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"The Force, the Fire and the Artistic Touch" of Alice Dunbar-Nelson's "The Stones of the Village"¹

Michael Tritt

Ambiguous of race they stand,
By one disowned, scorned of another,
Not knowing where to stretch a hand,
And cry, 'My sister' or 'My brother.'
(*"Near White,"* Countee Cullen)

- 1 "The Stones of the Village" details the successful negotiation of the color line by Victor Grabért, a Louisiana Creole who has Negro ancestry and yet manages, through a combination of luck and subterfuge, to hide his lineage and climb to the highest rung of the social ladder. In developing the narrative of Grabért's life, Alice Dunbar-Nelson engages a powerful social critique, portraying realistically the endemic color prejudice of white and black alike in New Orleans and its environs toward the beginning of the nineteenth century.² Written between 1900 and 1910, yet published posthumously only in 1988, "The Stones of the Village" has been gaining well-deserved recognition ever since as a story of considerable force, especially as a narrative dramatizing the phenomenon of passing.³ Indeed, since its publication the tale has been included in six different anthologies of short stories, has been dramatized by the Public Media Foundation of Northeastern University on a popular website for teachers and students, and has been made widely available on the Internet through the auspices of the National Humanities Centre.⁴ Moreover, recent literary histories and source books related to Southern literature by women, to local color fiction, to Afro-American (and Afro-American women's) literature explicitly recognize Dunbar-Nelson's contribution in this specific story.⁵ By and large, however, critical commentary has been relatively brief, limited to a focus generally upon theme and various associated autobiographical dimensions of the fiction, as these relate to the author's ancestry and to the prejudice Dunbar-Nelson herself experienced.⁶ There has been, to date, little concentration upon—and certainly no detailed exposition of—the author's impressive literary technique in the tale. Such a detailed exposition is all the more necessary in the context of

apologetic reservations about Dunbar-Nelson's lack of skill as a short story writer.⁷ In her careful foregrounding of early incidents in Victor's childhood, her masterful use of point of view and other particulars to counterpoint the protagonist's social accomplishment with his psychological anguish, her notable orchestration of characterization, imagery, symbolism and especially allusion, and through a variety of other means, Dunbar-Nelson renders a remarkably nuanced portrayal of the way emotional conflict determines the tragic course of life for a black Creole in search of a viable identity.

- 2 Dunbar-Nelson skillfully structures her tale so as to highlight the childhood turmoil which underlies Victor's tormented—and lifelong—struggle to control his emotions and to fit into society. Crucial to this portrait of Victor's early experience is the extent to which the protagonist (and his fellow playmates) are victim to culturally-created prejudices which destroy what Dunbar-Nelson depicts as a type of childhood innocence of color and background.
- 3 Several pages into the text, the narrator provides a crucial flashback to Victor's earliest memory, when, as a mere toddler, he receives a whipping at the hands of his grandmother, the result of his straying from home to play with a group of "black and yellow boys of his own age" (5).⁸ Although it is no doubt true, as Jordan Stouck (281) and Marylynne Diggs (13) suggest, that because of the protagonist's background he does not fit into any of the culturally defined racial categories of his village, nonetheless in this early scene he is pictured: "sitting contentedly in the center of the group in the dusty street, all of them gravely scooping up handfuls of gravelly dirt and trickling it down their chubby bare legs" (5). Clearly, Victor is accepted by the toddlers, included in the narrative description of "all of them" at play. Neither he nor the other children, it seems, yet recognize socially-defined racial and ethnic categories. To be sure, it is the prejudicial action of Victor's grandmother, (herself imbued with widespread exclusionary social/cultural attitudes) that initially precipitates her grandson's isolation and exclusion. When she "snatched at him fiercely" and "hissed" at him: "What you mean playin' in the strit wid dose niggers?" (5), Grandmère Grabért creates resentment (and self-consciousness) in Victor himself and no doubt in the other children as well. In truth, she initiates a tragic reaction, for learning of the incident, the parents of the toddlers with whom Victor was playing "sternly bade [their children] have nothing more to do with Victor" (5). Making matters worse, Grandmère Grabért forbids him to converse in his native Créole patois, forcing him to learn English. As a result, the young boy struggles all the more, speaking a "confused jumble which is no language at all" (5), further alienating him from the "black and yellow boys" and from the white ones as well, intensifying his isolation, confusion and crisis of identity.
- 4 Following—and at least to a degree as a result of—this early watershed incident and its consequences,⁹ Victor struggles, year in and year out, with the "derisive laughs and shouts, the taunts of little brutes," (3) "white and black and yellow" (5) who reject him. The first lines of the story portray the youth in his early teens striding down a neighborhood street, emotionally wracked by a "dull, sullen resentment, flaming out now and then into almost murderous vindictiveness," that has "grown nearly second nature to him"(3). The imagery of fire, specifically of flame, keenly evokes the intensity—and the destructiveness—of the passions bottled up inside of him even in early adolescence. That these feelings are described as erratically "flaming out" in bursts of emotion conveys the extent to which, far from being in command of his feelings, Victor

is dominated by them. Furthermore, such sentiments have already become nearly "second nature" to the adolescent, suggesting the impressionability of his young psyche. *Webster's* defines "second nature" as an "acquired behavior that is practiced so long it seems to be innate" (779). Such prematurely developed and disruptive passions, already in youth so "nearly" beyond reflection as to be innate, foreshadow the subtle and deterministic psychological forces that evermore forcefully take control of the protagonist's life. Indeed, as the tale develops, we note how obsessively Victor returns time and again in memory to those emotionally scorched village years, and to the "old village street refrain [...] 'Nigger!—Nigger!—White nigger!' [that] haunted [him] all his life" (27).¹⁰

- 5 The youth's anguish is ironically intensified rather than assuaged by the opportunity that chance affords him when he finds a job with a book-seller, inherits money from him, and is offered the possibility of attending Tulane. No doubt Victor desires desperately to identify with—and to belong to—some segment of society, all the more so one that offers him limitless socio-economic and other opportunities. When Mr. Buckley proposes that Victor attend Tulane, the young man reacts thusly:

'Tulane College!' cried Victor. 'Why -why--why--' then he stopped suddenly, and the hot blood mounted to his face. He glanced furtively about the room [...] His heart leaped wildly at the thought. Well, Grandmère would have willed it so [...] Victor found himself murmuring confused thanks and good-byes [...] after he had gone [...] the boy sat down and gazed blankly at the wall (italics mine, 9-10).

- 6 The initial exclamation blurted out rather than uttered calmly, the stuttered "whys" followed by intense flushing, the furtive glances and wild "leaping" of the heart — all are unthinking, automatic. There is, certainly, an improvised rationalization ("Grandmère would have willed it so"), yet Victor is pictured immediately thereafter sitting dazed, gazing "blankly" at a wall. Such an attitude conveys deftly the shock of his newfound situation which, far from being the result of careful calculation, is simply a mystery to him.¹¹
- 7 When Victor yields to the urge to pass as "pure-blood" white, he is clearly ill at ease assuming such a false lineage. Mentally and emotionally unprepared for a life of subterfuge, acting on ill-defined impulse, he adds to his conflict rather than resolving it. This is but an early depiction of the way in which the protagonist increasingly falls prey to impulses—and even to compulsions—that increase his misery.
- 8 Victor's lack of self-consciousness and control is similarly depicted in the above-cited passage through the express description of the way he "found himself" murmuring. While this verb may, at times, be used reflexively to denote increased self-awareness, here it rather evokes the extent of Victor's surprise and bewilderment. Dunbar-Nelson incorporates this same expression in no less than eight other locations in the tale, for instance when Victor "*found himself* with a growing sympathy" (italics mine, 13) for Wilson, "the prisoner before the bar" (12), and again "*found himself* saying unconsciously" (italics mine, 17) that he would save his child from the humiliation of being without a socially acceptable family. Such indications of a lack of self-awareness and even confusion become more pervasive and compelling as the tale unfolds. Indeed, at times, Victor is portrayed as a veritable somnambulist: "He walked out the wide boulevard towards Clairborne Street, hardly thinking, hardly realizing that he was walking" (18). This sort of automatic behavior represents the development and

solidification of the innate-seeming "second nature," described in germinal form in the protagonist's youth.

- 9 Although Victor is aware that he has become truly, in name and in position, a "victor," he is nonetheless tormented by inner discord. Critics have certainly noted in this regard the protagonist's "internal rupture" and the extent to which he is "self-divided" (Ewell and Menke 2). Yet the artfulness of Dunbar-Nelson's carefully nuanced evocation of the protagonist's state of mind has not been sufficiently elucidated. Consider the way in which, in the following excerpt, the author skillfully summons both the intense gratification Victor experiences and yet his perplexing discontent as well:

And yet, as he sat there in his cozy study that night, and smiled as he went over in his mind triumph after triumph which he had made since in the old bookstore days in Royal Street, he was conscious of a subtle undercurrent of annoyance; a sort of mental reservation that placed itself on every pleasant memory.

"I wonder what's the matter with me?" he asked himself. (12)

- 10 The passage describes in particular Victor's feeling of coziness in his study and pictures the protagonist in a self-satisfied pose, smiling in the contemplation of "triumph after triumph." Yet in the latter part of the selfsame sentence, this idyll is shattered by an inexplicable "undercurrent of annoyance" (12). The query "I wonder what's the matter with me?" that immediately follows, underscores the emotional helplessness of the protagonist, who is quite literally wonder-struck at his disruptive feelings. Such self-questioning is, moreover, a calculated and recurrent technique incorporated by the author throughout the text in order to draw attention to the protagonist's baffled reaction to emotions and behavior he cannot fathom.¹²
- 11 The narrator significantly links the "undercurrent" described in the excerpt above to a sort of "mental reservation." One definition of this term in the *Oxford English Dictionary*, "The action of keeping back or concealing from others," assuredly applies to the way Victor leads a duplicitous life. Yet in using the term, Dunbar-Nelson also activates a brilliant allusion to a specific doctrine of Catholic teaching that involves various sorts of equivocations and amphibologies, enlisted when there is reason for not being fully forthcoming and therefore for speaking the truth under a broad "mental reservation."
- 12 Such sorts of equivocation are much discussed by church fathers in order to enable individuals to negotiate the moral landmine of not fully revealing the truth. *The New Catholic Encyclopedia* describes the device in the following way:
- A term used to describe an attempt to evade a perplexing moral situation by restricting the meaning of words used in an act of communicating [...]. In the broad sense mental reservation is the use of equivocation or ambiguity to conceal the truth. What is said is not objectively untruthful, but it is phrased in such a way that it is possible, indeed even probable, that the true meaning of the words will escape the hearer, and that he will understand them in a sense in which they are not true. (497-8)
- 13 The allusion resonates strikingly with Victor's situation, in which day-to-day interactions with others are both self-consciously—and often unawares—cloaked by reservations of one sort or another. Such is the constancy of his fear of discovery and the consequent revelation of his lineage that even Victor's physical demeanor comes to reflect his deception: "His eyes had acquired a habit of veiling themselves under their lashes as if they were constantly concealing something" (21).

- 14 The following dialogue between Elise and Victor provides an admirable example of the way Dunbar-Nelson simulates the processes of the doctrine of mental reservation in Victor's daily interaction, in this instance with his wife:
- 'Oh, but Victor, haven't you some sort of plantation somewhere [...]?'
 'I have no home in the country'
 'Well, didn't you ever own one, or your family?'
 'It was quite a good many years ago,' [...] and a vision of the little old hut with its tumble down steps and weed grown garden came into his mind.
 'Where was it?'
 'Oh, away up in St. Landry parish, too far away from civilization to mention.' (15)
- 15 Dodging and ambiguity is used here to evade the revelation of the truth. Elise questions Victor about his plantation. Rather than tell her the truth, that there never was such a place, he is evasive, saying he has no "home in the country." When Elise pursues the question, asking him if he or his family ever owned "one," by which she means a plantation, Victor simply suggests "it" (referring to the ownership, rather, of *the home* he has just mentioned) was a good many years ago. In a manner typical of mental reservation, "what is said is not objectively untruthful," yet an exact understanding of the actual situation "escape[s] the hearer" (498).
- 16 The allusion to "mental reservation" is especially effective in indicating the subtlety of the manner in which Victor obfuscates both in his relations with others and in his rationalizations to himself. Ironically, however, the self-perceived motivation for such "reservation" is sharply dissonant from the sort of moral justification outlined by the church. The protagonist wrestles with his subterfuge precisely because he does not believe that his is an "admissible ambiguity [...] a truth legitimately hidden" (*New Catholic Encyclopedia* 499), "for the sake of safety of soul, body, honor, or any virtuous act" (Zagorin 898). Because of the extent to which he has internalized the prejudices of his society and its more general ideals of honesty and justice,¹³ he feels remiss in not fully disclosing, especially to Elise and to her family, the nature of his background. Thus, he asks himself: "Was it right to take a wife, especially such a woman as Elise, and from such a family as the Vanniers? Would it be fair? Would it be just?" (16) Additionally, Victor feels the guilt of betrayal related to his treatment of—yet confused sympathy and even deep respect for—people of color, especially those who exhibit confidence, pride and integrity like Ward and Pavageau.
- 17 Indeed, the development within the narrative of Grabert's interaction—and at times obsession—with these characters in particular, masterfully evokes the extent to which Victor is conflicted and unable to resolve his confused feelings of allegiance – and sense of identity. Unlike the protagonist, Wilson and Pavageau are forthright and unapologetic about their lineage, acting in accord with their convictions and affiliations in a way that Victor secretly admires and would no doubt wish to emulate.¹⁴ Moreover these men demonstrate conspicuous courage in fighting for their rights—and the rights of others—even when there is little or no hope of success. Thus, Wilson is described as always "kicking up some sort of row about theatre seats and cars" (13) whereas Pavageau admirably defends victims of discrimination in the courts.
- 18 Wilson and Pavageau furthermore manifest impressive self-control. The former, for instance, remains poised and "indifferent" even when he is told by a judge: "[you] niggers are putting yourselves up too much" (13). Wilson's "perfectly impassive" demeanor and deliberate behavior in the courtroom are notably contrasted to Victor's impulsive reaction upon hearing the judge's despicable comments: "at the forbidden

word, the blood rushed to Grabért's face, and he started from his seat angrily" (13). Pavageau as well, is ever in control of his passions and is commendably measured in his actions. Even though mistreated by Victor and knowing his secret, Pavageau does not yield to vindictiveness and seek to destroy the protagonist, but rather asks him simply (and calmly) for fair treatment in the courtroom.

- 19 Grabért is continually buffeted by emotions (especially manifest in his interactions with these men) that he cannot control. He experiences fear and consequent repulsion, surely, but he also feels sympathy, admiration, envy and attraction toward them. The protagonist's repeated interactions with Pavageau, specifically, provoke irreconcilable and unsettling feelings. Though Victor loathes contact with this man, regarding him as his "bête noire" (24) and the source of his intense "fits of moodiness and depression" (29), the protagonist nonetheless "secretly [...] admired [...] respected [and] liked him" (24), desiring even "to go up to Pavageau and give him his hand; to tell him he was proud of him" (24).
- 20 Yet the protagonist "dared not" (24) display this admiration. Living a life of subterfuge, a prey to the "vague formless fear [that] [...] dogged his life and haunted it" (29), Victor is "morbidly nervous lest something in his manner betray him" (13). Thus, "prudence and fear and cowardice" (30) dominate Victor's behavior. In the presence—and under the influence—of these men the protagonist is time and again "frightened at his own unguardedness" (19). Following a visit to his workplace from Wilson, for instance, Victor subsequently finds himself, inexplicably, with a "growing sympathy" for a Negro caretaker at his office (13). While the protagonist is, however, able to discharge the office worker and, at least to a degree, is capable more generally of avoiding contact with people of color in most areas of his life, Victor cannot similarly discharge Wilson and especially Pavageau whom he so often meets in court. In sum, Victor feels a maddening attraction and yet at the same time repulsion for these men of color. He admires their grit and their openness, sympathizes with them when they are the brunt of prejudice, yet feels threatened by the feelings they evoke in him, and so, defensively, regards (and treats) them as hated antagonists.
- 21 Certainly a sympathetic reader might not only understand but also empathize with Victor's desire to be treated equally in society and so to rise to the fullest heights of which he is capable through "passing". "It is natural for the individual," writes an early 20th century commentator about this phenomenon, "to remove the obstacles that interfere with his civic and economic progress, by such methods as seem to him available" (Baldwin 114). That Victor must act duplicitously in order to remove such obstacles is surely an indictment of the prejudicial society in which he lives. Furthermore, his unbounded success belies the bigotry of the age, based upon arbitrary strictures of the color line. Given that the only way for Victor to realize his potential is to hide his past, then why should he not do so? Yet Victor himself cannot consistently view his situation as a sympathetic reader might. At times, he does think: "Well, why not, after all why not? What difference between him and the hosts of other suitors who hovered about Elise?" (16) But at other times, and more essentially, he cannot escape the feeling (deeply rooted in his anguished childhood experiences) that he is somehow a lesser being because "they had family traditions and he had none" (16).
- 22 In order to relieve himself of unrelenting anguish about the way in which he has lived a self-conceived "life of deception" (17), Victor equivocates, rationalizes and at times unselfconsciously projects his self-anger and self-contempt outwardly – at those

"people whose prejudices [he believes] *made him* live a life of deception"(italics mine, 17).¹⁵ At the same time, though, he desperately wants to sustain his standing in the community and so, fearful, he takes no action against those he blames, shirking from exposure, caught in a web of self-contempt and ostensible contempt of others.

- 23 Dunbar-Nelson's impressive achievement throughout her tale is to enable the reader access through measured adjustments to the point of view (and by other means which I have been describing) to the insular, subjective world of the protagonist that is so frequently out of step with the world at large.¹⁶ The gulf between the public and private perspective progressively widens to the extent that Victor's anguished feelings of inferiority, of ambivalence, of guilt and notably of suspicion, are markedly independent of any stimulus from without. The narrative specifically evokes, for instance, the breach between the exterior view of Victor's success and the muddied, interior one of his self-perceived failure. Fairly early in the story, the narrator describes, in a distanced and "objective" way, the effortless course of the protagonist's accomplishments:

From school to college, and from college to Law school he had gone, and thence into practice, and he was now accredited a successful young lawyer [...] His small fortune [...] invested wisely [...] had almost doubled, and his school career [...] had been pleasant and profitable. He had made friends [...] He was rapidly becoming a social favorite, and girls vied with each other to dance with him. No one had asked any questions. [...] so he passed through the portals of the social world and was in the inner circle. (11)

- 24 Here the narrator documents, simply, Victor's impressive triumphs as he moves through various stages in his education and career to become a successful lawyer and, as well, into ever more exclusive social circles, not excluding that of the Vannier's, a "family [that] had been a social arbiter for many years"(11).
- 25 Yet later in the story, when the narrative limits the point of view to Victor, we note an entirely different prospect, especially as a result of the carefully chosen diction. The protagonist conceives of himself not as deserving of advancement, but rather as having "*taken* a diploma from *their* college" and of having "*taken* for his wife the best among *them* all" (italics mine 30-1). The word "taken" conveys Victor's feeling that he has gotten away with something, in effect stealing that which he does not deserve. His college education, his prestigious social position as a lawyer and later judge, the woman he loves and his social coup in marrying into the very highest social circles – none of these, Victor feels, is legitimately due to him.
- 26 Undeniably, the protagonist feels that there is a "subtle barrier that separated *them*" (italics mine, 16) from himself and that as a result of his lineage, "he must ever be on the outside, hovering at the gates, as it were [and that] into the inner life of the social world, he might never enter" (16). Here, in particular, is a fine instance of the way Dunbar-Nelson carefully offers contradictory outside and inside perspectives, using comparable diction in order to highlight the contrast between them. In the passage cited earlier, the narrator recounts at some remove, as a mere observer, describing the actuality, the manner in which Victor had "passed through the portals into the inner circle" (11). At this later point, however, privileged with the protagonist's unshakeable view that "he must ever be on the outside," the reader understands that, in Victor's mind, such gates will remain forever closed to him.

- 27 The protagonist's suspicion that others are somehow aware—or will become so—of his true identity grows increasingly to paranoia, incongruously as Victor rises higher and higher in the social world. When Wilson, for instance, comes to visit Victor in his office one day, the protagonist conjectures that the recorder had in an earlier meeting "seen the telltale flush on his face" (23). In truth, "Wilson did not even remember having seen him before" (23). Similarly, Victor's later hesitation as a judge in the courtroom to respond to Pavageau's comment about his child's schooling "shrieked in [Victor's] mind and stood out before him [...] wherein it seemed that his every footstep was dogged, his every gesture watched and recorded" (27). Those in attendance in the courtroom, we discover, find the whole incident humorous and think that "plainly Pavageau was an idiot, and his Honour too far above him; too much of a gentleman to notice him" (26-7). There is, then, no mistrust of Victor on the part of the general public, or indeed on the part of any of Grabért's acquaintances, which might rationalize the protagonist's overriding fear of discovery. Nor, despite his insecurity, is there a public denigration of Victor analogous to his *self*-denigration.
- 28 This skillful contrasting of interior and exterior viewpoints reaches its climax at the end of the tale at the political banquet, with Victor's deluded vision, first of Grandmère Grabért sitting in the place of the chairman (32) and later, of the presence at the gathering of "the little brutish boys" of the village. Such imaginings are offset by the narrator's descriptions of the way "Every eye was fastened on [Victor] in eager expectancy [as he] turned to *the chairman at the head of the table*" (italics mine, 32) and of the "men crowded around him," (33) evidently concerned for his welfare.
- 29 In the final tableau of the story, in particular, Dunbar-Nelson leaves the reader with an inspired symbolic representation of the self-imposed boundary,¹⁷ beyond which, despite his incredible social success, Victor simply cannot venture: "So he arose, and stumbling, shrieking and beating them back from him, ran the length of the hall, and fell across the threshold of the door" (33). This door, like the earlier-mentioned portals and gates, is accessible and open. Still, even at the very moment of his death, there is no freedom of entry for Victor; such is Dunbar-Nelson's unyielding portrait of psychological determinism. Despite having reached the very "threshold" of the entry way, he succumbs to the debilitating psychological frailty (now manifestly psychosomatic) that has dogged him his whole life.¹⁸
- 30 "The Stones of the Village" dramatizes Victor's lifelong struggle to forge a viable identity, to understand—and to wrest control of—his bitter and conflicting emotions, and ultimately, to find some measure of peace for himself. His emotional anguish begins early in childhood, substantially as a result of his isolation and mistreatment in society because he is a black Creole in Louisiana in an age of prejudice. His struggles intensify as a result of feeling fear, distrust, bitterness, guilt, ambivalence and more, all in the course of his "passing" as pure-blood white, a self-perceived solution to his crisis of identity. But identity formation, it turns out, is individual and relational, frequently attenuated and complex. Dunbar-Nelson's tale evokes the composite and multi-faceted dimensions of identity in the carefully developed vicissitudes of Victor's emotional struggle. Yet "the force, the fire, and the artistic touch" of "The Stones of the Village" is manifest in the proverbial details: among other things, in the artful structuring and style of the

fiction, in its imagery, symbolism, allusion, and point of view. Perhaps in this context, we may apply to the short story an insight that Brooks and Warren originally applied to the poem: "We may put the matter this way: The theme does not give the [story] its force; the [story] gives the theme its force" (121).

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NOTES

1. Paul Dunbar described his future wife's story-writing ability: "You have the force, the fire and the artistic touch that is so delicate and so strong." (Hull, *Heath* 389.)
2. Several critics emphasize this realistic dimension of the story. See, for instance, Bryan, who suggests that the tale incorporates a "realistic treatment of race" (133); Mullen who labels the fiction "real"; and Judith and Martin Hamer, who suggest that Dunbar-Nelson's tale provides an "example of the renewed emphasis on social realism in black women's literature that began shortly after the turn of the century" (10). Hull, in particular, highlights the authenticity of the historical setting: "History and sociology confirm that color, caste and race were deadly, daily realities for the mixed blood inhabitants of Louisiana" (Intro 35).
3. Indeed, Marylynne Diggs suggests that the story is "a perfect example of the narrative of passing, secrecy, and the fear of detection" (13).
4. See <http://scribblingwomen.org> for the showcasing and dramatization of the tale and <http://nationalhumanitiescenter.org/pds/maai2/identity/text5/dunbarnelson.pdf> for an authoritative version of the story on the web. The following anthologies include Dunbar-Nelson's story: *Centers of the Self: Stories by Black American Women from the 19th Century to the Present*, eds. Judith A. Hamer and Martin J. Hamer NY, Hill & Wang, (1994); *Revolutionary Tales: African American Women's Short Stories, from the First Story to the Present* ed. Bill Mullen. New York: Laurel Leaf (1995); *The Soul of a Woman*, eds. Grace W. Tompkins, Harriet E. Wilson, Zora Neale Hurston, Nella Larsen, Jessie Redmond. New York: Fawcett Press, 1996; *Great Short Stories by American Women*, ed. Candace Ward. New York: Dover Publications, 1996. *American local color writing, 1880-1920* eds. Eds. Elizabeth Ammond and Valerie Rohv. New York: Penguin Books, 1998. ; and *Pow Wow: charting the fault lines of the American Experience -short fiction from the to now* eds. Carla Blank and Ishmael Reed. New York: Perseus Books, 2008.
5. See for example, *The Companion to Southern Literature*, 207; *The History of Southern Women's Literature*, 229; *Southern Local Color: Stories of Region, Race and Gender*, 297; *Writing out of Place: Regionalism, Women, and American Literary Culture*, 283 and *Encyclopedia of the Harlem Renaissance*. 884.
6. There are notable exceptions to such limited commentary. Jordan Stouck and Marylynne Diggs do much to illuminate various thematic dimensions of the story; the former discusses the crisis of identity in the context of Creolization while the latter examines the "thematics of passing, secrecy and the fear of detection" (2) in discourses of racial and sexual identity. The narrative has most often (and rightly, it seems to me) been associated thematically with the narrative of "passing." A common focus of such narratives, as in Dunbar-Nelson's tale, is the failure of "passing" as a solution to problems of identity. For further discussion of this failure, see Wald, 357. Victor's ambivalent emotions and crisis of identity have been linked to Dunbar-Nelson's own "powerful ambivalence" with regard to her "mixed white, black and Indian Creole ancestral strains" (Hull xxix). Furthermore, the prejudice depicted in whites and blacks alike (e.g. in *Grandmère Grabert*) has been related to the author's own experience as described in "Brass Ankles Speaks." Indeed, Hull suggests that "'The Stones of the Village' is as close as she [Dunbar-Nelson] ever got to turning [her] personal and cultural confusion into art" (xxxvi).
7. For such sorts of apologetic commentary see, for instance: "One must remember, too, the content of nineteenth century popular fiction with its penchant for narrative modes and devices we now eschew - romance, melodrama, moralization, etc" (Hull, *Heath* 388); "However Dunbar-Nelson was writing [...] mostly before the early twentieth century [...] Her plots often seem predictable, her situations hackneyed or melodramatic, her narrative style unsophisticated [...]" (Hull, *Color Sex and Poetry* 53); "Alice Dunbar-Nelson's attributes are, to be sure, somewhat modest. But for all that, those who call her stories of New Orleans charming [...] are right"

(Whitlow 124). For further discussion of the denigration of Dunbar-Nelson's writing ability, see, Strychaszcz, footnote 3.

8. All citations from the text of "The Stones of the Village" are taken from the authoritative edition edited by Hull and will be noted by page numbers in parentheses.

9. This early event and its consequences are crucial to Victor's development: "It had been loneliness *ever since*" (italics mine 5). Gloria T. Hull suggests that the silence "linguistic, racial, psychic, and emotional" early imposed in childhood upon Victor "determines his entire life" (xxxiv).

10. See, for example, the way Victor thinks recurrently of the boys on pages 17, 25, 27, 30, 31, 32.

11. All citations from the text of "The Stones of the Village" are taken from the authoritative edition edited by Hull and will be noted by page numbers in parentheses.

12. See, for instance, such sorts of self-inquiry on pages 6, 9, 15, 16, and 23. Additionally, Victor's earlier shocked exclamation (in the language of-- if not punctuated as--an interrogative) "Why--why--why--"(9) and then several lines later again, "why--why--"(9) echoes this bewilderment.

13. Stouck insightfully suggests that: "the real revelation of Dunbar-Nelson's text" is that "identities are revealed as social fictions" (287).

14. Recurrently in the story, he determines that "he would be honest" (17).

15. Steven T. Moore discusses the anger that Grabért carries within him at the beginning of the story as a result of his childhood experience (100). It seems to me that, especially as the tale develops, such anger intermittently directed outwards towards whites (and even people of color like Wilson and Pavageau) is a projection of his increasing self-contempt.

16. The point of view utilized by Dunbar-Nelson falls into the category of "third person omniscient limited." Wayne C. Booth's description of the "embarrassing inadequacy of our traditional classification of 'point of view' (149) in conveying the specific rhetorical affects of the manner of narration seems particularly apt here. In "The Stones of the Village," Dunbar-Nelson artfully enhances the sense of Victor's insular perception through a complex and skillful alteration of perspectives.

17. Gloria T. Hull writes of the way in Dunbar-Nelson's tales "one encounters disturbing tropes of enclosure (the veil, the closing door) which subtly critique female confinement and lack of options" (Hull xxxiii). Ironically the tropes of enclosure in this tale appear to be more psychological than actual.

18. Hull suggests that Victor had a "fatal heart attack." It is not clear what Victor dies of, whether a heart attack, or stroke, or something else. I do think it likely that his psychological stress contributed substantially to his death.

ABSTRACTS

Écrit entre 1900 et 1910, "The Stones of the Village" d'Alice Dunbar-Nelson a été publié à titre posthume en 1988. Depuis, l'œuvre a figuré dans de nombreuses anthologies et obtenu une reconnaissance bien méritée comme un récit qui dramatise avec une force considérable le phénomène de "passer Blanc". Dans l'ensemble toutefois, les critiques se sont généralement concentrés sur le sujet, les thèmes et les dimensions autobiographiques de la nouvelle, ne faisant guère de place à la remarquable technique littéraire. À la lumière surtout des réserves critiques fréquentes quant aux capacités de

Dunbar-Nelson en tant que nouvelliste, une exposition détaillée de sa méthode maîtrisée dans cette nouvelle est d'autant plus nécessaire. En effet, dans "The Stones of the Village", l'auteur préfigure de main de maître des incidents décisifs et à tout le moins déterminants de l'enfance de Grabert, orchestrant le point de vue et d'autres éléments narratifs précis, tout en créant un contrepoint entre les réalisations du protagoniste et le doute qui le tourmente. Dunbar-Nelson a de plus recours à une caractérisation, une imagerie, un symbolisme et avant tout des évocations remarquables pour tracer un portrait saisissant de la manière dont le conflit affectif détermine le cours tragique de la vie d'un Créole noir à la recherche d'une identité viable.

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Michael Tritt teaches in the Dept. of English, Marianopolis College, Montréal. He has written about the fiction of many nineteenth and early twentieth century American writers, including Hawthorne, Poe, Thoreau, Twain, Crane, Sinclair, Bierce and others. His most recent publications have been about the work of Cynthia Wilkins Freeman, Kate Chopin, and a little known feminist editor and writer, Rosa Sonneschein.