

ARTICLE

Alice Dunbar-Nelson's Stories of Childhood

Brigitte Fielder¹, Jean Lutes² and Denise Burgher³

¹College of Letters and Science, University of Wisconsin-Madison, USA; ²English, Villanova University College of Liberal Arts and Sciences, USA and ³English and Center for Black Digital Research, Penn State University, University Park, USA

Corresponding author: Jean Lutes; Email: jean.lutes@villanova.edu

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Abstract

Inspired by teaching Black kindergarteners at the White Rose Mission in New York City in the 1890s, Alice Dunbar-Nelson wrote 12 stories about children in an urban neighborhood targeted for uplift. Around 1900, she drafted a table of contents for the collection, *The Annals of 'Steenth Street*. The collection was never published as such, but some of these stories were published individually in multiple periodicals over several decades. Dunbar-Nelson's stories center on the neighborhood's children and their perspectives. This was literature intended, at least in part, for a child audience. Both the content and the publication history of Dunbar-Nelson's stories raise important points for scholars of African American children's literature. Our discussion focuses on the story Dunbar-Nelson intended to appear first in her collection, "The Revenge of James Brown," published in the *Chicago Daily News* in 1899 and in the Methodist Episcopal Church School Publications' weekly paper, the *Classmate*, in 1930. This story extends notions of where we might look for children's literature of the Harlem Renaissance to include print venues not often examined with Black children in mind. Moreover, Dunbar-Nelson's revisions of this story allow for complex considerations of her representations of Black childhood. This essay's authors are co-founders of the Black digital humanities project, *Taught by Literature*, the work of which includes creating a freely available digital edition of "The Revenge of James Brown" and Dunbar-Nelson's other 'Steenth Street' stories, working with K-12 educators to create materials to facilitate teaching these stories to children in the present.

Keywords: African American; Black; children's literature; periodicals; recovery; revision

Alice Dunbar-Nelson's stories of childhood present a dynamic, nuanced view of African American children and African American children's literature that has too often been obscured. Black authors have always challenged the most prominent, racist degradations of Black childhood. They continually refused children's adultification, celebrated their youthfulness, and attended to their edification as part of larger, future-looking projects of racial justice and community uplift across periods. Histories of Black education reveal how children have been central to Black writing. And authors from all periods of African American literature have regarded children as key members of the Black publics they have addressed. Dunbar-Nelson's recently recovered short fiction reveals the necessity of identifying engagement with Black children, rather than assuming its absence. African American children's literature is sometimes hiding in plain sight, in public venues that cannot be fully

understood unless we take into account their many potential readerships. Here, we discuss a project of locating stories of Black childhood in the pages of a popular Chicago newspaper, among other places, and recovering them for new readers in the digital age.

It may be unsurprising that Dunbar-Nelson attended to children in her writing, but this point is worth noting. Literary and cultural studies scholars, educators, and children's authors have noted the ways that childhood has been constructed in the United States—a construction that has historically imagined children as white. We understand this problem in modern-day correctives to acknowledge and attend to children of color because a white majority has not prioritized them. But Black children have not been ignored. Black writers—and Black women writers in particular—have paid much attention to Black children in their work.

Inspired by teaching Black kindergarteners at the White Rose Mission in New York City in the 1890s, Alice Dunbar-Nelson wrote 12 stories about children in an urban neighborhood targeted for uplift. Dunbar-Nelson planned to publish a collection of these stories called “The Annals of ‘Steenth Street,’” orienting these around the fictionalized neighborhood of her setting. This collection was never published, but several of the stories were published individually in magazines and newspapers in the 1890s and early decades of the twentieth century. Taken as a group, these stories chronicle a vibrant, working-poor community where poverty and unemployment, domestic violence, limited access to education, and untreated illnesses make it difficult to thrive. The collective voice of ‘Steenth Street is deeply skeptical about middle-class reformers. Importantly, the stories center on the neighborhood’s children and their perspectives.

This essay takes the example of Alice Dunbar-Nelson’s ‘Steenth Street stories—stories we read as intended, at least in part, for a child audience. We will focus our reading on the story Dunbar-Nelson intended to appear first in her collection, “The Revenge of James Brown,” a story whose complex textual history reveals new possibilities for understanding it as African American children’s literature. “The Revenge of James Brown” was published in 1899 in the *Chicago Daily News*, under the byline of “Mrs. Paul L. Dunbar.” At the time of our writing, this is the first known publication of the story. A clipping of the 1899 publication, with penciled corrections in the author’s hand, is housed in the Alice Dunbar-Nelson Papers at the University of Delaware Special Collections. This version, incorporating Dunbar-Nelson’s hand corrections and keeping the paragraphing almost exactly the same, was reprinted in Oxford University Press’s 1988 three-volume Schomburg collection *The Works of Alice Dunbar-Nelson*, edited by [Akasha] Gloria T. Hull.¹ But this is not the end of the story’s revision and publication history.

¹ Recovering the published editions of Dunbar-Nelson’s story has been a long endeavor with several false starts. Hull’s editor’s note to her 1988 reprinting of the story was only partially correct. Hull indicates that “The Revenge of James Brown” was “published as a young people’s story by the Methodist Episcopal Church, 1929” (Hull 1988, 136). This incomplete information was based on the archival clipping (which includes no date or publication information) and a letter (also in the author’s papers) that Dunbar-Nelson received from the Methodist Episcopal Church School Publications indicating that she sold the story for \$35 in 1929. At first, we assumed “The Revenge of James Brown” appeared in the *AME Church Review*, a journal Dunbar-Nelson edited in 1913 and 1914, because the story was digitized in the Alexander Street database and listed there as having been published in the *AME Church Review*, 1929, pp. 136–45. The incomplete archival holdings of the *Church Review* made this publication difficult to confirm, however, and we now believe this listing to be incorrect. The page numbers listed in the Alexander Street database (136–45) correspond not to the pages of the *Church Review* but rather to the pages of Hull’s reprinting of “The Revenge of James Brown” in 1988. See Dunbar-Nelson 1988. Moreover, by 1929, the author had been married to Robert J. Nelson for thirteen years, making it more likely that the clipping on which the Hull edition was based

After its 1899 publication, Dunbar-Nelson apparently revised this story at some point in the next three decades. Beyond the undated revisions to the *Chicago Daily News* clipping, at least two more unpublished variants of the story exist: Dunbar-Nelson's papers include a 6-page autograph manuscript and a 10-page typescript with corrections in the author's hand. The various versions of the text evidence Dunbar-Nelson's revisions over time and suggest that racial markers and racial slurs were removed (either by the author or by editors, with or without the author's permission) in the 1899 *Chicago Daily News* version. Decades after the *Daily News* publication, a revised version of "The Revenge of James Brown" appeared in the November 15, 1930 issue of *The Classmate: A Paper for Young People*, an 8-page subscription weekly magazine sold to schools for 75 cents a year and published in Cincinnati, Ohio by the Methodist Episcopal Church School Publications. This version of the story differs from the 1899 *Chicago Daily News* version in several ways.² For example, the "sound of horses' hoofs on the cobble-stones" of the 1899 version is replaced with "a new and raucous sound: the hoot of auto horns" in 1930. This later publication is similar to the text of the undated typescript in the Alice Dunbar-Nelson Papers.³ Beyond the publications, Dunbar-Nelson's manuscript revisions are difficult to definitively date, but they indicate revision over time, for different publication venues.

Dunbar-Nelson's continued attention to this story had a larger purpose. The draft table of contents for *The Annals of 'Steenth Street* begins the collection with "The Revenge of James Brown."⁴ This introduction to the neighborhood sets the collection's tone by focusing on thirteen-year-old Jimmy Brown's fiercely negative reaction to the opening of The Pure in Heart Mission. The story's intertwined themes deal with family, poverty, boyhood, and respectability. Jimmy's navigation of his relationship with his family, peers, and the Mission reformers both reveals his youth and leads to his adultification, as he ultimately takes on the role of family provider. In many ways, the story represents the intricate dynamics of the neighborhood and its inhabitants, and it shows Dunbar-Nelson's keen attention to her child characters as well as the neighborhood adults' understanding of and relation to them.

Our reading of "The Revenge of James Brown" in its multiple publication contexts advances an argument for expanding the lens of where we look for children's literature of the Harlem Renaissance. If we are to capture the breadth of Black writing for children during this period, we must reach beyond the limiting form of "children's books" and even the realm of periodicals explicitly intended for children. Doing so, we expand our view of what kinds of stories were available to Black children during the Renaissance. We write about "The Revenge of James Brown" as scholars working to recover this work for new generations of readers. The authors of this essay are co-founders of the Black digital humanities project, Taught by Literature, the work of which includes creating a freely available digital edition of Alice Dunbar-Nelson's *The Annals of 'Steenth Street* and working with K-12 educators to create materials to facilitate teaching these stories to children in the present. We plan to release

(listing "Mrs. Paul L. Dunbar" as author) was published earlier. And, the clipping bore a similar look to other publications of Dunbar-Nelson's in the *Chicago Daily News*, where we eventually located "The Revenge of James Brown" in the December 2, 1899 issue. The archival letter confirming her 1929 resale of the story was signed by Alfred D. Moore, assistant editor of the *Classmate*. The limited availability of *The Classmate* helps to explain why "The Revenge of James Brown" was not widely known to have been published in 1930.

² We have found a somewhat similar pattern of revision in the textual variants of another 'Steenth Street story, "His Heart's Desire." On Dunbar-Nelson's revisions of "His Heart's Desire," see Lutes 2021.

³ The first page of the typescript also bears a note handwritten in pencil in the upper right corner that connects it to the *Classmate* publication: "\$35/Methodist Board/August 1, 1929."

⁴ A typescript of this table of contents is available in the Alice Dunbar-Nelson Papers at the University of Delaware Special Collections.

our digital edition of “The Revenge of James Brown” in 2026. This will make both versions of the story that were published in Dunbar-Nelson’s lifetime—the 1899 *Chicago Daily News* version and the 1930 *Classmate* version—available for study.⁵

Black children’s literature, Black publics

African American authors have long included children among their various public audiences. While white children’s literature overwhelmingly misrepresented, degraded, or erased Black children from its materials, Black people’s love and care for the children in their communities shine in their literary history. “Children’s literature” as a category has too often been conflated with a particular format in which only some writing for children has appeared: “children’s books.” But, as scholars of African American literature know, considering the book format alone gives one an incomplete picture of that literary landscape. As early African American scholar Eric Gardner and others have noted, African American literature must be sought out in “unexpected places.”⁶ So, too, must African American children’s literature be located in texts and print venues often assumed to be the exclusive purview of adults.

Addresses to children are visible in some of the earliest African American children’s literature, from eighteenth-century authors including Phillis Wheatley, Jupiter Hammon, and John Marrant.⁷ And scholars have recognized an array of nineteenth-century texts meant for Black child readers, from lesser-known authors such as Ann Plato to well-known ones, like Frances Ellen Watkins Harper.⁸ During the Harlem Renaissance, we see a rise of children’s literature amid this era of cultural “rebirth,” including writing for children by a variety of authors better-known for their writing for adults, including Paul Laurence Dunbar, Georgia Douglas Johnson, Nella Larsen, James Weldon Johnson, and Langston Hughes.

Much of this African American children’s literature can be found in periodicals—a key site for understanding African American print history, more generally. Scholars of African American literature have recognized periodicals as an essential venue for the work of authors who may be otherwise marginalized from print venues.⁹ Although *The Brownies’ Book*, a children’s periodical that emerged from the annual Children’s Number of the *Crisis*, the official publication of the NAACP, is often misrepresented as the first periodical to create African American children’s literature, it was preceded by Black children’s periodicals that debuted as early as the 1880s.¹⁰ Beyond this, writing for children appeared in early African

⁵ Taught by Literature’s digital edition of Dunbar-Nelson’s ‘Steenth Street Stories (an ongoing recovery project) is available here: <https://www.taughtbyliterature.org/steenthstreetstories>.

⁶ See Eric Gardner, *Unexpected Places: Relocating Nineteenth-Century African American Literature*, University Press of Mississippi, 2009.

⁷ Hammon’s 1782 “A Poem for Children with Thoughts on Death” is directed to children; Marrant acknowledges potential child readers in the account of seven-year-old Mary Scott’s conversion in his 1785 *A Narrative of the Lord’s Wonderful Dealings*; Wheatley’s “To S.M. The Young African Painter, on Seeing His Works” was addressed to Scipio Moorhead, who was around twelve or thirteen years old at the time of her book’s publication. On this early history of Black authors directly addressing child readers, see Fielder 2022.

⁸ See Capshaw and Duane 2017.

⁹ Lutes 2010, for example, has described how periodicals fostered “a vital tradition in African American and women’s writing.” See “Beyond the Bounds of the Book-Periodical Studies and Women Writers,” 337.

¹⁰ The full extent of early African American children’s periodicals has yet to be explored. The 1880s saw the AME Church’s *Child’s Recorder* and a Baptist publication, *Our Women and Children*. In 1887, Black Canadian children’s author Amelia E. Johnson founded *The Joy*, an eight-page monthly literary magazine for Black girls and women, and

American periodicals more broadly. Early African American newspapers like the *Colored American* and the *Christian Recorder* began including children's sections in the 1840s and 1850s. The latter was the official publication of the African Methodist Episcopal Church, which also published the *Child's Recorder* as early as the 1880s. The *Crisis* included a monthly children's column called "The Little Page" from 1925 to 1929. And the *Chicago Defender* began publishing a "Defender Junior" section in 1921.

Alice Dunbar-Nelson's stories of Black childhood appeared in at least one venue in which children's literature—and especially African American children's literature—might be easily overlooked. She published at least seven of these stories about children in the *Chicago Daily News*, a white-owned and operated newspaper founded in 1875. A daily newspaper, it was the city's first "penny paper," with a broad distribution that made it Chicago's most widely circulated newspaper leading into the twentieth century. And Dunbar-Nelson published at least one story in a white-edited children's periodical, *The Classmate*, a Sunday school publication overwhelmingly associated with white authors and readers. Although white readers have attended almost exclusively to white print venues and white-authored texts, as scholars including Carla Peterson, Nazera Sadiq Wright, Eric Gardner, Daniel Hack, Matt Sandler, and Brigitte Fielder have noted, African American people (including child readers) have always read broadly, with capacious readerly interests that have traversed racial lines.¹¹ Black writers have also written capaciously, attending to broad audiences of potential readers. Unlike white authors, they have not excluded Black readers from the audiences they address directly, and in this inclusion, they have not failed (as white authors have, historically) to include Black children among the potential readers of their work. When we include Black children in the broader array of African American readers, we reveal one of the many ways Black intellectuals have attended to children. And, when we consider Black readers (including child readers) of writing published in various print venues, we gain a more complete picture of African American children's literature.

Alice Dunbar-Nelson's child advocacy

Alice Ruth Moore Dunbar-Nelson was a poet, fiction writer, and essayist whose work spanned the turn of the nineteenth to twentieth centuries into the Harlem Renaissance. She advocated for causes such as women's suffrage and racial equality, and she supported activism against lynching. A promoter and facilitator of African American literature, her work included editing the *A.M.E. Church Review*, a publication of the African Methodist Episcopal Church, and anthologies of Black speeches, prose, and poetry. She also worked as a journalist, writing columns for the *Pittsburgh Courier* and the *Washington Eagle*. Despite her long writing career and the volume and versatility of her writing across multiple genres, she is still under-recognized.

In addition to her writing, editing, and activism, like many notable Black women writers, Dunbar-Nelson was also an educator. She worked as a public school teacher in New Orleans and Delaware and taught at the Hampton Institute in Virginia and at the State College for Colored Students, which would later become Delaware State University. And she taught

another, *The Ivy*, focusing on Black history, in 1888, though no extant copies of Johnson's children's magazines have been found to date. Moving into the early twentieth century, a radical Black children's magazine *Our Boys and Girls*, was published from 1919 to 1920.

¹¹ See Hack 2017; Peterson 2020; Sandler 2020. Eric Gardner, Nazera Sadiq Wright, and Brigitte Fielder specifically discuss Black child readers of white-authored work in early Black newspapers such as the *Colored American* and *Christian Recorder*. See Fielder 2017; Gardner 2017; Wright 2017.

Black kindergarteners at a settlement house in a poor neighborhood in New York City's Upper East Side. The White Rose Mission—also known as the White Rose Home for Colored Working Girls and the White Rose Industrial Association—was founded by Victoria Earle Matthews to provide transitional housing and basic education to young Black women and children.

That Dunbar-Nelson appears within a tradition of attending to Black children, is no coincidence. She worked closely with Black children in her teaching and racial justice work, which flowed into her promotion of Black literature. In 1922, she penned an essay, "Negro Literature for Negro Pupils," which appeared in the February issue of the *Southern Workman*, a monthly periodical published by the Hampton Institute. In this piece, Dunbar-Nelson writes

For two generations we have given brown and black children a blonde ideal of beauty to worship, a milk-white literature to assimilate, and a pearly Paradise to anticipate, in which their dark faces would be hopelessly out of place ...The effect of this kind of teaching is shown in the facts that the beautiful brown dolls, which resemble their tiny play-mothers, still have some difficulty in making their way into the homes of our people; that some older religionists still fondly hope that at death, and before St. Peter admits them into Paradise, they will be washed physically white; that Negro business enterprises are still regarded with a doubtful eye; and that Negro literature is frequently mentioned in whispers as a dubious quantity.¹²

Dunbar-Nelson writes here of the importance of self-representation in children's literature and popular culture. She notes the ways Black literature has been diminished—pretended as unimportant and unworthy of study. Being both aware of and a contributor to a rich and wide African American literary history, Dunbar-Nelson does not here describe a dearth of Black literature for children. She acknowledges its existence, making an argument for a curricular shift toward its inclusion in their education—a shift that was already being implemented by Black teachers. The essay goes on to argue that

There is a manifest remedy for this condition, a remedy which the teachers of the race are applying gradually, wherever the need has been brought to their attention. We must begin everywhere to instill race pride into our pupils; not by dull statistics, nor yet by tedious iterations that we are a great people, and "if you do not believe it, look at this table of figures, or at the life of so-and-so." Idle boasting of past achievements always leaves a suspicion in the mind of the listener that the braggart is not sure of his ground and is bolstering up his opinion of himself. But we will give the children the poems and stories and folk lore and songs of their own people. We do not teach literature; we are taught by literature.¹³

In this last line, Dunbar-Nelson recognizes the important historical and cultural lessons that African American literature has to offer.

In the spirit of presenting "Negro Literature for Negro Pupils," Dunbar-Nelson herself wrote literature about—and, we argue, for—children. According to her papers, which are located in the special collections of the University of Delaware Library, in the 1890s, Dunbar-Nelson

¹² Dunbar-Nelson 1922, 59.

¹³ Dunbar-Nelson 1922, 60.

wrote a set of short stories about children that she planned to publish together as *The Annals of 'Steenth Street*. The table of contents Dunbar-Nelson planned for the collection reveals her careful and curious arrangement of the stories. The collection revolves around a poor/working-class neighborhood that faces a myriad of socio-economic problems, from poverty to domestic violence to reformers who could be either helpful or harmful; sometimes they provided a much-needed meal to a family, and at other times they offered unwanted and unneeded attempts at intervention. These stories focus on some of the community's youngest members, who also attend a local school that is run by educators from outside their community.

As Caroline Gebhard, Katherine Adams, and Sandra A. Zagarell have noted, 'Steenth Street's fictional, Pure in Heart Mission is directly inspired by Dunbar-Nelson's time working with the White Rose Mission.¹⁴ While children are at the center of these stories, Dunbar-Nelson includes not only parents but also teachers among her characters, and many of the stories showcase children's reactions to what their teachers say and do. Following Akasha (Gloria) Hull's suggestion that Dunbar-Nelson may have written the 'Steenth Street stories as juvenile fiction, we count children among her intended readership, and here explore their possibilities as children's literature.¹⁵

Although the absence of clear racial markers in some of the 'Steenth Street stories has caused some scholars to read the characters as white, we approach these as stories about Black children and communities. This reading is, in part, a refusal to set whiteness as a default, to regard literary characters as white unless otherwise marked. Alice Dunbar-Nelson was a Black writer and educator of Black children who almost certainly did not simply construct childhood as white. Given the influence of these stories and Dunbar-Nelson's complex representations of race in her other fiction, we have more reason to read at least some of the 'Steenth Street children as Black. Moreover, some versions of some of these stories include more overt references to race, suggesting that she may have revised these with multiple, differently raced ideas of these characters and audiences in mind. "The Revenge of James Brown" provides one such example in which Dunbar-Nelson's revisions reveal different approaches to race and childhood.

The 1930 *Classmate* publication of "The Revenge of James Brown" supports our reading of Dunbar-Nelson's characters as Black, most clearly by including a prominent, centered illustration. The image identifies Dunbar-Nelson's child characters in its caption, taken from the story ("Jimmy Laughed Derisively: 'I say, fellers, he's one o' de goodies now'"), and the boys are clearly depicted as dark-skinned children (Figure 1).

This illustration, by James Edwin Jackson, a white artist known for popular magazine illustrations, features a group of smiling Black boys conversing outside a building. Most wear flat-brimmed hats and jackets. One sports a scarf. A small boy in the front carries a packet of newspapers under his arm. At least some of these, it seems, are working boys. At the center, in a light striped sweater but no jacket, is a boy who charismatically draws the attention of the others. This seems to be Jimmy. Alongside the inclusion of Dunbar-Nelson's by then recognizable name, accompanying the story with an illustration of Black boys provides a clear racial framing for this story's main characters.

¹⁴ See their discussion of another 'Steenth Street story, "His Heart's Desire," Gebhard et al. 2016, 405.

¹⁵ See Hull 1988, xxxviii.



Figure 1. James Edwin Jackson, illustration for “The Revenge of James Brown,” *The Classmate* Vol. 37 No. 46 (November 15, 1930) Caption: “Jimmy Laughed Derisively: ‘I say, fellers, he’s one o’ de goodies now’”.

This illustration differed from the vast majority of illustrations of Black people in children’s publications in its evasion of the usual derogatory racial stereotypes. These children are not caricatured, but illustrated as if to align potential readers with the happy-looking boys depicted, providing a subtle yet meaningful avenue for potential identification.¹⁶ This visual choice establishes the characters at the center of Dunbar-Nelson’s story as Black, resisting potential whitewashed readings of the story and framing Blackness in a way that resists the most prominent degradations present in white-authored and edited children’s literature of the time. Beyond the implications for white readers of the paper, this framing of Dunbar-Nelson’s characters also suggests the possibility of Black readers of the story in this venue. Nevertheless, even without this illustration, Jimmy might be read as Black, as this editor and/or illustrator likely did in their initial imaginings of this scene. Dunbar-Nelson’s own workings and reworkings of race in the story serve as reminders that the absence of racial markers does not necessarily denote whiteness, and even language around race might be used in various, racialized ways. Her other revisions suggest opportunities to consider and reconsider how she represents these racialized characters.¹⁷

¹⁶ It bears noting that the *Classmate* was not entirely free of racist caricatures. The illustration accompanying a story appearing on this issue’s first page, by Herbert E. Buxton, resembles popular anti-Asian caricatures of the times. This unfortunate choice makes Jackson’s uncaricatured illustration seem even more deliberate in this context.

¹⁷ For the sake of simplicity, we refer here to the two early published versions of Dunbar-Nelson’s story: the 1899 *Chicago Daily News* version and the 1930 *Classmate* version. Where the unpublished variants overlap with these, respectively, our arguments also apply. Further work on these variations might usefully compare the original *Chicago Daily News* publication with the hand-revised version included in Hull’s 1988 edition, as well as comparisons between this and the (assumedly later) *Classmate* version. We hope to continue this work in our digital recovery of both (known) versions of the story that were published during Dunbar-Nelson’s lifetime.

Writing and re-writing boyhood, agency, and race: “The Revenge of James Brown”

In “The Revenge of James Brown,” thirteen-year-old Jimmy Brown, a leader among his peers, initially stands up for his neighborhood by rejecting help from outsiders, but by the story’s end, he has chosen to find a job to help provide for his family. Although the narrative centers on Jimmy’s perspective, his mother plays a pivotal role throughout. She intervenes when necessary, but allows Jimmy to make his own decisions and wisely remains silent when he seeks a way to punish her by choosing to work rather than seek help from the Mission. As Jimmy navigates his relationships with his peers, his mother, and the mission reformers, Dunbar-Nelson stresses both his immaturity and his determination. The story challenges the adultification of Black boys by showcasing Jimmy’s fierce but limited vision; he thinks he is getting revenge on his mother when he is, in fact, doing exactly what she hopes he will do. The title itself is an ironic invitation to acknowledge Jimmy’s status as a young adolescent, since it is the only time in the story he is called by his formal given name. By titling the story “The Revenge of James Brown” instead of “The Revenge of Jimmy Brown,” Dunbar-Nelson dignifies her young protagonist. Yet once the nature of his revenge becomes clear, his endearing lack of judgment makes it impossible to judge him—and his cherished revenge—by adult standards.

The story begins with the narrator declaring, “It was a great day in ‘Steenth Street,” then contrasts the “great rejoicing” of wealthy patrons inside the Mission with the distrust and scorn expressed by the neighborhood outside (136).¹⁸ Thirteen-year-old Jimmy Brown holds the Mission in such contempt that he participates in the harassment and attack of other children who go there for food or warm clothes. But when his youngest brother gets chicken pox while his father is out of work and neglecting his family (drinking in the 1899 version and at a political club in the 1930 version), Jimmy’s mother reaches her limit, and insists that Jimmy go to the Mission for help. When he refuses, she spansks him. Jimmy, humiliated, submits to his mother’s will and solicits help. His brother’s health improves as a result. But Jimmy resolves to defeat the Mission and his mother both—by getting himself a job. Dunbar-Nelson’s narrator explains Jimmy’s ironic thought process: “Like a flash, he comprehended a scheme. He would find some means of keeping his mother from accepting its bounty; he would disgust her, and through her, others, and the mission would fail ignominiously because it would cease to be called upon for aid. The idea of work, a new one, by the way, entered his mind. He would be revenged upon his mother for her weakness” (144). Here, Dunbar-Nelson lifts up Jimmy’s immaturity—he does not understand that his mother, herself, would rather not need the Mission’s help—while also celebrating his agency: he is determined to express his own independence and value.

At the story’s end, Jimmy is delighted with his “revenge” even though the neighborhood boys beat him for his reversal. The narrator notes, in closing, that his mother “did not enlighten Jimmy as to her opinion on the subject” (145). Jimmy ends up working, but he is not an adult, and Dunbar-Nelson’s story insists on his fundamental immaturity, even as it dramatizes his charisma, imagination, and capacity for work. This ironic tale of belligerent leader of a “gang” of children turned family provider introduces virtually all of the collection’s central themes: the lofty, often out-of-touch aspirations of Christian reformers; the agency and resistance of children; and the intellect and power of women and girls.

¹⁸ Unless otherwise indicated, parenthetical page numbers refer to Hull’s edition of “The Revenge of James Brown,” in *The Works of Alice Dunbar-Nelson*, Volume 3.

The question of Jimmy's race in this story reveals Dunbar-Nelson's ambiguities and revisions. Reading Jimmy as a Black boy makes more sense when we take into account the archival evidence of Dunbar-Nelson's revision process, in which she experimented with racial markers that suggest Jimmy as a member of an explicitly racially diverse neighborhood. Beyond its illustration, the 1930 version provides racial markers omitted in the 1899 version. Via these racial references, the narrator repeatedly characterizes 'Steenth Street as explicitly multiracial, describing the Mission's celebratory opening as "packed to overflowing with humanity in various stages of poverty and wealth, in assorted colors and races."¹⁹ In the 1930 *The Classmate*, a skeptical neighborhood resident who observes the opening of the Pure in Heart Mission, questions, "what do they be setting up a mission fur?" and reasons, "Sure it's not for the likes o' me but for n—s and poor folk what wurrks out wot needs it (3)."²⁰ In the autograph manuscript, this slur is crossed out, and the line reads, "Sure it's not me, but them wot wurrks out wot needs it." The same vague, defensive assertion appears in the *Chicago Daily News* version.

In the *Classmate* Jimmy disparages the Mission to his friends through anti-immigrant and anti-Black slurs to describe it as "A Joint where dey gives hand-outs to [Irish, Jewish, Italian, and African Americans] (3)." After using racial and ethnic slurs to characterize these recipients of the Mission's help, he spits, "as he expressed his ultimate disgust to the gang. He was the leader of that gang of underprivileged youngsters of whom it was variously said that they were 'bound for the Island or the chair (3).'" The narrator curiously follows Jimmy's disparagement toward these groups with an extended description of how proud he is to be known as part of a neighborhood that was "notorious as the resort of vice and poverty (3)." It is impossible, however, to take Jimmy's supposedly budding criminality seriously; although the story describes a boy who swaggers and gets into fights, he is mostly talk. This, too, calls into question his use of these slurs, as the accompanying image makes one wonder how we are to understand this. It is quite possible that Dunbar-Nelson may have had no hand in or knowledge of this image before the story's publication. And it is unclear whether the illustrator read the story or was simply given a prompt for his creation, based on a summary of this scene and Dunbar-Nelson's by then recognizable name. But the image also speaks to how readers would have experienced the story in this print venue, complete with its prominent accompanying image of Black children.

A variety of language explicitly referring to Black people recurs in other parts of the unpublished manuscripts and the *Classmate* version. In these, when Jimmy's mother is trying to convince him to seek help at the Mission, she tells him that a nurse had already come by to check on their sick baby: "She's a nice colored girl, an' she washed Buddy, an' give him some medicine—an' she said he needs soup an' milk— (3)" At this point, Jimmy interrupts his mother and uses a racial slur to describe the source of their family's help: "Where you goin' to git it from? Another n—at de mission, huh? (3)" And his mother replies, "Well, they helps." Jimmy's use of this language and his mother's defense of Black people ("they helps") as she also continually names the nurse's race could position his family as white in these versions (3). Notably, Jimmy seems to express anti-Black sentiments, though his mother contradicts him. But if we read Jimmy and his family as Black in light of the *Classmate's*

¹⁹ Page numbers for our discussion of the *Classmate* are taken from Dunbar-Nelson's 1930 publication of the story.

²⁰ While this epithet is spelled out in these versions of the story, we have chosen not to repeat this word here, a choice that follows our own teaching practices. On this choice, see Koritha Mitchell, "The N-Word in the Classroom: Just Say NO," C19 Podcast (Official Podcast of the Society of Nineteenth-Century Americanists) Season 2, Episode 9 (March 2019). <https://soundcloud.com/c19podcast/nword?fbclid=IwAR0svqyoDXlNqoJVJkjsjx5QQ0oYjFodGzJPZvegVCjaLHxUTtbMifJlg9M>.

illustration of a group of dark-skinned boys, readers may have taken this language differently, perhaps reading this as an in-group repetition of the slur, and possibly signaling a similar in-group critique of participation in the mission's work. This reading aligns with the boys' critiques, which extend not only to the Mission's outsiders but also manifest in an attack on one of their peers. They assault Scrappy Franks for having "deserted" the group by accepting the mission's help, the evidence for which is the new woolen comforter he wears around his neck.

Ultimately, Mrs. Brown's view wins out in all versions of the story, since Jimmy's ultimate "revenge" evidences his mother's parenting success. The 1930 *Classmate* also includes a final line with a racial marker omitted from the 1899 *Chicago Daily News* and autograph versions. After the narrator concludes, "As for Mrs. Brown, she was a wise woman, and said nothing to Jimmy of her innermost feelings," the *Classmate's* ending continues: "But her heart breathed a prayer of blessing upon the little colored nurse who had cleared the path before them (3)." This revision then, quietly celebrates not only Jimmy's mother's tactical success, but also her gratitude toward the Black woman who made it possible for her family to receive help. In these versions of the story, it is difficult to tell whether Jimmy and his family are best understood as set in contrast to the neighborhood's Black, Irish, Jewish, and Italian residents or among them. And, although the 1899 *Chicago Daily News* version omits these discussions of race and ethnicity, this absence of racial markers does not simply signal whiteness, but also allows the possibility of Jimmy's belonging to any of the marginalized groups that comprise the neighborhood—including the possibility of Jimmy being read as Black.

Although these revisions deal with specific racial markers, race is not always made apparent in Dunbar-Nelson's fiction. While this has led some scholars to assume whiteness in the absence of clear racial indicators to the contrary, we emphasize the context for understanding Dunbar-Nelson's writing (including the African American periodical publication contexts of some of her writing) to read her characters, rather, who might be read as Black—reflections of the children Dunbar-Nelson herself taught and observed. Scholars including Akasha (Gloria) Hull, Elizabeth Ammons, Kristina Brooks, Pamela Glenn Menke, Elizabeth West, and Thomas Strychacz have acknowledged the more nuanced racial complexity of Dunbar-Nelson's stories.²¹ And elsewhere, Brigitte Fielder and Jean Lutes have discussed the relevance of race to understanding boyhood and masculinity in another of her 'Steenth Street stories, "His Heart's Desire."²² Moreover, Dunbar-Nelson herself centers Blackness in editorial practices that diverge from others' practices of making whiteness the default, assumed position. In her 1920 collection *The Dunbar Speaker and Entertainer*, she marks whiteness, rather than Blackness in her Table of Contents, noting that "The names marked with an asterisk are the names of members of the Caucasian race".²³ This speaks to the racial publics Dunbar-Nelson knew the volume would engage, particularly bearing the name of the early century's most prominent Black poet, Paul Laurence Dunbar. In explicitly Black print venues like this volume and the *AME Church Review*, Blackness might be easily taken as the standard, rather than the exception. Dunbar-Nelson's own name (either as "Mrs. Paul L. Dunbar" in the *Chicago Daily News* or as Alice Dunbar-Nelson in *The Classmate*) might also prompt readers of a piece by a known Black author to similarly center Blackness, rather than to assume the whiteness of her characters when race was not mentioned.

As Caroline Gebhard puts it, Dunbar-Nelson does not simply erase race but "mutes racial markers" in many of her published stories, choosing not to explicitly describe her

²¹ See Ammons 1991; Brooks 1998; Hull 1988; Menke 2002; Strychacz 2008; West 2009.

²² See Fielder 2020b; Lutes 2021.

²³ See Dunbar-Nelson 1920.

characters' racialization in many instances.²⁴ The later revisions of "The Revenge of James Brown" offer insight into that process of muting. In the *Classmate*, the Mission is interracial, "packed to overflowing with humanity ... in assorted colors and races." Jimmy expresses disgust for the Mission by using ethnic and racial slurs for Irish, Italian, and Black people. A "little colored nurse" from the Mission plays a key role by reaching out to Jimmy's mother. After we learn that Jimmy's mother keeps her pleasure over his new job to herself, the narrator adds a final line: "But her heart breathed a prayer of blessing upon the little colored nurse who had cleared the path before them." None of these racial markers survives in the 1899 published story. Nor does the fuller vision of "The Revenge of James Brown," which acts as a gateway to 'Steenth Street, an imagined place that revels in the ironies of childhood in an unjust world. But Dunbar-Nelson was not finished shaping this story, and the published version is not the only context for understanding these characters.

While Dunbar-Nelson planned to open her volume with "The Revenge of James Brown," a fairly light-hearted story about the neighborhood's reaction to the arrival of the Mission, her Table of Contents reveals intentions to close it on a rather grim note, with "Witness for the Defense," a story about a wife who stabs her abusive husband to death while her young daughter looks on, a traumatic incident that nevertheless inspires celebration, not consternation, in the neighborhood. In between these bookends, readers would have stories about an array of the neighborhood's children, treated with similar attention to the nuances of childhood and children's perspectives. The writing that surrounds "The Revenge of James Brown"—both the 11 stories Dunbar-Nelson wrote to follow it and the story's published and unpublished variants—portray Black children with subtlety and grace. The 'Steenth Street stories imagine children in multiple, often contradictory roles: They dote on toys, work for pay, play with friends, care for siblings, angle for attention, learn to sing, get in fights, adopt pets, seek adventure, protect their families, rebel against their families, testify in court, make mistakes, and change their minds. Dunbar-Nelson's stories resist the adultification that has so often harmed Black children, even while they portray the family responsibilities children shoulder and the challenges they face when the adults in their lives cannot provide food, shelter, and stability. In these stories, readers encounter an array of children's experiences and perspectives that constitute evidence of Dunbar-Nelson's attention to children and the consideration of which shifts predominant notions of "early" African American children's literature. Recovering them for a new readership affords the opportunity for useful conversations about the genre and predominant, persisting assumptions about it.

Recovering *The Annals of 'Steenth Street*

The necessity of African American women's literary recovery is clear. It reveals a view of American literary history otherwise obscured. Eric Gardner and Joycelyn Moody explain how "recovering black histories—and especially histories integral to print—offers us a much richer and a more honest sense of American literature and history".²⁵ Recovery projects involving African American women intellectuals, in particular, reveal continuities in discussions of activism, education, and childhood. "The Revenge of James Brown" is just one example showing how Black writers, Black educators, and Black education advocates have refused to ignore Black children's interests and needs. The nuanced picture Dunbar-Nelson paints of her young protagonist shows just one of the ways she (like other African

²⁴ See Gebhard 2016.

²⁵ See Gardner and Moody 2015.

American writers) refused to erase or degrade Black children (as they too often were in popular white representations) but instead treated her young characters with particular attention and care, noting their youthful innocence as well as their intense emotions and aims. This example defies more prominent passive-voice claims that Black children were simply ignored or denigrated and shows instead how they were cared for, empathized with, carefully observed, and loved.

The Taught by Literature team is currently working on a project to recover the ‘Steenth Street stories as a group and to make them freely available with resources for teaching in classrooms for both children and adults. We’ve decided to work on this digital edition of Dunbar-Nelson’s stories in order to collect them together as we believe she intended. And because we regard these stories about childhood as African American children’s literature, we want to make them available and accessible for teaching in a variety of educational contexts.

As we work to recover Dunbar-Nelson’s stories specifically as a Black digital humanities project, we are carefully considering these stories within an ethics of care framework. This includes assessing our own notions of responsibility, which raise questions of both who is doing this work and how. To create our digital edition, we have been considering how Dunbar-Nelson’s story collection might be made available, in which revised versions, and also for whom we recover these stories. Because we intend children—including Black children—to be an audience for Dunbar-Nelson’s work, both in her historical moment and our own, we are working to prioritize this audience in our recovery project. To that end, we are working with educators at the School District of Philadelphia to facilitate professional development sessions on early African American women writers as we work toward the goal of creating a curriculum to accompany Dunbar-Nelson’s Steenth Street stories.

Taught by the Literature’s recovery project has led to a broadening of the project’s mission. While we began with a question (who are we recovering these stories for?) that would inspire us to create a Black digital humanities project, our process for doing this work led us to additional interventions, partnering with K-12 educators and creating additional resources and professional development trainings to make early Black women intellectuals more available and accessible to educators, work that would become the bedrock of our project. Beyond recovery, Barbara McCaskill advocates for a focus on how “the investigative process itself reveals about how to frame and then pursue questions ... how to interpret what we find, and, in the first place, why these mechanisms matter”.²⁶ Knowing how several of Alice Dunbar-Nelson’s stories originally appeared in periodicals aimed at broader publics informs our project’s interest in making these similarly available to twenty-first-century audiences beyond academic institutions. Moreover, these appeared in a decades-long historical context in which Dunbar-Nelson’s writing was not singular, but emerged from a longer history of Black women’s intellectual contributions. Recovering Dunbar-Nelson’s stories for our contemporary audience is part of a larger project to make Black women’s intellectual contributions more visible and accessible.

Dunbar-Nelson left behind one of the most extensive archives of any Black woman of her era, thanks in large part to the loving, meticulous work of her niece, the pioneering librarian Pauline Young, who preserved her aunt’s papers. These archival riches are held by the University of Delaware’s Special Collections. But for archives to grow in meaning and value, they have to be not only created and maintained and used, but also supported, resourced, and promoted. The

²⁶ See McCaskill 2016.

existence of Black women writers' archival records alone does not easily translate into their becoming household names among other U.S. literary figures. In a world in which both whiteness and maleness have been and continue to be over-represented, Black women writers are still undervalued and obscured in our literary history. Dunbar-Nelson and her 'Steenth Street stories present one example of the need to attend more to Black women writers and the ongoing, collective project of recovering their work for our contemporary moment.

The 12 'Steenth Street stories are not easily accessible to readers today. Five of them were included in the three-volume *Works of Alice Dunbar-Nelson*, edited by Akasha Hull in 1988. This remains the most complete collection of Dunbar-Nelson's work to date. These volumes were published by Oxford University Press as part of the extensive Schomburg Library of Nineteenth-Century Black Women Writers, edited by Henry Louis Gates, Jr. These volumes are costly (each is listed from \$115 to \$150 on the Oxford University Press website), and used copies have only limited availability. Only some of Dunbar-Nelson's short fiction is available in other accessible forms, such as via the African American Women Writers of the Nineteenth Century Digital Schomburg collection. While this digital collection includes some of Dunbar-Nelson's published work, the 'Steenth Street stories are not available here. To our knowledge, the entire collection has not been gathered anywhere. We began work on the 'Steenth Street Project because we want to make these stories more widely available and to put them into closer conversation with one another in the ways that Dunbar-Nelson herself seems to have intended.

Our work is part of a larger project to "recover" early African American women's literature—to make this writing available to our own contemporary audience. Efforts to recover both women writers and African American writers have been ongoing projects for scholars of nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century literary history. Although far too many scholars have done ground-breaking recovery work for us to name them here, the work left to be done is massive. It is also a pressing and exciting scholarship, though not without challenges. As scholars, including Karen Kilcup, Pattie Cowell, Jean Lutes, Andrea Williams, Susan Tomlinson, and Michelle Burnham have noted, even writings that get recovered are often obscured again. Writers who are made visible are often re-abandoned. Anthologists may not incorporate them while prioritizing a white, male canon; editors may not recognize a viable market for the republication of academic or trade editions of their work; academics and other educators may not do the work of incorporating unfamiliar texts into our courses. Hull's three-volume collection was an incredible undertaking, and these have been very important for generations of researchers. But much of Dunbar-Nelson's work has still not been known and available to a wider readership.

The difficulties of recovery work are not simply evidence of individual failings but indicative of systemic challenges. Lacking the support of white publishers, many nineteenth-century African American writers self-published their work. Much of early African American literature was circulated in Black periodicals, which often struggled financially, not having the same scale of economic support as those that were backed by white wealth. Even as they themselves created literature, Black authors—including Alice Dunbar-Nelson—often had to build and maintain the infrastructures to make this literature available to the public. Black literary recovery projects are extensions of the work that Black writers have, collectively, done all along.

Additionally, the recovery of Black women writers cannot be divorced from histories of devaluing their work under the influence of both racism and sexism. It is common to see this work deemed unimportant; these writers are dismissed because they are not already more

widely known. Erasing early Black women writers becomes easier when periodization for popular notions of African American literature far too often begin with the Harlem Renaissance that emerges in the 1920s. Black women writers are also subjected to appropriation rather than responsible engagement. For example, a recent project that attempted to reclaim some of Alice Dunbar-Nelson's fiction was fraught with factual errors resulting from sloppy research and a seeming failure to engage responsibly with library archivists and content expert scholars.²⁷ Recovering African American women writers requires expertise and is fairly impossible without collaboration among researchers and across fields and institutions.

Even when recovery projects are responsible and successful, this work is still under-recognized and underfunded in our academic institutions. Even some colleges and universities that claim to care about the public humanities often fail to offer training to graduate students who want to pursue such projects or to encourage faculty by adequately recognizing this work for tenure and promotion. As a result, this work may be relegated to the status of an extra side project that scholars may do only after they have accomplished other, more transparently acknowledged and rewarded work. This makes recovery projects difficult for scholars to pursue unless they hold exceptionally secure positions, which are increasingly rare. Among these systemic challenges, we want to acknowledge the exceptional material conditions of our work, which we are grateful to have supported in these early stages and which are necessary for its continuation. Our first significant source of support for our project was the Idol Family Fellows Program of the McNulty Institute at Villanova University. We note the need for more programs like this one, which is specifically designed to support collaborative work that engages stakeholders outside the academic community and seeks to make a broader social impact. More recently, we received funding via a planning grant from the National Historical Publications and Records Commission of the National Archives. We acknowledge the significance of this kind of federal research support for digital humanities projects like ours.

We need this kind of public humanities work now more than ever. Our current era is experiencing general defunding of the humanities, widespread and dramatic cuts to federal research funding, attempts to disallow research that centers people other than white men, attempts to remove or ban books from school curricula and libraries, and ongoing attacks on Black studies education and—effectively—on Black children. Dunbar-Nelson's stories evidence the long history of African American attention to children. As we make these stories available to future generations of readers, we honor the work of Black women educators, and we affirm the hope Dunbar-Nelson made manifest in the 'Steenth Street stories, which portray Black children and their families with courage, imagination, and care.

Brigitte Fielder is a Professor in the College of Letters and Science at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, where she researches and teaches on African American literature and other literature of the long nineteenth century. She is the author of *Relative Races: Genealogies of Interracial Kinship in Nineteenth-Century America* (Duke UP, 2020) and a co-founder of Taught by Literature, a Black digital humanities project working to make early Black women intellectual's work and teaching materials available for students of all ages. Fielder is also the co-editor of *J19: The Journal of Nineteenth-Century Americanists*.

²⁷ Academic responses to the Women's Prize for Fiction's Reclaim Her Name project (sponsored by Bailey's Liqueur and apparently no longer publicly available on the Internet) call out the general lack of care with which the included authors had been treated. On Alice Dunbar-Nelson's inclusion in this wayward project, specifically, see Zagarell 2020. Scholars including Lois Brown, Brigitte Fielder, Xine Yao, and Ellen Gruber Garvey also speak to the problematics of treating women of color authors without the requisite academic care. See Brown 2020; Fielder 2020a; Garvey 2020; Yao 2020.

Jean Lutes is the Luckow Family Endowed Chair, a Professor, and the Chair of the English Department at Villanova University. She is a co-founder of Taught by Literature.

Denise Burgher is the Senior Team Leader for curriculum and community engagement at the Colored Conventions Project, where she co-directs Douglass Day with Jim Casey at the Center for Black Digital Research at Penn State. Her work has appeared in *Legacy*, *The Collective Wisdom Handbook*, and in numerous public venues. She is a member of Just Teach One and is a co-founder and co-director of the Black digital humanities project, Taught by Literature, which focuses on the work of Alice Dunbar Nelson and her literary contemporaries.

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