BAMS Mini Lecture Script: Alice Dunbar-Nelson

[show photograph with name and dates (1875-1935)]

During her lifetime and for much of the twentieth century, the American writer, poet, journalist, educator, and activist Alice Dunbar-Nelson was overshadowed by the literary reputation of her first husband, Paul Laurence Dunbar. She struggled to negotiate between the marital expectations placed on women in turn-of-the-century America and her independent writing career. Her fiction, poetry, and personal papers also reveal complex, nuanced, or ambivalent interpretations of race and ethnicity, as well as gender and (bi)sexuality. In this short lecture, we'll see how her biography intersects with important cultural and political movements in the United States, including the 'local color' movement and the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s and '30s; consider how questions of racial identity and gender are raised in her short stories; and suggest ways to explore papers in her archive at the University of Delaware.

Dunbar-Nelson was born Alice Ruth Moore in New Orleans in 1875. Her mother was a seamstress and former enslaved person of Black and Native American descent, while her father was reportedly a white seaman. Her diaries record her intermittent experiences of passing as white and of ostracization from both Black and white communities as a light-skinned mixed-race woman, but little information exists about her early life. In an archive otherwise overflowing with meticulous documentation, correspondence, and unpublished writing, this absence has allowed critics to differently characterise her as ashamed of her heritage or strategic in her ambiguous presentation of racial identity or deeply resistant to the idea that race is reducible to a set of symbols and classifications. As her literary legacy has gained in importance since the 1980s, the dominant interpretation of Dunbar-Nelson's work as a writer and activist today is that she explores both race and gender as changeable, individual lived experiences.

In 1895, at only twenty years old, she published her first book, *Violets and Other Tales*, which is often referenced as the first published short story collection by an African American writer. Her second and more famous collection, *The Goodness of St Rocque and Other Stories*, was published in 1899. [Show covers of books] Both explore New Orleans and the city's Creole community. The post-Civil War United States was defined by 'the color line', a reference to racial segregation developed by Frederick Douglass and W.E.B. Du Bois, and Creole identity

was unfamiliar and almost illegible outside New Orleans. In *The Goodness of St Rocque*, however, Dunbar-Nelson's exploration of Creole identity reveals her sensitive treatment of race and its lived intersections with class and gender.

Written while Dunbar-Nelson was living in Boston, New York, and Washington DC, this second collection, although popular, was largely received as a 'charming' representation of regional Creole life. As now, 'charming' was a word used to critique literary works as light and decorative rather than seriously intellectual. This patronising reception was entangled with the limited success allowed to Black women writers and equally with its publication as a companion piece to Paul Laurence Dunbar's *Poems of Cabin and Field*. Dunbar-Nelson was married to the poet from 1898 until his death in 1906, although she left him to teach at Howard High School in Wilmington, Delaware in 1902 after years of abuse. 'Charming' was also a description associated with the 'local color' movement in American literature at the end of the 1800s, which was wary of the way a one-size-fits-all national identity would erase local differences. The movement encompassed works interested in the details of regional, often working-class life, communities and families and was seen as a parochial mode of escapism for elite urban readers. In retrospect, 'local color' stories are also nuanced reflections on domesticity, power, gender relations, and the uneven impacts of geopolitical systems. At the end of this lecture, you'll have a chance to analyse how such complexity shows up in Dunbar-Nelson's fiction.

Dunbar-Nelson is also remembered as a significant figure in the Harlem Renaissance. Although she lived in New York for only a short time from 1895 to 1898, her short stories, poetry, activism, journalism career, and work as a teacher and editor were influential in representing the role of Black women in the workforce, education and the antilynching and suffrage movements. In the 1920s, her poetry was given new relevance with publication in Du Bois's *The Crisis*, in *Opportunity*, and in *Epony and Topaz*, and she was in demand as both a columnist and public speaker, although she was rarely paid or credited for her work. [Covers] She shared with Du Bois a belief in education as transformational for Black Americans, but she was critical of what she referred to as 'injudicious laudation' on the basis of race. She desired Black writers to be successful as writers, not only Black ones.

That said, the doubled pressure of gendered and racialised erasure meant that her legacy, reputation, and archive languished in obscurity until the 1980s. It wasn't until almost fifty years

after her death that Akasha Gloria Hull (then publishing as Gloria T. Hull) [show cover of Hull's book] restored public and scholarly attention to the impact of her writing and activism and uncovered evidence of her queer relationships with other Black women, including Howard High School principal Edwina B. Kruse, activist Fay Jackson Robinson, and artist Helene Ricks London. However, despite Dunbar-Nelson's active engagement with race and gender politics in her public life and career as a journalist, Hull widely criticised her writing and characters as 'aracial', meaning lacking identifiable racial content. She saw Dunbar-Nelson as insufficiently concerned with the lived experiences of Black women. This description has haunted Dunbar-Nelson's legacy until very recently.

In 2016, *Legacy: A Journal of American Women Writers* published a special edition on Dunbar-Nelson that sought to redress this categorisation. [Show edition cover] The contributors challenged Hull's 'aracial' critique in two significant ways. First, several of the essays questioned the demand for racialized and gendered authors to write always about their 'authentic' experiences. Secondly, each piece explored different ways in which Dunbar-Nelson's representation of race offered a more complex dynamic than the 'binary idiom of the color line', instead dissecting its construction and its intersection with concurrent experiences of class and gender. Many of these essays also call attention to the fact that works explicitly exploring racism and oppression were rejected as 'inaccessible' by publishers in the early-twentieth century, a dynamic exacerbated by Dunbar-Nelson's status as a Black woman.

In this vein, this brief lecture has pointed to some of the many biographical and contextual reasons to revisit Dunbar-Nelson as a writer of race and gender. We've briefly covered her biography and particularly her association with the local colour movement and the activism of the Harlem Renaissance, as well as the way in which Dunbar-Nelson's fiction has the capacity to change contemporary understandings of these movements and their motivations. However, many qualities of her writing and much in her archive remains to be explored, which leaves an opportunity for you to learn more about Dunbar-Nelson as a writer and/or a historical figure.

Activities

The Alice Dunbar-Nelson papers at the University of Delaware provide lots of opportunities for students of English and of History, so depending on your subject, there are two activities you can try to learn more about Dunbar-Nelson.

1. **English:** Read the short story, 'The Praline Woman' from *The Goodness of St Rocque and Other Stories*. Your teacher may be able to hand out printed copies. It stands out from the collection for its language, narrative voice, and style. [Show story on screen – may need permission from Delaware for manuscript images] Can you identify moments in the story that challenge Hull's 'aracial' label for Dunbar-Nelson's writing? You could think about the word 'brune' and how it might have been read differently by readers in New Orleans or in the metropolitan Northeast. You may also want to think about the significance of the praline woman's mixture of English and Creole or the kinds of migration represented by the Native American woman and the Irishman. If you have time, you can also find manuscript versions of this story in Dunbar-Nelson's online archive. What differences do you find? How do these change your readings?
2. **History:** Visit the Alice Dunbar-Nelson papers in the Delaware Digital Archive (https://udspace.udel.edu/communities/ba387030-ca80-44f4-b0f6-76f4c8c0b4a4). Can you find sources to help answer the following questions: 1) How was Dunbar-Nelson's work, both fiction and activism, received during her lifetime? [Hint: it may be helpful to look for reviews, copies of her columns, newspaper reports on her speeches, and articles written after her death]. 2) Based on her correspondence with Robert Nelson, editor of *The Washington Eagle*, how did Dunbar-Nelson deal with the constant struggle to make money from her writing?