

A Window into the World of Alice Dunbar Nelson

Review of Tara T. Green, *Love, Activism, and the Respectable Life of Alice Dunbar-Nelson* (Bloomsbury Publishing, 2022)

JAFAR BABA

DOI: 10.53720/ZREN6019

Love, Activism, and the Respectable Life of Alice Dunbar-Nelson, a captivating biography by Tara T. Green, is a thorough study of thirteen chapters that delves deeply into the personal and literary life of the pioneering African American activist, writer, suffragist, and journalist, Alice Dunbar-Nelson. The depth and particularisation of the study is foregrounded in Green's acknowledgement, in which she describes the effort of writing such a comprehensive biography as "a ten-year journey" (ix). Green's main purpose in this book is to bring to light the significance of a major figure in Black or African American women's history, as it is the first biography to portray Dunbar-Nelson's personal life and sexual tendencies as a Black feminist, social activist, and writer.

Green's literary biography approaches the life and legacy of Alice Dunbar-Nelson as a respectable activist who, within the confines of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century respectability politics, defined her sexual identity and autonomy while striving for gendered and racial rights. In her introductory chapter entitled "Introducing a Respectable Activist," Green sets the aim of her study as well as the gendered and racial orientation of the biography by asserting that "*Love, Activism, and the Respectable Life of Alice Dunbar-Nelson* allows for a sustained look into the private behaviour of one woman in a growing educated Black middle-class society that prescribed to respectability" (4).

Following a brief introductory chapter, Green describes how Dunbar-Nelson saw herself as different within the Black community due to her skin colour—as a “half white nigger”—and her sexual identity (1). In chapters one and two of the book, Green foregrounds the first twenty years of Dunbar-Nelson’s life, demonstrating how a family secret—being born to an unknown White father—had a lasting impact on Dunbar-Nelson and largely dominated her early writings as well as her work as an activist intent on “protecting young Black women from sexual exploitation and social stigma” (13). Next to the influence of her personal background, the racial diversity in New Orleans functioned as the prime setting for much of her fiction. Dunbar-Nelson’s vivid descriptions provide insight into the daily challenges faced by the working people in New Orleans as well as the small victories, grievances, and real hardships they endured. Green goes on to describe Dunbar-Nelson’s early educational background; the schools she attended and the role that the teacher training program in Straight College played in giving her what she needed to provide a great “service” to her mother’s Black race. In this chapter, Green illustrates how, during the late nineteenth century, Dunbar-Nelson developed a “distinct discourse of resistance, a feminist theology” by joining *Women’s Era*, the first newspaper published and edited by African American women, and other women’s clubs to elevate Black women, especially those of African descent (18). Green’s discussion reflects the discourse of Black literary resistance that shaped the mentality of educated Blacks during the late nineteenth century, a period that almost marked a return to the Old South notion of White dominance and Black enslavement.

Turning to the literary realm, chapter two highlights the emergence of Dunbar-Nelson as a talented writer, which is manifested by the publication of *Violets and Other Tales* (1895), a collection of short fiction, sketches, and poems, in which her ability to navigate respectability politics and to define herself as a combination of the emerging New Negro and New Woman are of prominent concern. It is through her fiction, Green proposes, that “Alice’s two selves merged . . . the young Black activist met the romantic writer” (27). The significance of Dunbar-Nelson’s short-story tradition can be attributed to its revolutionary nature in respect to the late nineteenth-century Black readership, a group that has come to be understood along colonial and minstrel stereotypes. Arguably, Dunbar-Nelson was the first Black woman to write regional short stories, a genre much more prominent among White women in American literary scholarship. Ultimately, it is the strategy of avoiding stereotypes

A WINDOW INTO THE WORLD OF ALICE DUNBAR NELSON

and presenting more respectful creole sketches that has perhaps granted Dunbar-Nelson less critical attention in comparison to her literary peers.

Chapter three, “Activism, Love, and Pain,” describes the turning point in Dunbar-Nelson’s educational and personal life and highlights her correspondence with her first husband, poet Paul Laurence Dunbar. Through their correspondence, Green demonstrates how Dunbar-Nelson “navigated respectability politics . . . and how she defined her complex role as a writer, activist, and sexual being” (44). Additionally, while Green admits that Dunbar-Nelson’s poetry and poetic style may in part reflect the Victorian preferences for the sentimental and refined, the chapter ultimately reveals that Dunbar-Nelson can be positioned closer to the racial protest literature and folk culture celebrations that were increasingly prevalent in the works of the Harlem Renaissance. This chapter also highlights a critical moment in Dunbar-Nelson’s personal life by demonstrating how her marriage to Dunbar in 1898 was the result of despair and an anticipated rebirth from social death, as marrying him was her only choice after he had raped her.

Stressing the importance of her marriage to Paul Dunbar, Green dedicates chapter four, “Love and Writing,” to documenting the effects this marriage had on Dunbar-Nelson’s sexual, literary, and personal identity. The chapter reveals that Dunbar-Nelson suffered the maltreatment of her abusive husband during their marriage. Seeking adherence to respectability politics in the late-Victorian age, Dunbar-Nelson abandoned her husband several times before her final decision to leave him permanently. During all these separations and reunifications, however, Dunbar-Nelson never asked for a divorce, and they remained officially married until his death in 1906. Green shows that marriage, nevertheless, did allow Dunbar-Nelson time to dedicate to writing and to experiment with new forms and genres, culminating in the publication of two short-story collections, *The Goodness of St. Rocque and Other Stories* (1899), and *The Annals of Steenth Street* (1900–1901). The idleness of Dunbar-Nelson’s marriage life was most apparent in her novella, *Confessions of a Lazy Woman* (1903), a work that remained unpublished. It features a middle-class, married, childless woman who spends her days reluctantly. This novella, Green argues, “works more as an allegory for Dunbar-Nelson’s longing for a real and independent married life” (80). Furthermore, the author shows how respectability politics’ intersection with a search for identity and wholeness continued to dominate Dunbar-Nelson’s literature, where she used her writing talents to analyse gendered positions of power and the reality of race relations in America. At the same time,

Green alludes to the issue of regionalism in Dunbar-Nelson's writings, as the majority of her stories take place in New Orleans. Despite the fact that Dunbar-Nelson's writings may seem apolitical initially, she revises elements of regionalist texts to challenge social categories and societal norms, criticising the stance that many White authors had taken in their depictions of the South in general and New Orleans in particular. The book sheds light on how, in the face of a racist *modus operandi*, Dunbar Nelson's actions undermined her art, which she consciously employed as a protest against the White literary establishment at the turn of the century. In the context of African American literary history, Dunbar-Nelson's *oeuvre* exceeds social and literary expectations, as Black writers of the time had been restricted to certain stereotypical racial themes and dialect writing. Confronting the repressive, racist prescriptions of what Black artists should and should not do, Dunbar-Nelson envisioned art as a form of freedom from the narrow, confining dictums of a race-minded literary society. Dunbar-Nelson's *oeuvre* represents the mind of an author unbound by race, both thematically and linguistically.

The fifth chapter, "Loving Alice After Paul," examines Dunbar-Nelson's multiple relationships after the death of Paul Dunbar, especially her relationship with C. A. Fleetwood, during which Dunbar-Nelson failed to gain a marriage that would preserve her respectable position in society. Green also touches upon same-sex relationships evident in Dunbar-Nelson *oeuvre* including her short stories "Natalie" and "A Modern Undine," which combine issues relating to her sexual identity, her feminist leanings, her ties to New Orleans, her love of nature, her career, and her spiritual beliefs. The following chapter on "Love and Education" investigates the subject of homosexuality in Dunbar-Nelson's life in more detail as well as the queer community in her life, which Gloria Hull identifies as a "lesbian network" within the club work (qtd. in Green 113). Green clearly indicates that Dunbar-Nelson's work at the women's club allowed her to explore the discreet intimacies between women. Green further explores how, in her marriage to Henry Callis (a younger Black student), Dunbar-Nelson met the standards of respectability and simultaneously defied them, considering the fact that having a younger husband was deemed scandalous at the time. In other words, Green manifests how Dunbar-Nelson tested the boundaries and expectations of respectability politics in early twentieth-century America to pursue her individual desire.

Chapter seven, "Ms. Dunbar and Politics (of Love)," introduces Dunbar-Nelson's marriage to Robert Nelson in 1916, who was also interested in uplifting

the race through publishing and politics. Therefore, Green argues, her marriage to him allowed her to return to her activist roots, as she continued to explore new forms of writing. The two worked together on a collection of essays, *Master of Eloquence*, published in 1914. Together, they attempted to bring a voice and political empowerment to African Americans in the northeast. For Dunbar-Nelson, the significance of this marriage was that she “fulfilled her desire as a woman to enjoy a relationship with a New Negro Man—one who did not attempt to limit her social activities based on societal gender expectations” (132). Additionally, Green reveals how the intersection between respectability and politics emerged as Dunbar-Nelson used her identity as Dunbar’s widow to advance women’s political rights. The chapter attempts to identify and localise Dunbar-Nelson’s transitional position and literary orientation. Dunbar-Nelson’s literary, social, and political activity acutely places her on the margins of Victorian Womanhood as well as the emerging era of New Women. Her marginal position also represents the mentality of the New Negro Woman—the role that she assumed by producing sentimental domestic fiction intent on projecting African Americans as good citizens capable of reaching the White-defined threshold of American civilisation. Exploring her suffragist work, Green also lists many suffragist clubs and organisations that Dunbar-Nelson joined, including National Women’s Suffrage Association (NWSA), The Equal Suffrage Study Club, and The Delta Sigma Theta Sorority.

In chapter eight, “New Negro Woman’s Love and Activism,” Green further examines the concept of newness in the term New Negro, which, among the twentieth-century generation of Black people, meant receiving respect for their humanity and participating fully in US society. These activities extended beyond class lines and permeated the modern art and performance of the New Negro Renaissance (HR) of the late 1910s through the 1930s. Green argues that Dunbar-Nelson’s *oeuvre* encapsulates the transformation of the New Negro from a political into a cultural movement. Through her writings, Dunbar-Nelson devoted herself to a didacticism-free form of art, which mainly performed as a sort of counter-discourse against the Western representations of the Black folk or rural literary tradition. Moreover, Green delineates Dunbar-Nelson’s role as an activist during the First World War, where she joined the Circle for Negro War Relief, Inc. She also protested the Ku Klux Klan (KKK), a White supremacist, right-wing terrorist and hate group. Another important contribution by Dunbar-Nelson during this period was her one-act play, *Mine Eyes Have Seen the Glory* (1918), which brings together

the ethnic groups that had been segregated and isolated in the US, specifically African Americans, Jews, and Irish people.

Chapters nine and ten are dedicated to highlighting Dunbar-Nelson's interest in the film industry, her emergence as a respectable journalist, and the important role she played during the HR. The chapter, "For the Love of Family, Film, and the Paper," examines how Dunbar-Nelson attempted to market film scripts, scenarios, and melodramas, including the ones she offered for Realart Pictures Corporation, "Nine-Nineteen-Nine: A Motion Picture Play in Eleven Episodes," and a more developed screenplay, "The American Crime." The latter is about the lynching of a Black man, written in response to *Birth of a Nation* (1915), a film that justifies lynching to protect White women from Black men. Green further explores how Dunbar-Nelson, during her work as a journalist, attempted to advance the race by showing the African American middle-class in the best light, as well as writing about the emerging work being produced by Black writers and performers. The next chapter, "The Respectable Activist's Love for the Harlem Renaissance," further inspects how Dunbar-Nelson shaped readers' perspectives of the HR era as a columnist, and how she heightened her activism to reach a wider audience. Besides, Green illustrates that, between 1926 and 1929, Dunbar-Nelson wrote several pieces in which she covered various topics that targeted the interests of her Black audience, including racial violence and African American plays, films, and novel reviews. The chapter offers a better understanding of the Black women's literary tradition, and how it has been created. Green observes that "as a creative writer-activist [Dunbar-Nelson] fashioned herself as the journalistic voice of the New Negro social and political movement and the artistic Harlem Renaissance" (186).

Chapter eleven, "Love, Desire, and Writing," features Dunbar-Nelson's activist work where she served as the executive secretary of the American Interracial Peace Committee (AIPC) during the late 1920s and early 1930s. As the representative of an organisation dedicated to peace, Green observes, Dunbar-Nelson "moved away from encouraging support of wars, instead discouraging Black people and others from participating in them" (213). The chapter also stresses the importance of diary writing in Dunbar-Nelson's life, an activity that had provided her with a kind of freedom that defied the restrictions of respectability, or redefined the restrictions of respectability associated with middle-class social expectations—especially as Dunbar-Nelson documented her romances with women in her diaries, in particular with Fay Jackson. Thus, Green concludes, "Recordings of this period of her

A WINDOW INTO THE WORLD OF ALICE DUNBAR NELSON

life show how she tested the boundaries of respectability by enjoying romances with women while married” (215). The last chapter sheds light on the final years of Dunbar-Nelson’s life, and how her husband’s position as the boxing commissioner at the State Athletic Commission brought recognition and financial stability for the couple. It is through this period that Dunbar-Nelson found the autonomy of her identity as “she was no longer identified as the widow of Paul Laurence Dunbar, Alice was Mrs. Alice Dunbar Nelson, wife of Robert J. Nelson” (227).

Although it would have been a welcome addition if further literary analyses had been included by Green to strengthen the thematic and biographical investigation of Dunbar-Nelson’s *oeuvre*, *Love, Activism, and the Respectable Life of Alice Dunbar-Nelson* serves as an invaluable source for academics interested in Black feminism, African American literature, and queer studies. Green takes up the role of a literary detective in the first book-length study dedicated to deciphering the private and public life of an author often mentioned but rarely investigated in American literary discourse. The book also serves as a remarkable reference for researchers working in the field of African American politics, Black journalism, and the history of Black anti-racism discourse in American literary and social spheres.

CONTRIBUTOR DETAILS

Jafar Baba obtained his MA in English literature and language at Osmania University, India. Currently he is a third-year PhD student in Comparative Literature at the University of Szeged. His research focuses on the reconstruction of African identity and the analysis of colonialist stereotypes in the works of two postcolonial African novelists, Chinua Achebe and J. M. Coetzee.