agrarianism (184). Georgic representations of the material processes and social contradictions of labor emerge in works by Walt Whitman, Herman Melville, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, Rebecca Harding Davis, Charles W. Chesnutt, Stephen Crane, Edwin Markham, and Frank Norris, among others. In *Lyrics of Lowly Life*, the agrarian tropes and didactic orientation central to the georgic illuminate the unfreedoms of the Jim Crow South for African Americans.

A host of poems in *Lyrics of Lowly Life* center on fragile endeavors that fail to achieve durable success. While critics have tended to focus on Dunbar's tropes of enslavement (the caged bird of "Sympathy") or racial performance (the mask of "We Wear the Mask"), figures of laborers toiling against enormous odds populate *Lyrics of Lowly Life*. Dunbar uses these figures to encourage perseverance—"keep a-pluggin' away," one poem exhorts ("Keep")—and to mourn failed attempts, as in "He Had His Dream": "He labored hard and failed at last, / His sails too weak to bear the blast." But above all, Dunbar represents life as labor suffused with difficulty, uncertainty, and pain:

> 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.

These lines from "The Poet and His Song" represent diligent effort at the furthest remove from pastoral idyll. Describing the speaker as the georgic *agricola* tilling the earth and pruning trees, Dunbar portrays everyday life in antipastoral terms as the site of ceaseless work. His speaker's "days are never days of ease" but are grounded in material necessity. What others view as scenic beauty—the "ripened gold" of wheat in the field—is for Dunbar's narrator merely an occasion for renewed effort, marking his labor as specialized obligation rather than universal condition. This work can be destroyed by capricious forces: "Sometimes a blight upon the tree / Takes all my fruit away from me." The governing mood of these poems is disappointment.

That these poems turn to explorations of work as the locus of racial disappointment should not be surprising, since the fate of black Americans in the postbellum period was defined above all by their social constitution vis-à-vis labor. In the brief heyday of Reconstruction, the free labor of African Americans appeared to be the key not simply to their integration into American life but also to the modernization of the South. As one northern congressman declared, "[T]he whole land will revive under the magic touch of free labor" (Kolchin 215). Labor was the defining element of blacks' newfound status as enfranchised citizens in postbellum America: it was "by the sweat of their brow" that they would justify their right to full participation in civic and social life. Yet by the turn of the century this vision of black labor producing a renaissance for southern society had vanished from American life. As David Brion Davis argues, the "continuities of plantation agriculture from slavery to ten-

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ant farming" in the South were maintained through exploitative practices designed to reduce mobility and ensure a docile work force (276). The nominally free labor of African Americans thus continued to be subjugated and controlled through a variety of extralegal means.[6] Meanwhile, blacks became a convenient scapegoat for southern economic blight and the failures of integrated government.[7]

By the 1890s not only southern but also northern whites began to regard southern blacks as fundamentally unwilling to work. As the *New York Times* editorialized in 1890, "[T]he great trouble in the South has always been the idleness and consequent worthlessness of a large part of the negro population" (qtd. in Richardson 205). This narrative's most well-known proponent was Booker T. Washington, whose 1895 "Atlanta Compromise" speech called for blacks to "cast down your bucket where you are," arguing that the current generation has forgotten how to labor in their premature yearning for full equality (219). Washington's speech cemented the fin de siècle conception that African Americans had earned their status as incomplete citizens and were thus fated to labor toward freedom from the lowest social rung: "it is at the bottom of life we must begin, and not at the top," Washington declared. African American labor, in his argument, remains labor for another, the undertaking of marginal drudge work that whites refuse: as Washington assured his white audience, "[African Americans] will buy your surplus land, make blossom the waste places in your fields." Black workers begin in deficit, toiling in the "waste places" to earn the right to equality—an equality that will be granted on the basis of a proven "loyalty" and "devotion," struggled for rather than "artificially forc[ed]" (221). This narrative of uplift through manual labor substituted laborer for citizen, framing full participation in the public sphere not as an inalienable right but as a future transaction purchased through present labor. Southern blacks were condemned to what Dunbar calls, in a 1903 essay, the "new and more dastardly form of slavery"—peonage and sharecropping—which served, along with the terrifying violence of lynching, as "fresh degradation of an already degraded race" ("Fourth of July"). Thus, as Saidiya Hartman suggests, "the toiling figure, the bent back" of the black laborer may be seen as a master image of the racial politics of the era, conjuring the indistinguishability between slavery and freedom and the indebted nature of work for a generation of African Americans (135).

The metonymic reduction of African Americans to the "productions of [their] hands," which makes claims to personhood, equality, and citizenship contingent on the capacity to labor for the national good, is the backdrop for Dunbar's pessimistic georgic mode in *Lyrics of Lowly Life*. His poem "Disappointed," for example, offers what Hartman might call a "scene of subjection" in its portrayal of an old man whose work leads only to suffering. This eighteen-line poem depicts an old man engaged in subsistence agrarian production. He takes palpable pleasure in his work, "toiling in joy from dew to dew." At first the weather cooperates with his labors, allowing a "fine" orchard to grow and inducing him to "quiet [his] thrifty fears." But a storm soon gathers, destroying his careful efforts. The old man, "with a cry from his soul despairing, / . . . bowed . . . down to the earth and wept." As he lies prostrate before his ruined labor, "a voice cried aloud from the driving rain; / 'Arise, old man, and plant again!'"

From the poem's beginning, Dunbar stresses the vulnerability of the old man, who has no fruits stored and whose advanced age marks the uncertainty of his endeavor, begun not in the prime of life but close to his "failing years." The fragility of his efforts is heightened by his premonitory "fears" and underscored by his dependence on the whims of sun and rain. This atmosphere of uncertainty and the destruction that ensues echo the

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scenes of ruined labor in georgic poems from Vergil through James Thomson and Oliver Goldsmith—scenes that reinforce the "double vision" of labor as civilizing and objectifying. Dunbar characterizes the old man by the diligence of his labor, the care with which he "planted and dug and tended" his orchard. Such activity signals what Karl Marx calls human "species-life," the "life-engendering life" of productive labor (*Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts* 76). The "joy" with which the old man undertakes his task recalls Marx's description of "passion" as "the essential force of man energetically bent on its object" (136). Through his portrayal of the old man's energetic willingness to labor, Dunbar characterizes him as a civilized cultivator capable of guiding his endeavors to fruition. Yet his work provides no guarantee of freedom or durable achievement. It is instead susceptible to forces beyond the old man's control, as easily destroyed as it is carefully produced. Thus, labor is the measure both of the protagonist's humanity, creative potential, and animating passion and of his exposure to victimization. By framing the laborer as a representative human figure subjugated not only despite but also through his hard work, Dunbar separates effort from achievement in "Disappointed." In the face of widespread claims of black idleness and admonitions to work toward equality, Dunbar asserts the value of his agrarian protagonist as an able laborer but claims that the man's willingness to labor—and that labor itself—will not guarantee his freedom.

The revelation, common to georgic poems, that the farmer's vigilance does not assure success and that the only certainty is unceasing effort gains a distinctive historical valence in Dunbar's closing couplet. Emerging from the "driving rain" is an injunction, godlike in its omniscient authority, commanding the old man to "arise" and "plant again." The introduction of an authoritative statement ordering the old man to labor provokes a startling revelation: his work is doubly determined, by natural forces beyond his command and by an external voice of absolute power. This directive reveals him as a figure laboring under the aegis of an authority not his own. By closing the poem with this order, Dunbar gestures toward the persistence of slavery's externally bound labor. The protagonist's labor is not simply subject to the arbitrary moods of weather and seasonal change; it is fundamentally unfree in its answerability to another's orders. By the end of the poem, the old man is dispossessed twice over: first his earnest efforts are unmade by a storm, then these efforts are revealed never to have been a sign of his free agency. The revelation of "Disappointed" is that hard labor grants neither freedom nor a viable life but a burdened knowledge akin to DuBois's concept of double consciousness.

This account of the continuing proximity of laborer and slave gestures toward what Hartman calls the "nonevent of emancipation" after the Civil War, when a range of coercive practices, from vagrancy statutes and debt peonage to pervasive white violence, rendered illusory the principles of equality under the law and free ownership of labor (116). The plantation system was reinvented by these forms of conscripted labor and restricted mobility, producing in effect the "same social relations—the surveillance, restrictions on movement, and control over leisure-time behavior—that had characterized slavery" (Davis 276). Yet Dunbar also points toward the difference between slavery and postbellum forms of subjection. The commanding voice of "Disappointed" is not traceable to a representative figure of racial oppression, such as a slave owner or southern white racist, but instead is invisible and inexorable. While Dunbar's poem "A Corn-Song," which almost directly precedes "Disappointed" in *Lyrics of Lowly Life*, hinges on the interplay between a slave owner and slaves singing at the end of a hard day in the fields—a song that graphs the absolute and visible power differential that separates them—here the ambiguity of

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the speaking voice captures a new indeterminacy of unfreedom. The protagonist of "Disappointed" can neither name nor view the source of the command ordering him to labor, yet he is no less bound to follow its imperative. Whereas in "A Corn-Song" Dunbar characterizes slavery as a tragic but orderly system, in which slaves' lives follow a predictable diurnal cycle of labor and rest and in which sorrow is temporarily relieved by the communal expression of song, here the protagonist is stripped to bare life, possessing neither shelter nor a community with which to share his condition. Solitary and exposed to the elements, the old man represents a brutal new form of racial dispossession and poses a rebuke to the ideologies of emancipation through labor.

Negative Modernity in the Black Belt

Dunbar's georgic register in poems such as "Disappointed" appears resolutely antimodern, rooting its explorations of black life in rural, agrarian terms that refuse any hint of the cosmopolitan, urban, or industrial. The poems' antimodernism has often been read as a sign of Dunbar's naïveté as a poet and social thinker, and his trafficking in nostalgic plantation myths and tales of southern rural work is seen, Sterling Brown puts it, as a "cruel misreading of history" (*Negro Poetry* 33). Darwin Turner writes, "Provincially, [Dunbar] assumed the good life for the uneducated to be the life . . . of a sharecropper for a benevolent Southern aristocrat," thus "naïvely offer[ing] an agrarian myth" in his writing (3–4). Critics have emphasized the fact that Dunbar was not himself from the South: though he was the child of former slaves, he grew up in Dayton, Ohio, and lived a more urban existence than his poems reflect. Yet we can read his recurrent focus on the rural economy of the South in *Lyrics of Lowly Life* less as nostalgia for plantation life than as a meditation on what Baker calls the "southern cast of national racial formation" (23). Drawing on W. J. Cash's 1941 *The Mind of the South*, Baker argues that "for the Black American majority of the nineteenth and early twentieth century, the mind of the South was critical to black personality, cultural, economic, and political formation" (24). Not only did the vast majority of African Americans in the 1890s live in the South, Baker claims, but the national racial imaginary was largely determined by its institutions and values. Dunbar's georgic register in *Lyrics of Lowly Life* speaks to the determining impact of this "mind of the South" and the limitations it poses for racial progress. In their antipastoral reframing of the political economy of the Black Belt, these poems provide a thoroughly pessimistic portrait of the agrarian life for African Americans.

Dunbar "turns South" in his georgic poems to identify the problem of modernity for African Americans as rooted, in part, in the enduring racialized form of labor linking them to agrarian modes of production. These poems point to the ways the African American subject at the turn of the century remains unassimilable to discourses of economic modernization, appearing instead as the rural, untrained, servile southern laborer inexorably bound to the earth and the slave past. Agrarian productivity is untethered from virtuous progress and is instead defined in terms of negation: sensory deprivation, unmet bodily need, and social lack. Through such negative definitions, Dunbar responds to discourses like Washington's "Atlanta Compromise" speech that located the possibility of racial progress in the local economic relations developed between southern whites and blacks and in the emancipatory potential of what Washington calls "common labour" (221). Dunbar's georgics offer portraits in negative of Washington's industrial-agricultural training regime with its capitalist model of progress-oriented labor.[8]

Indeed, placing Dunbar's georgics in *Lyrics of Lowly Life* alongside his nonfiction writings on the South reveals the extent to which

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Dunbar presents a philosophical alternative to Washington's optimistic rhetoric of capitalist progress. While DuBois is Washington's better-known antagonist, Dunbar—in essays penned years before DuBois's 1903 *The Souls of Black Folk*—anticipates DuBois's objections to Washington's project of industrial-agricultural education and betrays a thoroughgoing skepticism about the future of southern life for African Americans.[9] Dunbar most forcefully demurs from Washington's uplift philosophy in his 1899 essay "The Hapless Southern Negro," which depicts the inaccessibility of economic progress and social enfranchisement for the southern black laborer. Here Dunbar narrates a story of journeying into the deep South and "looking into the condition of the people themselves" (43)—a narrative that DuBois also rehearses in his portrait of rural Georgia in *The Souls of Black Folk* and that, a generation later, Jean Toomer will take up in *Cane* (1923). Prefiguring DuBois's chapter "On the Black Belt," which describes the "forlorn and forsaken" land of former plantations now populated by sharecroppers (96), "The Hapless Southern Negro" portrays a scene of abject poverty: a "one-roomed shanty made of unhewn logs" housing "two families numbering altogether twelve or more people" (43). Such destitute conditions are common, Dunbar points out, for the "poor black men in the far South" with their "little cabins and narrow mortgaged land" (44). He asks, "What can we hope from such a condition, . . . either in the way of industrial or moral advancement?" His answer: the South represents a complete dead end for African Americans, because the history of dehumanization—"the destruction of [their] manhood"—is entrenched in its economic and social infrastructure (44). The solution Dunbar proposes is dramatic and prescient: a mass African American migration, not to northern cities but to the "great and generous West," where, he argues, racial inequality is less pervasive. If the West presents a possible future for African Americans, the South bears only the continuing obligations of an inescapable history of oppression that cannot be transformed, only abandoned.

In the light of this profound doubt about the viability of southern life for African Americans, the argumentative impact of Dunbar's georgics becomes apparent. Chronicling the lingering effects of slavery and the residual status of the black subject in fin de siècle America, "The Deserted Plantation" is perhaps the most powerful index of the South's uneven modernity. It is also the most controversial poem of Dunbar's oeuvre: a monologue in dialect of a former slave returning to his old plantation and mourning its ruin. Critics have tended either to read "The Deserted Plantation" as partaking in plantation ideology or to praise it for its covert resistance to racist stereotypes. Jean Wagner and Kenneth Douglas, for example, argue that this poem espouses a "southern-style ideology" by trafficking in the notion that the war "destroyed the genuine happiness that the Negroes had enjoyed under the old dispensation, turning them into rootless creatures who instinctively make their way back to the home, even though it is ruined, of those who had been their real friends." The poem's use of dialect, as a "minstrel" idiom that deepens the stereotype of the "happy slave," only makes its portrayal more objectionable (87–88). Joanne Braxton, by contrast, asserts that the poem exemplifies the "double voice" of Dunbar's dialect poetry, which allows Dunbar to "speak to two distinct audiences at once": to offer a reassuring image to white readers while allowing black readers to "relish . . . the means by which their ancestors retained their humanity and their psychic wholeness to survive their enslavement" (xxvi–xxviii). Braxton's reading exemplifies a common interpretive move that sees Dunbar's dialect poetry as performing a "masked" critique of white racism, invisible to white readers but legible to black audiences.[10] Yet even Braxton agrees that "The Deserted Plantation" is in the end an unfor-

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tunate production, a "sentimental and somewhat oversimplified poem that must have appealed to white southerners who wanted to see blacks back in their place" (xxvii).

A closer look at "The Deserted Plantation"'s portrayal of a suspended figure who remains, like the abandoned plantation itself, an unassimilable residue of another time reveals an agenda neither accommodationist nor covertly subversive. The poem instead reckons with the impossible predicament of the so-called free African American in the New South, who can neither return to old forms of economic survival, however brutal, nor find durable means of subsistence. Insisting on the speaker's humanity and limitless isolation, "The Deserted Plantation" openly challenges New South uplift ideologies and racist stereotypes about black idleness. Its old-plantation setting lays bare the speaker's lack of options, instead of serving as nostalgic throwback to the "good old days." In this way, the poem's georgic poetics provides a diagnostic frame, one that is ultimately tragic rather than accommodationist or subversive and thereby highlights the continuing determination of a racially oppressive past. The diagnostic temperament of "The Deserted Plantation" foregrounds finitude, not redemptive possibility, and poses the speaker's situation as a problem without a clear solution. The poem's antiprogressive, tragic stance—characteristic of georgic poetics, with its emphasis on conditions of necessity—does not directly appeal for social change but instead points to the ways such change, promised by racial emancipation and economic modernization, has failed to materialize.

A solitary speaker returns to his old plantation, now abandoned in the war's aftermath. The plantation's deserted implements of farming, like the discarded plowshares in Vergil's *Georgics*, signify an entire way of life that has been forsaken: "Oh, de grubbin'-hoe's a-rustin' in de co'nah, / An' de plow's a tumblin' down in de fiel'." Dunbar employs a georgic inversion, an image of the unmaking of cultivation, to present the plantation as obsolescent remnant of a no-longer-viable past. "Weeds" have overtaken the "co'n" in "de furrers" (furrows), and birdsong stands in for now-lost human voices. In this scene of ineffable "stillness," the solitary speaker confronts his former life by discovering its traces transfigured by "decay." In the hush of the deserted plantation, the speaker recognizes his own loss of livelihood and community. Turning from the overgrown fields to the empty buildings, the speaker sees not only the end of the slave mode of production but also the loss of the entire lifeworld, the familial network and slave culture that once existed here: he notes the silence where a "banjo's voice," "hymn," and "co'n-song" once rang out and where the sounds of children filled the air. Listing the names of kin—"Whah's ole Uncle Mordecai an' Uncle Aaron? / Whah's Aunt Doshy, Sam, an' Kit, an' all the rest?"—and remembering their evening songs and dances in the "ole cabin," the speaker reckons with their absence and his total isolation. "Gone!" he exclaims, "not one o' dem is lef' to tell de story" (21–25). The speaker will "tend" the plantation alone, as he puts it in the poem's closing lines, "'Twell de othah Mastah thinks it's time to end it, / An' calls me to my qua'ters in de sky" (35–36).

Dunbar's portrait of a subject cast adrift from economic progress adapts Goldsmith's 1770 British georgic, "The Deserted Village," to a new scene of historical change.[11] In "The Deserted Village," as in "The Deserted Plantation," a speaker describes his return to a landscape of memory, now transformed to "shapeless ruin," where weeds have overtaken the once-tended fields and "the sounds of population fail" (lines 47, 125). The speakers in both poems mourn the absence of those who had once populated the area, now "poor exiles" wandering elsewhere, and find themselves utterly "solitary" (Goldsmith 365, 77). Both poems invert images of georgic cultivation to launch a larger critique: the lack of a viable

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future in these blighted landscapes reflects political and economic failure. For Goldsmith, this failure is the disastrous policy of enclosure, which he argues is not only an inefficient use of land and a cause of intensifying social inequality but also a symptom of a dangerous swerve in Britain's economic priorities and social values. "The Deserted Village" evokes the history of primitive accumulation, the expropriation of agricultural laborers and their transformation into a landless proletariat defined in opposition to global "Trade" and commodity capitalism. By adapting Goldsmith's poem to the postbellum plantation, Dunbar draws on Goldsmith's portrait of the villagers' dispossession and unassimilability into a modernizing economy to depict a parallel case in an American context, portraying the speaker and his lost kin as victims of historical forces. The failure Dunbar's deserted plantation vivifies is not the collapse of the slave economy but the new forms of alienation the collapse produces and the lack of sustainable social structures emerging in place of this economy.

The differences between Dunbar's poem and "The Deserted Village" are also instructive. If Goldsmith's speaker longs for the general ambience of village life in Auburn, the grief of Dunbar's speaker is painfully specific, as he laments the absence of "all dat loved me an' dat I loved in de pas'" (32). The plantation's dissolution represents the breakdown of a lifeworld that afforded comfort, however tenuous, in its network of relations. Without these relations, the speaker of "The Deserted Plantation" is irrevocably deserted. And by closing with the speaker's intention to remain on the plantation, Dunbar revises Goldsmith's escape-clause ending, which provides a solution of sorts for his displaced villagers in the "distant climes" of America (341). In Dunbar's poem, there are no "new-found worlds" where the speaker can begin anew, like those Goldsmith's villagers hope to discover abroad (372). Dunbar's speaker has only one option: the decaying southern plantation—the old site of unfreedom—and the unceasing solitary work it entails. His tending of the plantation embodies futile, nontransformational labor that will neither restore the community whose absence he mourns nor return the plantation to economic sustainability. His labor's futility is confirmed in the poem's final lines, which name death as his only foreseeable prospect. In this way, Dunbar's speaker represents a forcefully negative relation to historical progress—a relation that is figured not in romantic terms of resistance or refusal but as a residual existence that cannot be integrated into a changing present.

Dunbar's georgic laborers embody a form of labor that is neither enslaved nor free in Karl Marx's sense of owning one's labor power to sell on the market.[12] There appears to be no viable market where these figures can exchange their labor for wages; their work is at once solitary and alienated, postslavery and yet unintegrated into a capitalist market economy. While Dunbar's portrayals of the solitary agrarian could read as willfully anachronistic fables, placing them alongside Goldsmith's poem reveals their historical stakes. Dunbar's protagonists can be identified as the unassimilated or redundant workers who make up capitalism's surplus population—in Marx's terms, the lumpen proletariat or "reserve army of the unemployed" (*Capital* 794). But as Michael Denning has recently pointed out, these categories, which center on wage labor as the norm, do not adequately capture the conditions of what Denning calls "wageless life"—being "disposable in the eyes of state and market" (80). The animating paradox of Dunbar's georgics is that his characters are simultaneously wageless and laborers, disposable and yet bound to their task. They dwell in the interstices of familiar modern categories, neither citizen nor wage laborer. They therefore speak to the postbellum entrenchment of a liminal form of labor balanced between the slave economy's totalized oppression and modern capitalism's exploitation, a condition defined by segregation, immobility, disen-

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franchisement, dispossession, wagelessness, and arbitrary violence. The poems in *Lyrics of Lowly Life* illustrate a socioeconomic transition in postbellum America that positioned African Americans as nonmodern laborers rather than liberal citizens.

Dunbar's georgics, then, offer a strikingly negative vision of work under conditions of racial oppression. Closest to Marxist theories of labor in their emphasis on alienation and objectification, these poems remain skeptical of the measurability of labor's value, pointing to the unproductive ends of productive acts. They forward what Antonio Negri calls a "negative ontology of labor" in their insistence that "*labor works without an end*," providing a plot that runs counter to capitalist economic language of value, measure, exchange, and progress; to the ideology of the work ethic and virtuous wealth; and to racial-uplift narratives centered on productive labor (11). While Dunbar's georgics value the humanity of their laborers, the poems pointedly refuse to redeem labor, delineating instead the ways it disappoints. In them, work exhausts or refuses measure; it is a site of arbitrary imposition rather than rational exchange, of human susceptibility rather than agency. In their ultimate refusal of what Arendt calls the "glorification of labor" central to Enlightenment theories of the subject (93), to capitalist economic theory, and to Jeffersonian agrarianism, Dunbar's poems return us to the sense of deprivation and objectification endemic to human labor. They highlight the minimal quality of manual labor, its association with bare survival, material frailty, and suffering. Dunbar's georgic laborers, returning to the land and its ceaseless labor without hope for redemption, evoke a racialized form of precarious life at the turn of the century.

Georgic Ends

While georgic themes sporadically appear throughout Dunbar's subsequent collections of poetry, they play their most prominent role in *Lyrics of Lowly Life*. A biographical explanation for their early prominence is that Dunbar's georgics mirror his own experience of toiling in obscurity as an elevator operator and bathroom attendant while writing his first poetry. His letters from the early to mid 1890s relentlessly catalog what he calls "the difficulties under which I labor" ("To Dr. James Newton Matthews"). In the georgic's negotiation of the struggle of agrarian labor, Dunbar might have discovered analogues to his own difficult material circumstances—circumstances that altered with the publication of *Lyrics of Lowly Life*, whose popularity eventually allowed Dunbar to earn his living as a writer and lecturer.[13] Dunbar's more cosmopolitan, professional post-*Lyrics* existence, which distanced him from the exigent manual labor of "lowly life," is revealed in the changing commitments of his later poetry. His subsequent books present poems of praise and protest that reflect a poet's increasing consciousness of his public role as racial representative.

The reappearance of the georgic in these later texts signals an ever-widening representational distance from the southern black laborer. Departing from his earlier work's interest in the psychological complexities of the laborer's plight, Dunbar's "To the South, on Its New Slavery," from the 1903 collection *Lyrics of Love and Laughter*, reveals a poet aiming to shape public discourse by directly appealing to the South to restore its lost dignity. In a sentimental plea, Dunbar calls on "Mother South" to "heed my pleading now" and "take . . . thy dusky children to thy saving breast." Dunbar emerges here as an indignant public figure fully empowered to chasten the South for its "unsanctioned crime" of "new slavery." By presenting himself as spokesman for the "hopeless" southern sharecropper, Dunbar introduces a new division of labor into this georgic, becoming the poet-professional whose work is to represent the invisible laborer and to confront southerners

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about their moral turpitude. His turn toward the South as the poem's subject, personified as a neglectful but ultimately benevolent maternal figure, suggests a shift toward a register at once more confrontational and more conciliatory than the resignation of his *Lyrics of Lowly Life* georgics. In the end, Dunbar argues, the grave conditions faced by southern blacks "cannot last"; the "warrior queen" will realize her error and "come to [her] own."

"To the South" simultaneously heightens the didactic rhetoric of the *Lyrics of Lowly Life* georgics and diminishes the polarities of labor that marked these earlier representations. This shift figures the black laborer as historical victim rather than disempowered agent. Describing the wageless laborer as "a bondsman whom the greed of men has made / Almost too brutish to deplore his plight," Dunbar turns him into a voiceless, suffering body instead of a sympathetic protagonist. This figuration of the southern black as embodying death in life, entirely depleted of human joys and reduced to bare "sighs" and "moans," hews closely to the depiction, in the collection's following poem, "The Haunted Oak," of a lynching victim. The georgic's endpoint in Dunbar's work, where its logic is carried to representational extremes, might be discoverable in this turn from laborer to victim, from toiling body to lynched body, as the defining figure of the South's negative modernity.

What happens to this racialized georgic mode after Dunbar? A generation later, it resurfaces in Toomer's modernist investigations of the declining South and its exhausted "black reapers" in *Cane*. With its impressionistic style, graphic violence, and frank expressions of sexuality, *Cane* may appear an unlikely inheritor of Dunbar's conventional verse. Yet alongside this text's spectacles of sex and blood is a series of agrarian grotesques, exaggerated and disfigured portraits of the everyday dehumanization of black agrarian laborers that extend Dunbar's georgic investigations of the unfreedom of manual labor for southern blacks to their outer limit. To read *Cane*'s modern grotesques, published twenty-seven years after *Lyrics of Lowly Life*, is to discover the outcome of the trajectory Dunbar's representations chart from sympathetic, burdened laborer to alienated body at the verge of extinction, as well as the endpoint of the georgic critique of racial barbarism in the South.

In the decades after Dunbar's and DuBois's searing portraits of the everyday terrors of post-Reconstruction life, laboring conditions declined even more dramatically for the rural southern black. The globalization of the cotton industry in the 1920s, along with dwindling demand, endangered cotton production in the South and reduced many black sharecroppers to deeper servitude and even starvation.[14] In the face of such depredations, Toomer's georgic grotesques capture the annihilating quality of agrarian labor, as in "Harvest Song":

> I am a reaper whose muscles set at sundown. All
> my oats are cradled.
> But I am too chilled, and too fatigued to bind
> them. And I hunger.
>
> I crack a grain between my teeth. I do not taste it.
> I have been in the fields all day. My throat is dry.
> I hunger.

Over the course of the poem, Toomer multiplies the forms of "hunger" the speaker experiences. He is not only thirsty and hungry but also "blind" and "deaf" and completely cut off from others. "Harvest Song" and the other georgics of *Cane* present agrarian labor as progressive decivilization—work that, as Joan Dayan puts it, "degrade[s] a body into mere matter" and draws it to death's edge (155). Toomer's reapers conspicuously fail to become civilized through manual labor, while lacking even the sympathetic and heroic qualities on which Dunbar's early georgics insist. Numbed and traumatized, they are defined in all senses by privation, akin to the "brutish" laborer of Dunbar's "To the South," who cannot even "deplore his plight."

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Amid what Alain Locke calls the "flight from medieval America to modern" that characterized the Great Migration, *Cane* narrates the endgame of a once-dominant mode of production and its accompanying racial ideology (6). In the depleted figures of "Harvest Song," we glimpse "the mind of the South" in its declension—a declension that Toomer neither celebrates nor mourns. The georgics of *Cane* reflect a New Negro–era dissatisfaction with the moralistic register of Dunbar's fin de siècle representations, a refusal to elegize their laboring figures or discover any redeeming trait in their work. Instead, the exhaustion of Toomer's reapers reflects a larger representational exhaustion with the georgic's tropes. Rejecting any images of progress, continuity, or futurity in favor of images of immediate lack and uncertain survival, *Cane*'s georgics are almost parodies of Robert Frost's richly alive mowers in *A Boy's Will* (1913) and other georgic images of enduring agrarian relations to the natural world's cycles—but parodies "without the laughter," as Kenneth Burke might have it (153).[15] In *Cane*'s portraits of the insufficiency and dehumanization of agrarian labor for southern blacks, we can see the waning of the georgic as a viable literary mode for African American writers in the twentieth century.[16]

In turn, Dunbar's and Toomer's poems, with their rebuke to discourses of salvational labor, highlight the alternative that the georgic mode presents to more-familiar conceptions of work derived from Enlightenment humanism and modern capitalism. With its portrayals of labor's constitutive negativity as well as its generative power, the georgic might be regarded as a repository for explorations of the productive impulse that fail to measure up—or, as in the case of these African American georgics, that prove to be beyond measure. Georgic poems point to the problem of labor's value in a modernizing society and to the unsettling possibility that work may be an action without meaningful or calculable ends. Dunbar's poem "Keep A-Pluggin' Away," from *Lyrics of Lowly Life*, poignantly underscores this possibility. Cataloging various hostile forces, from swelling storms and treacherous hills to "sneers" that must be "swallow[ed]" and "lots of pain to bear," Dunbar repeats his "humble little motto": "Keep a-pluggin' away." Dunbar exhorts himself and his reader to persist with ceaseless work in the face of adversity, framing work as a kind of waiting, an effort that defers achievement to an unknown future. Despite its optimistic assertions that "there will come a brighter day," the poem closes with a reminder to "Work and wait unwearying / Keep a-pluggin' away," lines that soberly convey the need for "unwearying" fortitude when unending, potentially unrewarded labor lies ahead. To "work and wait unwearying" is the impossible imperative faced by African Americans in Dunbar's generation—an imperative Toomer's georgics reveal to be bankrupt. More than simply invert pastoral conventions or present didactic narratives of agrarian life, georgic poems such as Dunbar's and Toomer's point toward the historical conditions under which the *vita activa* fails to sustain or improve material circumstances. Thus, while georgics may appear anachronistic or even irrelevant to contemporary readers more attuned to lyric soliloquy or linguistic experiment, the questions they pose about the equivocal freedoms of labor and poetry's task in representing them haunt us still.

Notes

1. Early estimations of Dunbar's work reflect his own sense of dialect's limitations as a "jingle in a broken tongue" ("Poet"). James Weldon Johnson, in the 1922 preface to his anthology *Book of American Negro Poetry*, argues that while Dunbar's dialect poetry made a distinctive "contribution to American literature," dialect as a means of poetic expression is inadequate: dialect "is an instrument with but two stops: pathos and humor" (xxxiii, xl). Johnson's judgment on dialect's insufficiency became a critical commonplace by the 1960s and 1970s,

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when the desire for a black poetry of overt protest led to readings of Dunbar as an apolitical accommodationist or a tragic figure "chained" by dialect verse. By the late twentieth century, however, critics influenced by poststructuralist theories of performativity and deconstructive *différance* sought to recover Dunbar's dialect poems as instances of subversive double consciousness and distinctively black textuality. Notable examples of readings that view Dunbar's dialect as "signifying" or subversive performance include Blount, "Preacherly Text"; Keeling; and Gates. Most recently, historicist readings by Nurhussein; Cohen; Scott-Childress; and Carr have traced the varied cultural inheritances in Dunbar's dialect, using his poetry to elaborate a more complex portrait of dialect as a popular multiracial genre in turn-of-the-century American literature. All these readings foreground dialect as the most salient dimension of Dunbar's poetry.

2. In an anthology of essays on Dunbar's work published in 2010, *We Wear the Mask: Paul Laurence Dunbar and the Politics of Representative Reality*, the editor's introduction lauds Dunbar's creation of "two distinct voices in his works—the traditional English of the conventional poet and the renowned, redolent dialect of African Americans"—as his most enduring achievement (Harrell, Introd. ix).

3. Recent articles have begun to broaden critical discussion to include dimensions of Dunbar's poetry beyond his use of dialect—e.g., Ampadu's discussion of Dunbar's praise poems, Balestrini's work on Dunbar's war poetry, Gabbin's essay on the prayer form in Dunbar's poetry, and Blount's writing on Dunbar and African American elegy ("Paul Laurence Dunbar").

4. Goodman points to the "network of image and echo that consistently defines *labor* as fundamentally reparative or restitutive, precarious, and subject to lapse" in the *Georgics* (113).

5. One key example of the subsumption of georgic into pastoral is Buell's definition of pastoral as "referring broadly to all literature that celebrates an ethos of rurality or nature or wilderness over against an ethos of metropolitanism" (439). Sweet argues that the "blur[ring] of the distinction between pastoral and georgic" raises the "question of identifying various ethoi specific to these domains which are not coextensive" (3–4). On the "complex pastoral," see Leo Marx.

6. Wacquant describes the new "peculiar institution" of racial oppression emergent in the postbellum South, produced by the "need to secure anew the labour of former slaves, without whom the region's economy would collapse," and characterized by "the generalization of sharecropping and debt peonage," vagrancy laws, and the persistent threat of vigilante violence (45–46). Dunbar himself, in his essay "Is Higher Education for the Negro Hopeless?," describes the high rates of black incarceration in the turn-of-the-century South (47).

7. Kolchin writes that even by the late 1870s, "when free-labor advocates looked south, instead of a flourishing economy, cheerful and efficient laborers, and a political system that was the model of disinterested republican virtue, they saw greed, corruption, ignorance, crudeness, and lethargy" (230). On northern perceptions of the political and economic failures of the postbellum South, see Richardson.

8. Hsu points out that Washington's localist rhetoric draws on "transatlantic scenarios [that] simultaneously register and disavow the international scope of the New South as a region transformed in accordance with capital circulation" (193). Hsu's argument illuminates the various "scales" of Washington's rhetorical investment in capitalist logics, from the local to the transnational; Dunbar's localist poetics, by contrast, reveals the painful lack of mobility and access to resources characteristic of the New South that Washington's capitalist-uplift discourse downplays.

9. In fact, DuBois congratulated Washington on his "Atlanta Compromise" speech as a "phenomenal success" and "a word fitly spoken," and he did not publicly break from Washington's philosophy until the early 1900s (57; Juguo). Dunbar's essay "Our New Madness," first published in the *Independent* in August 1898, directly addresses the limitations of Washington's Tuskegee program, arguing that while Washington's "ability and honesty of purpose" cannot be doubted, "I do fear that this earnest man is not doing either himself or his race full justice in his public utterances. He says we must have industrial training, and the world quotes him . . . as saying we must not have anything else" (182).

10. Jones; Keeling; and Peabody share this critical tendency.

11. While there is no direct biographical evidence that Dunbar read Goldsmith's poem, its popularity and pervasive influence on prior generations of American writers make it a probability. It is also likely that Dunbar would have been familiar with the anthologized early American georgics that respond to "The Deserted Village," such as Dwight's *Greenfield Hill* and Freneau's "The American Village." We might regard Dunbar's "The Deserted Plantation" as carrying on a literary tradition of American responses to Goldsmith's poem. On the American reception and influence of "The Deserted Village," see Lutz.

12. In volume 1 of *Capital*, Marx defines free labor in these terms: "Labour-power can appear upon the market as a commodity, only if, and so far as, its possessor, the individual whose labour-power it is, offers it for sale, or sells it, as a commodity. In order that he may be able to do this, he must have it at his disposal, must be the untrammelled owner of his capacity for labour, i.e., of his person. He and the owner of money meet in the market, and deal with each other as on the basis of equal rights, with this difference alone, that one is buyer, the other seller; both, therefore, equal in the eyes of the law" (167).

13. Dunbar wrote to Howells in September 1896, after *Lyrics of Lowly Life* was published with Howells's lauda-

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tory introduction, "You may be pleased to know that my affairs have very materially changed for the better, and entirely through your agency" ("To William Dean Howells").

14. Grubbs describes the declining conditions of southern cotton production in the 1920s.

15. Webb discusses Toomer's rewriting of Frost's "Mowing."

16. While *Cane* carries Dunbar's investigations of uneven modernity and nontransformational labor to their logical extremes, Sterling Brown's 1932 book of poems *Southern Road* might be regarded as the historical terminus for the georgic mode attuned to the racial ideologies of southern agrarian labor. For a reading of Brown's poetry as georgic, see Collins.

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