***When Malindy Sings:* a meditation on sound and silence**

The poem *When Malindy Sings* (hereafter, *Malindy)* by Paul Laurence Dunbar is an ode to the voice of the eponymous character, a voice more beautiful than all other sounds both natural and man-made. *Malindy* is a song of praise to Dunbar’s mother Matilda and to the centrality of the black female voice in the African American experience. Forty-three words in this nine-stanza poem signify sound, while few appeal to the other senses. In this close reading, I will focus on the bracketing stanzas at the beginning and end and investigate the poet's calls for silence that reside there. *Malindy*'s bouncy iambic rhythm and colloquial tone belie the density of ideas in the poem, including the poet’s message about his struggle to be heard. I propose that this tension, between the celebration of sound and the imposition of silence, signifies the poet’s battle to construct a poetic voice that contains both African American and European literary elements, and that mends the discursive dismemberment thrust upon him by his social context.

As a black man who wanted to be a writer in late 19th century America, Dunbar sought a way to weave the sounds and symbols of his African American cultural heritage into his poetry, and still achieve recognition of his mastery from both white and black readers. How was he, in his time and place, to meld his identity as a son of once-enslaved parents to his vision of himself as a literary figure? Dunbar straddled the period between the plantation tradition (which idealized the Old South and slavery) and the agrarian tradition (which ignored slavery completely), and preceded the flowering of the Harlem Renaissance in the 1920s[[1]](#footnote-0). Put another way, he was not sheltered in a movement, and was improvising a style in a more or less solitary fashion. At Dayton’s prestigious Central High School, where Dunbar was the only black student, he distinguished himself academically.[[2]](#footnote-1) “[Y]oung Paul Dunbar possessed an inquisitive mind, keen powers of observation, a sense of the significant…[and] had a sensitive ear for language, a large vocabulary, and a facility in written expression.” He was “an introspective boy keenly aware of his racial as well as his intellectual difference.”[[3]](#footnote-2) When Dunbar wrote *Malindy* (published in *Major and Minors* in 1896) his career was on the rise, but he had yet to find a way to make a living with his writing, and was dependent on financial contributions from sponsors. Important white critics assessed his “standard English” works as unremarkable[[4]](#footnote-3), and black critics sometimes censured his dialect works as a betrayal to his race.[[5]](#footnote-4) Unable to make a living from his writing or to get a job more suited to his education and ability, Dunbar wrote poetry inside the “cage” of the elevator that he operated as his day job, and later wrote novels, songs, and plays. Being black, educated and able to write in many voices and formats created tension for the poet, who was “always at some pains to show his range at a time when black writers were expected to write only about black subject and black people.”[[6]](#footnote-5)

*Malindy* has a consistent rhyme scheme and regular meter that's sing-able as a blues, and the speaker presents his remarks about Malindy’s via interactions with other characters; but while a humorous tone predominates in the opening stanzas, the poet is signifying a reality that is far from comic:

G’way and quite dat noise, Miss Lucy--

Put that music book away;

What’s de use to keep o tryin’?

Ef you practice twell you’re gray,

You cain’t sta’t no notes a-flyin’

Lak de ones dat rants and rings

F’om de kitchen to de big woods

When Malindy sings.[[7]](#footnote-6)

The speaker cheekily tells Miss Lucy to be quiet because her singing is unharmonious, a “noise". Perhaps Miss Lucy is the white Mistress on the plantation and the speaker can afford his impertinence because he’s young. Malindy sings in the kitchen where she works for Miss Lucy, but she also sings in “de big woods”, the place to which an enslaved person would go to escape, to mourn, or to gather with community. Her ranting and ringing notes that go “a-flyin’” suggest passion, content, and purpose. The black voice is not an entertainment, it is “a site of the active production of meaning”[[8]](#footnote-7), a straining towards useful expression and, perhaps, freedom. Malindy’s voice cannot be imprisoned on the page, nor silenced.

In the second and third verses, Dunbar inverts the racist “othering” of the black body by white people when his speaker tells Miss Lucy that her body is simply not constructed for singing:

You ain’t got de nachel o’gans  
 Fu’ to make de soun’ come right,  
You ain’t got de tu’ns an’ twistin’s  
 Fu’ to make it sweet an’ light.  
Tell you one thing now, Miss Lucy,  
 An’ I ‘m tellin’ you fu’ true,  
When hit comes to raal right singin’,  
 ‘T ain’t no easy thing to do.  
  
Easy ‘nough fu’ folks to hollah,  
 Lookin’ at de lines an’ dots,  
When dey ain’t no one kin sence it,  
 An’ de chune comes in, in spots;  
But fu’ real malojous music,  
 Dat jes’ strikes yo’ hea’t and clings,  
Jes’ you stan’ an’ listen wif me  
 When Malindy sings.

Dunbar would seem to be trying to “dismantle the master’s house using the master’s tools”[[9]](#footnote-8) when he asserts that Miss Lucy's white body does not possess the "nachel o'gans" to make “real malojous music / Dat jes’ strikes yo’ hea’t and clings”. But Dunbar is not simply inverting racism: the black body—objectified, demeaned, tortured, and seen as problematic by whites from slavery days until today—is superior to the white body as a vehicle to produce song precisely because it has been forged by the agony of slavery: the “tu’uns and twistin’s” that the poet ascribes to Malindy’s vocal technique could also describe the motion of a lynched body hanging from a tree. It could also describe discursive agility the poet himself demonstrates in the delivery of his message. The speaker assumes an emphatic tone by twice repeating “You ain’t got”, and then goes on to insist that he will “tell you one thing” and “I’m tellin’ you”. The speaker is “telling”: he claims authority over his language and his evaluation of Malindy’s song, the power of which emerges from a shared history of suffering that is not only not written down in Miss Lucy’s “book” but is also incomprehensible to the white woman, and not reproducible by her. He ends with a command: “Jes you stand and listen wif me / When Malindy sings”, thus demanding respect from Miss Lucy for Malindy.

Dunbar uses humor and eye-dialect in *When Malindy Sings* to mask radical messages that would have been dangerous to write (or say) in “standard” English. But the sound of the language is also fundamental to the poem’s ability to convey a sound that’s expressive and true to the poem’s subject: the black voice. In 1922 in his *Preface to the Book of American Negro Poetry*, James Weldon Johnson compared Dunbar’s poetic achievements to those of Robert Burns, who “took the strong dialect of his people and made it classic; Dunbar took the humble speech of his people and in it wrought music.”[[10]](#footnote-9) Despite acknowledging Dunbar’s achievement in the use of dialect, however, Johnson claimed that it was inadvisable for black poets to use it in the Harlem Renaissance period, because of “the limitations on Negro dialect imposed by the fixing effects of long convention”, i.e., white-imposed minstrelsy. Johnson also observed that dialect didn’t suit the symbols and aspirations of the growing black urban population, nor its writers’ search for a new voice, perhaps one that saw itself as more allied with jazz than spirituals. And yet, Henry Louis Gates notes that among “[Dunbar’s] most frequently anthologized—”anthologized” by memorization, by word of mouth, by speakers”[[11]](#footnote-10)—are his dialect poems, in part because of their charm and veracity. Surely *Malindy* in standard English would lose much of its meaning, appeal and atmosphere.

The seventh stanza of the poem jumps off the page as the only one the poet personalizes with the pronoun “I’ and the only one that does not end with Malindy’s name; here, the speaker seems to conduct an interior monologue that extends to our ears whose purpose is to emphatically reclaim his right to the voice of his muse:

Who dat says dat humble praises  
 Wif de Master nevah counts?  
Heish yo’ mouf, I hyeah dat music,  
 Ez hit rises up an’ mounts--  
Floatin’ by de hills an’ valleys,  
 Way above dis buryin’ sod,  
Ez hit makes its way in glory  
 To de very gates of God!

He’s left Mistress Lucy behind, and now evokes “humble praises” that rise up to the ultimate Master: God. The staccato delivery of the third line, “Heish yo’ mouf, I hyeah dat music”, brooks no dissent. Now, instead of silencing Miss Lucy, the poet makes all of us shut up, not so that he might hear the music, but rather *because he already does*. The poet claims himself and his sound, and he commands his critics and readers to quieten while he exalts Malindy’s song. Here, the speaker’s tone is authoritative and mature.

In the last stanza, Dunbar’s speaker subsides to a more subdued and conversational mode, but he is no longer the cheeky fellow of the beginning of the poem; rather, he is older, more subdued, and in his own environment as he hints at a freedom not yet achieved:

Towsah, stop dat ba’kin’, hyeah me!  
 Mandy, mek dat chile keep still;  
Don’t you hyeah de echoes callin’  
 F’om de valley to de hill?  
Let me listen, I can hyeah it,  
 Th’oo de bresh of angel’s wings,  
Sof’ an’ sweet, “Swing Low,   
 Sweet Chariot,"  
Ez Malindy sings.

This older man accompanied by wife, child and dog, now has to listen hard now to hear Malindy’s voice: time has passed, slavery is over, and perhaps Malindy has passed away; but he can still hear her voice “th’oo de bresh of angel’s wings”. No longer imperative, he pleads “*Let* me listen”. Malindy no longer “rants and rings”, rather she sings “Swing Low, Sweet Chariot”, a song signifying to black Americans the underground railroad and escape to freedom. Slavery may be over, the poet tells us, but he is tired and on the lookout for “angels” who will see him and his song to a place of free expression.

Crafting quality literature from the given materials of one’s life is a trial for all writers—we seek acceptance from a literary-academic establishment that seeks confirmation of its own theories, and an unfeeling capitalist marketplace—but Dunbar’s artist’s path was particularly fraught. His black skin, multivalent texts, and the transitional nature of the times in which he lived all presented unusually burdensome challenges to the artist. The voice of the Mother is unconditional love and the ordinary comforts of life; for Dunbar, however, Mother is also the insistence on education, the melody of loss, and the rhythm of suffering, faith, yearning, and sorrow. He turns the Mother's voice into a meditation on his own poetic voice, one to which he at first commands us and finally entreats us to listen. Elise Boddie, writing recently on the tragic and unpunished murder of Philando Castile by police in Minnesota, writes: “In these supposedly more modern times, the right to the ordinary isn’t denied just by rogue police officers or racists...The problem also surfaces in the indignity of having to justify oneself against presumptions of wrongdoing and illegitimacy.”[[12]](#footnote-11) The wistfulness of the last stanza of *Malindy* speaks to this indignity felt by the poet whose ability to set down the authentic music he hears in his own head is constrained by political and social forces beyond his control: “Let me listen, I can hyeah it, / Th’oo de bresh of angel’s wings”. In a life beset with difficulties and cut short at age thirty-three, Dunbar did not achieve what he had envisioned; but if we read him carefully, we can hear his voice. To hear Dunbar's voice and the voices of contemporary African Americans, we will have to learn to be quiet.

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1. Martin & Primeau. [↑](#footnote-ref-0)
2. Martin & Primeau [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
3. Braxton, p. xi [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
4. William Dean Howells in *Harper's Weekly*, June 27, 1896, wrote that there was "nothing especially notable about" in Dunbar's "standard" English verse, "except for the Negro face of the author." Braxton, p. xvi. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
5. Influential black critic Charles T. Davis, though not contemporaneous with Dunbar, wrote that the poet "never fully understood that he had to make a decision", and that "the choice of voice is finally an act of will." [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
6. Martin & Primeau, p. 5 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
7. Dunbar, Braxton, p. 82 [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
8. Griffin quoting Lindon Barrett, *Blackness and Value*, p. 76 [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
9. Audre Lorde, calling on feminists to recognize discriminatory practices learned from the patriarchy, wrote "The master's tools will never dismantle the master's house." [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
10. WHERE [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
11. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. *In His Own Voice,* Woodward & Primeau, p. xi [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
12. “Philando Castile and the Terror of an Ordinary Day”, Elise C. Boddie, *The New York Times*, June 20, 2017. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)