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**Enslavement to Philanthropy, Freedom from Heredity:
Amelia E. Johnson's and Paul Laurence Dunbar's
Uses and Misuses
of Sentimentalism and Naturalism**

Abstract: The article analyzes dialogical relations between Amelia E. Johnson's *Clarence and Corinne, or God's Way* (1890), an evangelical conversion narrative of the Black Woman's Era, and *The Uncalled* (1898), the first novel of Paul Laurence Dunbar. As both texts feature racially indeterminate protagonists, draw on the drunkard's story, are set in small northern towns, and were published by African American writers within the space of less than a decade, they encourage an intertextual reading. *Clarence and Corinne* and *The Uncalled* recast the themes of reform, uplift, and charity and the ways in which these functioned in the sentimental and naturalist aesthetics. Representing the tension between the lower class and its reformers, Dunbar's and Johnson's narratives embrace social determinism and effectiveness of reform work yet they also demonstrate the limitations of sentimental empathy and problematize the opposition between the benevolent agency of the reformer and the helplessness of the brutalized victim.

Keywords: the Black Woman's Era, naturalism, sentimentalism, temperance, conversion narrative

A genuine attachment had sprung up between the lonely old
woman and the friendless boy.
—Amelia E. Johnson, *Clarence and Corinne* (146)

The man stood smiling down into the child's face: the boy,
smiling back, tightened his grasp on the big hand. They were
friends from that moment, Eliphalet Hodges and Fred.
—Paul Lawrence Dunbar, *The Uncalled* (42)

The texts that I will analyze in this article, Amelia E. Johnson's *Clarence and Corinne, or God's Way* (1890) and Paul Laurence Dunbar's *The Uncalled* (1898), were published by influential African American writers, yet they are largely absent from canonical debates about American fin-de-siècle literature. The former is an evangelical conversion narrative and has been acknowledged as a representative

of black appropriations of the sentimental tradition (Tate 11-12), and the latter has recently been positioned in the American canon of naturalism as a text that “probes the issues of spirituality, heritage, destiny, and the environment to explain social marginality and moral turpitude” (Jarrett 290). I will argue that the two novels do not ideally fit either sentimental or naturalist conventions but rather draw on both of them simultaneously, and thus they are an apt case study of the overlapping spaces between the two aesthetics. Furthermore, the many parallels between the two texts suggest that, in his first novel, Dunbar enters a dialogue with the Black Woman’s Era, black women’s outburst of literary activity represented by Johnson, which points to the dominant position of this body of African American writing at the turn of the twentieth century.

Although naturalism and sentimentalism are conventionally perceived as two distinct, almost oppositional traditions, frequently strongly gendered as masculine and feminine respectively (Williamson 7), they share significant features. Thematically, both are primarily interested in the underprivileged, and both highlight the significance of external influences in their narratives. Structurally, their sensational plotlines, abounding in coincidences, have been defined against the expectations for verisimilitude and plausibility set by literary realism.¹ *Clarence and Corinne* and *The Uncalled* exemplify these general similarities between sentimentalism and naturalism as well as their more nuanced shared concerns, such as representations of social reform and intemperance. Dunbar’s and Johnson’s texts, however, go beyond just exhibiting parallels between naturalism and sentimentalism. As a result of their indebtedness to both traditions, they recast them in meaningful ways. In both novels, the protagonists come from the underprivileged class and are orphaned at the beginning of the novel, but none is burdened with the naturalist plot of decline (Howard 142). Dunbar’s work opens with a depiction of a lower-class neighborhood, and characteristically for naturalism, it is interpolated with philosophical enunciations about natural instincts that are suppressed by culture. Yet, it avoids typical naturalist pessimism, as the main character, Fred Brent, manages to transcend both his biological heredity of alcoholic parents and the inhibiting middle-class conditioning of his adoptive milieu. Analogously, Johnson’s text focuses on children who emerge from a drunkard’s home. Even though the detailed portrayal of the protagonists’ family dwelling highlights its meaningful impact on Clarence’s and Corinne’s lives, they succeed in going beyond the expectations set up for them by the logic of social Darwinism. The euphoric endings of the narratives largely stem from their residual sentimental optimism regarding social change, which is guaranteed by genteel identification and empathy with the oppressed as well as narrative coincidences that reunite broken families.

On the other hand, both texts undercut the image of the benevolent agent

1 For analyses of sentimentalism in naturalist novels, see Jennifer Fleissner, *Women, Compulsion, Modernity: The Moment of American Naturalism*, and Amy Kaplan, *The Social Construction of American Realism*.

of uplift. The novels strategically use the metaphors of slavery to depict the power of the newly adopted environment of respectable middle-class homes rather than to represent the force of biological heredity. Politically, their privileging of social rather than biological determinism supports the belief in the effectiveness of reform work and social transformation yet by representing the charitable guardians as enslavers, they complicate the sentimental discourse of empathy and uplift and problematize the opposition between the benevolent agency of the reformer and the helplessness of the brutalized victim. When such a blend of naturalism and sentimentalism in the novels is read in the context of the racial politics of the Nadir, it successfully balances the hope for change of the Jim Crow regime with attention to the structural conditions of the oppressed black minority.

Freedom from Intemperance

One of the points of intersection between naturalism and sentimental reform fiction is their preoccupation with alcohol use and intemperance. In naturalism, alcohol highlights human powerlessness, whereas in sentimentalism, it serves to construct images of victimhood and thus to increase its affective force. This theme is also central for *Clarence and Corinne, or God's Way* and *The Uncalled* as both works employ children of drunkards as their protagonists. An analysis of intemperance in the novels may shed light on another significant characteristic shared by Johnson's and Dunbar's texts, namely, their racially indefinite characters. The racial indefiniteness of the protagonists and their intemperate parents can be read as a strategy that distances the narratives from the contemporary retrogressionist images of black drinking. As Claudia Tate demonstrates, the rise of Jim Crow regime was accompanied with "the social theory... termed 'retrogressionism,'" according to which "the (alleged) sexual excesses of the recently emancipated [African Americans] were the result of their unrestrained retrogression into savagery" (10). This ideology was instrumental in the escalation of anti-black terrorism—white-on-black lynching and rape—at the turn of the twentieth century. Retrogressionism neatly merged with a strand of temperance rhetoric that employed racialized images of alcohol use. As Sherri Broder argues, "[a]lthough temperance advocates used the term [brute] to refer to all men who abused their families by their addiction to alcohol, by the late nineteenth century the brute had become a short-hand for immigrant and African American men" (100).² The black brute who cannot restrain his passions and appetites became a staple image of retrogressionist mythology.

This controlling image of black intemperance can be illustrated with a short but representative quote from Thomas W. Dixon's *The Leopard's Spots* (1902), a classic of retrogressionist literature, which depicts an African American soldier

2 For a more detailed reading of race in *Clarence and Corinne*, see Anna Pochmara "Tropes of Temperance, Specters of Naturalism: Amelia E. Johnson's *Clarence and Corinne*."

disrupting a wedding ceremony to kidnap the white bride: “The burly figure of a big negro trooper from a company stationed in the town stood before them. His face was in a broad grin, and his eyes bloodshot with whiskey. He brought his musket down on the floor with a bang” (125). The grotesque characterization of the figure is deeply related to his prior alcohol use: the large mouth dominates his face in an uncontrolled smile, and his red eyes lend it a threatening edge. A less explicit, but largely analogous, image can be found in a naturalist classic (Pizer 337), Theodore Dreiser’s “Nigger Jeff” (1901). Dreiser, even if he was not the loudest champion of racial equality and integration, definitely was not an explicit advocate of retrogressionism either; in his articles, he argued that “there is room for a black republic or a black empire,” and many African Americans evidence “intellectual power” (*Political Writings* 33). Yet the text’s eponymous character is referred to as a “groveling, foaming *brute*” (44; emphasis added) and throughout the story is depicted as a dehumanized, animalistic, and grotesque. Lynched for accosting a white girl, he explains that “[he] didn’t go to do it. [He] didn’t mean to dis time. [He] was just drunk” (43-44), which positions alcohol at the center of the scene. Donald Pizer, discussing the text in a formalist way, disregards the factor of race and argues that Jeff simply represents sexual desire, “a dominant, uncontrollable force in almost all of Dreiser’s principal male characters” (336). Yet although “sexual desire may not lead to the destruction of such a figure as Frank Cowperwood” (Pizer 336), Jeff is tortured and killed because his act is perceived as an example of deeply racialized retrogressionist mythology, not a result of a universal human or male desire. Both Dixon’s black soldier and Dreiser’s Jeff represent uncontrolled desires: drinking both evidences their lack of restraint and further increases their indulgence. Thus, written in the context of the black Nadir, Johnson’s and Dunbar’s works dissociate themselves from such dominant retrogressionist images of blackness through the elimination of racial markers.

By choosing racially ambiguous characters, Johnson and Dunbar avoid the retrogressionist connotations in their depictions of alcohol use, but they also depart from the traditional, racially unmarked temperance rhetoric, closely related to the sentimental tradition, which is examined by Elaine Parsons in her study *Manhood Lost: Fallen Drunkards and Redeeming Women in the Nineteenth-Century United States* (2003). In the traditional drunkard narrative as defined by Parsons, the enslaved drunkard is “a particularly promising young man,” who falls because of “external influences” (11); he is tempted by older men or by palatial urban saloons. Thus, in a direct contrast to the drunken brute of retrogressionism, he is cast as a victim, not an aggressor, and evokes the reader’s sympathy, not fear or outrage. One of the central metaphors of this discourse was “slave to the bottle,” which identified intemperance with slavery and mobilized an analogous affect to the sympathy for the enslaved evoked in abolitionist discourse. Even though its use goes back to the antebellum days, as Parsons observes, it “continued well after emancipation, even to the end of the century” (28). In the late 1800s, the sentimental metaphor of enslavement

to one's appetite began to resonate with the emergence of naturalist determinism. Determinist skepticism regarding human volition was largely analogous to the sentiments expressed in temperance rhetoric. Hence, although devoid of the affective excess that characterizes sentimentalism, naturalist denial of free will largely overlaps with the rhetoric of enslavement and victimhood in reform fiction.

In contrast to the hegemonic drunkard narrative, neither Dunbar's nor Johnson's novel uses the metaphor of slavery to depict intemperance. Furthermore, both avoid sentimental empathy for the inebriate as neither of the drunkard fathers is "a promising young man." In fact, the reader is unable to identify with them as they are hardly given any background history. At the beginning of each text, they strongly remind of the drunken brute, though neither is represented as ethnically or racially marked. In Johnson's narrative, James Burton's presence is first visible in the result of his intoxicated behavior: his wife's "swollen eye" suggests that he has been a violent brute (7). Subsequently, Mr. Burton disappears from the novel and is not heard of until the last but one chapter entitled "Reunion," when his death is reported in papers. In *The Uncalled*, Tom Brent is explicitly introduced in a dialogue as "a brute" who used to give his wife "sich beatin's... when he was in liquor you never heerd tell of" so she has divorced him (6). He reappears as a reformed temperance activist to die just before the narrative's ending. Thus, the drunkards are largely erased from the plots. Despite their absence, they perform a significant function: throughout the novels, due to the dominance of social Darwinism and eugenics, their haunting images determine society's attitudes to and expectations for their children, especially sons. As the young protagonists struggle to separate from their heritage and all emerge triumphant, Johnson and Dunbar undermine the theory of hereditary determinism and the idea that "blood will tell" (Dunbar 69). The ending of *The Uncalled*, as Gene Jarrett argues, "resists portraying Fred, and even his father, as insurmountably degenerate" (293). *Clarence and Corinne* is less optimistic in regard to Mr. Burton, yet it also leaves some hope for his reformation in the form of his deathbed confession: "He expressed sorrow for his misspent life, but laid all the blame on whisky" (178). Such ambivalent closures—in contrast to the final destruction by alcohol or complete redemption that characterize drunkard narratives—do not offer easy sympathy for the inebriate and do not position him as a victim. At the same time, they express the belief in change and transformation, which is central to the logic of the novels.

Dunbar's *The Uncalled*, apart from revising the drunkard narrative in its plot, also offers an implicit metatextual commentary on temperance discourse and sentimentalism. Its young protagonist, Fred Brent, exposes the paradox of sympathy for reformed drunkards. When thinking about his father's conversion, he cannot forget about his unreformed past: "Tom Brent, temperance advocate, sometime drunkard and wife-beater" (223). Fred is outraged that "his father, after having led the life he had, should make capital out of relating it" (228). As a former minister, in his divagations, he refers to the biblical rhetoric but rather than embrace it, he challenges

its logic: "Of course they tell us that there is more joy over the one lamb that is found than over the ninety and nine that went not astray; it puts rather a high premium on straying" (230). The novel enables Fred to vent his anger at the father, which is much more elaborately depicted than their understated reconciliation preceding the death of old Tom Brent. Father's homecoming is important for Fred because he is able to tell his father that he has ruined his life and "left [him] a heritage of shame and evil" (237). In contrast to anger, forgiveness does not come easily: "Could he forgive him? Could he forget all that he had suffered and would yet suffer on this man's account?" (237). Only the moral suasion of his adoptive father Eliphalet enables Fred to say, "I forgive you, father" (237). Thus *The Uncalled* enters a dialogue with the sentimental sympathy for the drunkard in temperance rhetoric both by revising the plot of the temperance tale and by an explicit rhetorical attack against it in Fred's internal monologue, focusing on anger rather than forgiveness.

There is one more way in which Dunbar rewrites the drunkard story, for which "the maleness of the subject" was central (Parsons 21). Even though the inebriate father is the dominant image haunting Fred in Dunbar's novel, the text represents also his mother as intemperate. Strongly resembling the mother of Stephen Crane's *Maggie*, rarely sober, "Margaret had never been a particularly neat housewife" (6), and her house is "miserably dirty" and dilapidated (6). An image of female drinking is also repeated towards the end, during a temperance meeting, where the audience listens to "experiences from women whose husbands had been drunkards and from husbands whose wives had been similarly afflicted" (218). Thus the text problematizes the easy identification of intemperance with masculinity. The peculiar gender equality parallels the lack of racial markers in the novel. When read in the context of determinist philosophy and eugenic discourse, *The Uncalled's* downplaying of race or gender markers deemphasizes the significance of internal, biological, and hereditary factors. Moreover, as men can also be victims of their wives' intemperance, the text further challenges the correlation between black masculinity, the stereotypical drunken brute, and its white female victims.

There is one more way in which the two novels undermine the notion of hereditary intemperance and the determinist force of "demon drink." Neither text shows any moments when the children of drunkards are drawn to drinking although sons in both works migrate to the city and are exposed to its mythical temptations. Their behavior stands in stark contrast both to the sentimental drunkard narrative and to the naturalist classics dealing with the notion of alcohol use, such as Crane's *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets* (1893) and Jack London's *John Barleycorn* (1913), whose young characters enter saloons at the first invitation. London's autobiographical persona states that "here was John Barleycorn, prevalent and accessible everywhere in the community": "I found saloons, on highway and byway, up narrow alleys and on busy thoroughfares, bright-lighted and cheerful, warm in winter, and in summer dark and cool" (953). More figuratively, in *Maggie*, "the open mouth of a saloon call[s] seductively to passengers to enter" (30): a female anthropomorphization

of a barroom lures its male victims in the dark street of the city. In Dunbar's and Johnson's texts, the protagonists easily avoid the seductive calling of saloons and accessible alcohol. In *Cincinnati*, Dunbar's Fred is "surprised and sickened" (203), when he sees children fetching beer for their parents or "a mother holding a glass of beer to her little one's lips" (203), and he does not enter a beer garden, when his roommate wants to introduce him to city life. Analogously, Johnson's Clarence, after he moves to the city, refuses to join his friends "in their nightly frolics" despite their "calling him names and poking fun at him" (82). Thus, the black novels balance the attention to the meaningful impact of the social context with the characters' self-determination and volition. The use of the intemperate parents helps them underline the possibility to transcend biological heritage, yet they also portray the difficult struggle against the eugenic logic that is all-pervasive in late nineteenth-century U.S. society. Whereas the metaphor of slavery was used to talk about intemperance at the time, Dunbar and Johnson use intemperance to talk about the powerful impact of social expectations rooted in eugenic thinking and the possibility of self-determined action and advancement. Images of slavery are reserved in both texts for a different theme.

Slaves to Charity

In Parson's analysis, "slaves to the bottle" are complemented with "redeeming women" who reform them. Both Dunbar's and Johnson's works use metaphors of and allusions to slavery, yet these do not concern intemperance but the female figure who charitably takes over the control of the drunkard's broken home. In Dunbar's text, Fred is adopted by strict unmarried Hester Prime and forced by her to enter the ministry. The stifling religiosity and discipline of his guardian is represented as analogous to slavery and bondage. At some point, he rebels and decides to leave his new family. Fred announces then that he is "going to spend the first few days just in getting used to being free" (194) to which Miss Hester bitterly responds that he "think[s] that [he has] been a slave" (194). Even though he objects, his later thoughts on the powerful impact of religious education actually reinforce the simile of enslavement: "He had hated the severe discipline of his youth, and had finally rebelled against it and renounced its results as far as they went materially. This he had thought to mean his *emancipation*" (209). Thinking about Hester Prime's training, Fred uses vivid metaphors of bondage, such as "a chain that galled his flesh" (57), "iron bands" (209), or a "yoke whose burden he hated he was placing about his own neck" (210). Even away from her, he feels "bound, irrevocably bound" (170). "He had run away from the sound of 'right' and 'duty,' but had not escaped their power" (210). Hence the rigid religiosity and controlling influence of Miss Hester are represented as analogous to slavery and antithetical to freedom and growth. These images interestingly resonate with the representation of the guardian of Corinne, the girl protagonist from Johnson's novel. As I have demonstrated elsewhere, Corinne, the daughter of the drunkard is treated by Miss Penrose as a slave ("Tropes" 55).

She is “overworked and underfed,” Miss Penrose “pays her no wages,” and the girl is confined to the space of the household. Thus, in both texts, genteel agents of uplift are represented as slave owners.

Additionally, there are many more detailed parallels between the two guardians. Both are referred to as “stern,” and their judgmental perspective on the lower class is highlighted. Just as Johnson’s Miss Penrose cannot understand how lower-class people “could be so *shiftless*” (22-23; emphasis added), Miss Prime’s voice is “a trumpet of scathing invective against the *shiftlessness*” of the “denizens of the poorer quarter” (34; emphasis added); she concludes that Fred’s mother “ought n’t never to ‘a left her husband” and “the child is better off without her example” (7-8; emphasis added). In the emergent eugenic rhetoric, shiftlessness, next to crime and disease, was a code word of racial and class difference. As Robin D. G. Kelley shows in a chapter tellingly entitled “Shiftless of the Word Unite,” the notion of shiftlessness was central in what he calls the “Cult of True Sambohood,” an ideology that soothed white anxieties about black presence at the labor market (21-22). Accordingly, the use of the term by the two white female guardians possibly invests both their protégées in particular and the lower class in general in the with racial difference.³ The whiteness and privileged position of the guardians are emphasized in the representations of their *white gaze*. Whereas in *Clarence and Corinne* “Keen grey eyes of the seamstress” are depicted as looking sharply at people (50), in *The Uncalled* Miss Prime has a “cold grey eye” that “impales” her lower-class neighbor with “an annihilating glance” (27). In both texts, the women’s judgmental look is coded with “grey” eyes in contrast to the dark eyes of the children. Fred’s “brown eyes” are at one point “sparkling with amusement” (26), and Corinne’s eyes are repeatedly referred to as black or dark (9, 14, 87). Hence the guardian’s gaze, apart from class superiority, might be also informed with racial condescension.

In both cases, the adoptive households are very respectable and pristine, which follows the domestic ideal in the sentimental tradition (Tompkins 143, 178). The devotion to cleanliness also parallels the critical gaze of the narrator-observer in naturalist fiction, which painstakingly records the lower-class lack of hygiene and marks it with ethnic difference (Banerjee 122-123). Dunbar and Johnson problematize the identification of a clean household with moral purity, and thus they challenge the ideology of genteel respectability, yet they also point to the dominance of such thinking. The devotion to cleanliness of the middle-class guardians is manifested in both texts already at their beginnings, when they take over the cleaning of the dilapidated and dirty households of the orphaned children. Their own homes are accordingly immaculate. In Johnson’s text, this is interpreted by the community as a univocal sign of a good adoptive environment. Corinne’s brother draws the conclusion “from the very tidy appearance of the house” that she

3 For the relationship between non-Anglo-Saxon ethnicities, eugenics, and the notion of “shiftlessness,” see James C. Wilson, “Evolving Metaphors of Disease in Postgenomic Science: Stigmatizing Disability.”

is “fortunate in having such a home” (48). Also the teacher who visits the girl initially expects that “the prim Miss Rachel Penrose,” “apparently a very exemplary woman” with “a good home,” would guarantee the child’s happiness (55). In *The Uncalled*, the pedantic house of Fred’s guardian mimics the patronizing attitude of the owner. Miss Prime’s windows look at the “mean street” like “a pair of accusing eyes” (32). The “the prim cottage” is “painted a dull lead colour” and the flowers are “planted with such exactness and straightness” that they look “cramped and artificial and stiff as a party of angular ladies dressed in bombazine” (32). In contrast to Johnson’s novel, Dunbar’s text, however, also explicitly expresses the lower-class perspective on Miss Prime’s “maidenly neatness” (12). Mrs. Warren, one of Fred’s mother’s friends expresses her sympathy for the boy: “He won’t dare to breathe from this hour on” (31). Even though Mrs. Warren does not have much sympathy of the narrative—she robs the orphaned home of Fred after the funeral of his mother’s belongings—her judgment regarding Miss Prime’s approach to upbringing is largely correct and challenges the idea of noble charity. Overall, the images of the two households highlight the condescension of naturalist observers and dispute the goodwill of sentimental angels of charity.

Both Miss Penrose and Miss Prime show a dramatic lack of understanding and empathy for the lives of the lower-class children and, as I have demonstrated, turn the lives of their protégées into a limited existence that the texts compare with slavery. Their patronizing attitudes and privileged economic positions connotatively comment upon middle-class reform activities. According to Broder, in the 1890s, in response to labor unrest, conservative reform activists expressed a “desire to exert more control over the immigrant and African American working class” (18), and Johnson’s and Dunbar’s texts might respond to such increased policing. Significantly, the novels imagine the reform workers as white females. It can be read as a critical commentary on the evangelical missionary zeal of privileged white women and their crusades in lower-class neighborhoods, which provided them with an opportunity to introduce social change but also to exercise power over the disadvantaged. Additionally, the ease with which the guardians take charge of the orphans’ homes and the orphans themselves can be linked to their unmarried status, which is suggested in *The Uncalled*, when “Miss Hester move[s] about the room, placing one thing here, another there, but ever doing or changing something, all with *maidenly neatness*” (12; emphasis added). As Anna Lepine argues, “the spinster unsettled established notions of domestic space by seeming to be ‘at home’ anywhere” (v). As a result, at the turn of the century, for many, “the single woman was a threatening figure, suggesting women’s independence from men” (Holmes 68). Dunbar’s and Johnson’s texts record and activate these anxieties, marking them with class and possibly race resentments.

As an analysis of the guardians and adoptive environments demonstrates, both texts are entangled in dialogues with contemporary reform discourse and determinist philosophy. Johnson and Dunbar point to the significance of the environment and external influence: their powerful impact is expressed in metaphors of enslavement. Moreover, their correlation of the notion of slavery with white middle-class women’s

self-appointed guardianship of lower-class children can be read as a critique of the increased policing of the “other half.”

Emancipation from Heredity

Johnson’s and Dunbar’s dialogue with temperance discourse and naturalist philosophy is most conspicuous in their preoccupation with the notion of heredity. As I have mentioned, in contrast to both temperance fiction and naturalist classics, neither text shows any moments when the children of inebriates are drawn to drinking although sons in both novels migrate to the city and are exposed to its mythical temptations and saloons. In Dunbar’s and Johnson’s works, the protagonists struggle thus not as much with their heredity as with the eugenic thinking of society. Its pervasiveness can be illustrated with the fact that in *Clarence and Corinne*, even Corinne’s future husband, as a Sunday school child, sees her as “only a pauper,” whose “father is nothing but a drunkard” (153; 155). At the beginning of the novel, Clarence laments that Corinne and he are “the children of a drunkard” and that “People don’t even want to give [him] work because of it; and they call [him] ‘old drunken Burton’s boy’” (19-20). This is the key reason behind his decision to move to the city, among “new people—people who did not know him as ‘old Jim Burton boy’” (78). Yet, the change of place is not enough to erase the internalized stigma. When Clarence is framed for stealing money and fired, he feels again “born to be downtrodden—crushed!” (116). What helps him overcome his despondence and begin a self-determined life is conversion, which he undergoes with the support of an evangelical missionary, Mother Carter. In a rewriting of the narrative analyzed by Parsons, here the redeeming woman saves the child rather than the fallen drunkard. Yet, the final moment that enables Clarence to come to terms with his origins is the news of his father’s tragic death and his last words of repentance. Jim Burton’s final remorse suggests that even the most degenerate brutes can change and hence enables his son to finally reject the notion of hereditary determinism.

In *The Uncalled*, the struggle against the influence of paternal heredity is depicted more elaborately. Fred, since childhood, is confronted with the idea that “blood ‘s bound to tell, an’ with sich blood as he ‘s got in him [no one knows] what he ‘ll come to” (23). People object to his entrance into the ministry because “It ‘s ag’in’ nature” that “Old Tom, drunken Tom, swearin’ an’ ravin’ Tom Brent’s boy [should become] a preacher!” (114). A manipulative animalistic metaphor is used to support this eugenic logic: “A panther’s cub ain’t a-goin’ to be a lamb” (114). As a minister of his small congregation, Fred constantly feels that he is “fighting old Tom Brent” (179). The struggle with the image of his father accompanies the climactic twist, when Fred resigns from the position of the town’s minister. After the elders oppose his decision not to stigmatize a young pregnant girl, he decides to leave, and explains that “You are saying that it is the old Tom Brent in me showing itself at last. Yes, it has smouldered in me long, and I am glad.... I would rather be the most roistering drunkard that ever reeled down these streets than call myself a Christian and carouse

over the dead characters of my fellows...Yes, old Tom, drunken Tom Brent's son despises you" (187-188). Fred uses the image of his father to highlight the hypocrisy of the congregation, and subsequently migrates to the city to leave behind his "past of sorrow and degradation" (222).

Yet the struggle against eugenic logic does not end with Fred's move to Cincinnati. Instead of being able to free himself from his father's shadow, the protagonist is forced to face him as the city, instead of providing anonymity, coincidentally reunites the son with his father. A newly reformed drunkard, Tom Brent is a temperance advocate. Fred feels that he "comes and lays a hand upon [him], and that [he is] more the son of Tom Brent [that] night than ever before" (222). After the encounter, Fred's "eyes [are] bloodshot, his face [is] pale, his step [is] nervous and weak" (224), and his landlady assumes that he is intoxicated. Thus at this moment, his father's former intemperance is mirrored in what the novel refers to as Fred's "beastly condition" (224)—the contact with his father touches the son with temporary inebriety. The confrontation, after much inner struggle on Fred's part, ultimately ends in reconciliation. Characteristically, Fred does not take up his father's position, but, to the contrary, his father takes the room and bed of the son. Dunbar thus rewrites a scene of a drunkard's reformation in his child's bed, which according to Karen Sanchez-Eppler is a staple image in temperance fiction (1). Yet, in contrast to the scenes analyzed in her article, Fred is empowered by the scene of reunion with his father, which enables his separation from the haunting image of the drunkard. The reconciliation ends Fred's Oedipus crisis: he is able to enter a relationship with a woman and get married. Overall, both for Clarence and for Fred, the final encounters with their fathers or their words help them soothe their anxiety over hereditary intemperance. Also, in contrast to many traditional temperance tales, both texts are more interested in saving the children rather than redeeming the drunkard fathers.

The Converted and the Uncalled

Apart from several strong parallels between the two narratives, there is an important difference, namely, their representation of conversion experience. Dunbar's and Johnson's rewritings of this trope need to be considered in the context of what Ann Douglas famously dubbed "the feminization of American culture," a process in which "The Victorian lady and minister" changed the literary scene (8). In the course of the nineteenth century, the religious sphere was domesticated and as a result became part of the woman's realm. Just like in the temperance narrative analyzed by Parsons, in sentimental conversion narratives, woman was positioned as a redeemer. As Jane Tompkins states, in sentimental rhetoric, women served as mediators between the unconverted and God (219). Woman's religious mission was strongly related to the rise of the ideology of suasion—the specifically feminine power of moral influence (Dorsey 116). Moral suasion enabled women to transcend the limits of the domestic

sphere since, as Tompkins argues in her generous reading of the sentimental tradition, “religious conversion” was positioned as “the necessary precondition for sweeping social change” (132), and the “process of redemption” could “change the entire world” (131). Conversion was supposed to lead to social transformation as it helped build a community alike in interests and feelings, and the woman’s power of moral suasion was instrumental in its emergence.

Both African American novels recast the hegemonic scenario of woman’s religious mission as analyzed by Douglas and Tompkins. The theme is especially significant in Johnson’s novel—subtitled “God’s Way” and originally published by American Baptist Publication Society. Although it largely embraces this element of the sentimental tradition, not all women in the text are true religious mentors. Before the model redeeming woman is introduced into the narrative, as I have mentioned, the first religious guardian—the stern, grey-eyed Miss Penrose—exploits Corinne rather than facilitates the moral growth of the girl. The novel mocks religious hypocrisy as Miss Penrose makes “a great show of piety” and “invariably attend[s] church in the morning, rain or shine, snow or blow” (57), yet prohibits her protégée from accompanying her to services. Instead, “acting the part of a Christian guardian,” she makes “the child plod through [the Old Testament] verses” that are indecipherable to the girl and just make “her eyes and head ache” (58). Corinne’s first step towards conversion is individual—she finds a Bible in her room, opens it at the New Testament, and the passages give her spiritual comfort.

In contrast to Corinne’s individual encounter with the Bible, her brother, characteristically for the sentimental tradition, needs a woman as a mediator with God. After he is unjustly accused of theft and fired, he encounters Mother Carter, who “perform[s] her mission” among “those in want, never failing to put in a word or two of either advice, admonition or comfort” (121). Her power of suasion works also on Clarence, who “confesse[s] his sins and ask[s] earnestly to be forgiven, and then and there [gives] himself to God” (145). The novel’s representation of conversion does not, however, completely follow sentimental expectations. First of all, Clarence finds his way to God in the city, which, in sentimentalism, is closely related to worldly sophistication and corruption of the wide world (Tompkins 81). Furthermore, the redeeming woman is not a respectable middle—class reformer as in the traditional sentimental novel, which “represents the interests of middle—class women” (Tompkins 140), but a representative of the underprivileged. Thus, Clarence accidentally meets a lower-class woman in the city streets, who uses her feminine influence to save him. This episode signifies on the popular scenario of urban corruption and seduction of a young man in the city. Johnson’s text positions conversion—traditionally located in the domestic realm – in the city, and thus disrupts the neat binary opposition between the innocent country and corrupt urban landscape. Furthermore, by contrasting two Christian female guardians—the noble lower-class Mother Carter and the respectable but hypocritical Miss Penrose—Johnson expresses her anxiety regarding white middle-class missionary zeal.

After his conversion, the novel contrasts Clarence's former ambitions and "the prospect of [professional] advancement before him" with "God's way" (144). He stays with Mother Carter and does not seek work to "make more money" (147). From the point of view of capitalist efficiency, he seems unproductive as his work for Mother Carter is imperceptible for outsiders; Miss Penrose could judge him as a representative of the "shiftless" class. The narrator explicitly comments on the significance of such invisible work: "It is not always necessary that people should live very prominent and public lives in order to be useful. Lights are burning where the busy world sees them not; but that it does not see or know them does not alter the fact that they are performing their mission" (121). Even after he gets his education, Clarence does not go back to business but becomes a doctor instead. Typically for the sentimental tradition, the marketplace is represented as unpredictable and unjust, yet it does not morally corrupt the main character but makes him homeless. Yet—despite the novel's preoccupation with spiritual growth—it represents the economic hardships of migration and urbanization from a structural perspective that is indebted to the naturalist logic of social determinism.

In Dunbar's text—according to Robert Bone his "spiritual autobiography" (39)—already the title suggests that it will problematize the idea of calling and conversion. Against his guardian's hopes, Fred does not have a minister's calling. The awakening and emancipation he experiences in the novel result from his resolution to leave ministry (170; 209)—the first autonomous decision he makes. Ostentatiously religious women in the novel, just like in Johnson's text, are not successful "mediators between God and the unredeemed" (Tompkins 219). Hester Prime, as I have demonstrated, is depicted as an enslaving force. She is paired with the minister's daughter, who is unfavorably judged by the narrative as a "fool" and a "shallow woman" that with complacency "skims the surface of tragedy and thinks that she has sounded the depths" (121). The true redeemer in the first part of the novel is "Brother Hodges," Fred's adoptive father "a kindly-faced man," whose "supplication [i]s very tender and childlike.... He left all to God, as a child lays its burden at its father's feet, and many eyes were moist as the people rose from their knees" (17). Hodges's prayer strongly reminds of the biblical verse frequently repeated in Johnson's novel: "Casting all your care upon him; for he careth for you" (65, 73, 109). When Fred leaves Dexter, "Poor Eliphalet... br[eaks] down and we[eps] like a child" (197). The incident takes "sunshine... out of the old man's life" (197). Not only is Eliphalet a more successful mediator between "God and the unredeemed," but he is also represented as a better parent than his wife, which clearly challenges the sentimental tradition's celebrations of mothering and feminine power of religious suasion.

Analogously to *Clarence and Corinne*, *The Uncalled* also problematizes the moral corruption related to the city in the sentimental tradition. In contrast to Miss Prime's predictions that in "a strange city full of wickedness an' sin," Fred might fall victim to "temptation sich as is layin' in wait fur young men" (195), migration to the city helps him renounce stiff religiosity, grow, and find his fulfillment. Significantly,

his stern guardian is juxtaposed with an urban woman, whose influence is represented in a much less restrictive way. Fred meets “a young lady... who is very much interested in church work, and somehow she has got [him] interested too, and [he goes] to her church every Sunday” (245). Alice’s influence is positioned as parallel to that of Fred’s adoptive father Hodges: “‘I been a-prayin’ fur you,’ [Hodges] said. ‘So has Alice,’ replied the young man, ‘though I don’t see why she needs to pray. She’s a prayer in herself’” (254). Thus Dunbar, analogously to Johnson, challenges the stereotypical ideas of an urban temptations and seductive women. Even though during his first days in Cincinnati, the protagonist admits that “The city indeed was full of temptations to the young” (206), the closure of the novel, which ends in Fred’s settling down in the metropolis and his marriage to Alice, disproves the uniform identification of the city with sinfulness. Fred’s story represents the experience of urban immigration, which was common for millions of turn-of-the-century Americans. When Fred’s narrative is read more specifically as a commentary on the situation of the African American community, it represents the Great Migration of black people to the Northern cities as a possible way to emancipation from the Jim Crow regime.

As I have demonstrated, despite their differences, Johnson’s and Dunbar’s novels are entangled in parallel dialogues with contemporary reform discourse and determinist philosophy. Both highlight the significance of the environment and external influence, whose powerful impact is expressed in metaphors of enslavement. Additionally, their correlation of the notion of slavery with white middle-class women’s self-appointed guardianship of lower-class children can be read as a critique of the policing of the “other half” by reform activists. Both texts underline the possibility of transcending biological heritage yet they also show the struggle against eugenic logic that is all-pervasive in the late nineteenth-century society. For the abject classes and races, the most destructive force is not the internal factor of heredity or the omnipresence of alcohol but the influence of Darwinist ideology. Especially in their revisions of the drunkard narrative and sentimental conversion narrative, the novels balance the attention to the meaningful impact of the social context and external influences, on the one hand, and the characters’ self-determination and volition, on the other. Characteristically, despite their incorporation of determinism, the protagonists’ plotlines do not end in decline. Even the brutal intemperate fathers express remorse and desire to change before they die. The racial indeterminacy of the characters in the novels enables the authors to avoid the immediate associations between black lower-class population and retrogressionist ideology. Furthermore, if racial unmarkedness is read as white, the texts evoke images of white male brutality and white female drunkenness, thus even further challenging the ideology of retrogressionism. On the other hand, it is possible to read protagonists in both texts as black, which offers a narrative of self-determined uplift of the black community: in the case of Johnson, ending in a homecoming and a formation of a larger extended family, in the case of Dunbar, a linear plot, ending with an independent nuclear family in the city.

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