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Countering Stereotypes and Affirming Black Childhood and Family Relationships in Paul Laurence Dunbar's *Little Brown Baby*

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مواجهة الصور النمطية وتأكيد الطفولة والروابط الأسرية السوداء في ديوان الطفل البني الصغير لبول لورانس دنبار

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ABSTRACT

Paul Laurence Dunbar (1872-1906), a celebrated African American poet, was named as the poet laureate of the Negro race. He belonged to the first generation of Negroes born into freedom. He deeply understood his people and cared about their problems. Hence, through his literary gift, he was able to decode their spirit and life in his poetry. Dunbar's love for children made him write many poems in light of them. This paper argues that *Little Brown Baby* resists the dehumanizing legacies of the minstrel and plantation traditions by celebrating the dignity and emotional richness of the Black family. Situated in the post-Reconstruction era, when African American identity was under social and literary distortion, Dunbar's work offers a radical counter-narrative by celebrating the warmth, intimacy, and cultural richness of Black childhood and domestic life. The purpose of this study is to explore how Dunbar's selected poems from *Little Brown Baby* use poetic form and cultural expression to affirm Black childhood and family love, while actively resisting racial stereotypes. Drawing on Critical Race Theory, the analysis emphasizes how the poem functions as a counter-story that reclaims Black identity and challenges dominant narratives that historically devalued African American domestic life and childhood experiences. Keywords: Dunbar, Black childhood, family Bonds, Racial Stereotypes, Minstrel Show, Black Dialect, counter-storytelling.

المستخلص

يُعد بول لورانس دنبار (١٨٧٢-١٩٠٦) من أبرز الشعراء الأمريكيين من أصول إفريقية، وقد لُقّب بشاعر العرق الزنجي. انتمى إلى الجيل الأول من السود الذين وُلدوا أحرارًا بعد إلغاء العبودية. وكان دنبار يمتلك فهمًا عميقًا لمجتمعه واهتمامًا صادقًا بمشكلاته، مما مكّنه من التعبير عن روحه وحياته من خلال موهبته الشعرية. وقد دفعه حبّه للأطفال إلى كتابة العديد من القصائد التي تتناول عالمهم ومشاعرهم. تؤكد هذه الدراسة أن أعمال دنبار تُعدّ مقاومة للإرث اللانسانى للثقافة التهمكية وصور المزارع النمطية، من خلال احتوائها بكرامة الأسرة السوداء وغناها العاطفي. وتأتي هذه القصائد في سياق مرحلة ما بعد إعادة الإعمار، حين كانت الهوية الإفريقية الأمريكية تتعرض للتشويه الاجتماعي والأدبي، فتقدم بذلك سردًا مضادًا جذريًا يحثي بالدفء والحنان والثراء الثقافي في حياة الطفولة السوداء والأسر الإفريقية الأمريكية. وتهدف هذه الدراسة إلى استكشاف كيفية توظيف دنبار للشكل الشعري والتعبير الثقافي لتأكيد الطفولة السوداء وحب الأسرة، مع مقاومة الصور النمطية العنصرية. وتستند الدراسة إلى نظرية العرق النقدية، لتبرز كيف أن هذه القصائد تمثل قصصًا مضادة تستعيد الهوية السوداء وتواجه السرديات السائدة التي طالما انتقصت من قيمة الحياة الأسرية والطفولة لدى الأمريكيين من أصل إفريقي. الكلمات المفتاحية: دنبار، الطفولة السوداء، الروابط الأسرية، الصور النمطية العنصرية، عرض الوجه الأسود، اللهجة الإفريقية الأمريكية، السرد المضاد.

1. Introduction Following the Civil War (1861-1865), Reconstruction (1865-1877) faced significant political, social, economic, and psychological challenges for newly liberated blacks. They had to defend their citizenship, maintain social equality, and remain free workers with their employers, despite attempts to reduce their rights. The most severe problems faced by these individuals were in their psychological domain, questioning who they are and who they should be to survive in the struggle for life (Wagner 39). "In the process of marginalization, minority individuals are turned into rejected and debased objects, which results in damaging their psyches" (Taher 77). Their inferior status was not just a legal edict but also confirmed by daily existence, and literature and art were not exempt from these servitudes. In the late 19th century, black poets faced a heavy burden of inferiority due to the traditional portrayal of the Negro in stage plays, poems, and novels, which limited their freedom of expression and influenced public opinion. It was the minstrel tradition and the plantation tradition that had the greatest influence on Black poetry in the final years of the nineteenth century (Wagner 39). In such an era marked by racial caricature and social marginalization, Paul Laurence Dunbar emerged as a poetic voice that both resisted stereotypes and tenderly celebrated Black life. "Dunbar's poems provide a significant and nuanced contribution to American literary and cultural history" (Fattah & Yousif, *The Racialization* 157). By Dunbar's era, the minstrel show had been firmly entrenched in popular culture, significantly contributing to the proliferation of the stock character of the Negro. It can be characterized as a system of entertainment rooted in Negro folk art, whether comedic or melancholic, appropriated, performed, and often distorted by subpar white actors who "impersonate Negroes" by darkening their faces with burnt cork. These representations have enduring psychological and social repercussions, engendering inner conflicts and constraining the public expression of Black identity (Wagner 40).

2. *Little Brown Baby* *Little Brown Baby* is regarded as the first book for African American children. It is a collection of dialect poems first published in 1895 (Harris 544). In 1940, Bertha Rodgers edited the collection, including twenty-five poems that directly or indirectly address black children. Dunbar's *Little Brown Baby* illustrates the importance of black childhood. This collection is considered the inaugural book for African American youngsters, highlighting familial connections and depicting affectionate portrayals of black household life. The collection opens with "Little Brown Baby" poem, composed in slave vernacular at the conclusion of his career and life, has become an American classic. "Little Brown Baby" draws upon Dunbar's childhood recollections of his father, who would summon his child to sit on his knee and narrate enchanting tales of valor or cautionary stories about the "Boogie Man," purportedly residing just beyond their threshold. Patricia C. McKissack values this poem saying: The love between father and son in the poem crosses racial lines. Fathers of every race have shared this poem with their children, but minority fathers are particularly fond of this Dunbar piece. It presents a black father and son in a loving relationship, something that is rarely shown in American literature (51). Patricia C. McKissack highlights the importance of Dunbar's affectionate depiction, which affirms the emotional depth and dignity of Black familial life and challenges dominant narratives of Black fatherhood as absent or broken. Katharine Capshaw Smith, in her book *Literature of the Harlem Renaissance*, asserts that the poem illustrates the connection between modern African American parents and their children "through the dramatic interaction between parent reader and child auditor, the contemporary family an echo of the antebellum family" (124). Dunbar's poems concerning black children and childhood continued to be read by African American households for centuries following his demise. Little brown baby wif spa'klin' eyes, Come to yo' pappy an' set on his knee. What you been doin', suh — makin' san' pies? Look at dat bib — you's es du'ty ez me. Look at dat mouf — dat's merlasses, I bet; Come hyeah, Maria, an' wipe off his han's. Bees gwine to ketch you an' eat you up yit, Bein' so sticky an' sweet — goodness lan's! (*Little Brown Baby* 3). The poem commences with a jovial, affectionate black father inviting his child, "Come to yo' pappy an' set on his knee," expressing his adoration for his little brown baby "wif spa'klin' eyes." The father cautions his child of the danger of bee stings, stating, "Bees will catch you and consume you, / Being so sticky and sweet." This motif and aesthetic persist throughout the entirety of the poem. The jovial father delights in interacting with his infant, embodying the affection and tenderness of familial bonds. The poem employs black slang to function as a historical document that captures the realities of African American living during that period. Smith contends that "the celebration of familial ties in 'Little Brown Baby' evokes the inclusive cross-writing of pageants and plays, texts that conferred upon grandmothers' narratives the significance and authority of academic textbooks" (127). Smith's observation underscores how "Little Brown Baby" elevates everyday Black family life, especially oral traditions like grandmothers' stories, to the level of cultural and educational authority. Dah, now, I t'ought dat you'd hug me up close. Go back, ol' buggah, you sha'n't have dis boy. He ain't no tramp, ner no straggler, of co'se; He's pappy's

pa'dner an' play-mate an' joy. Come to you' pallet now — go to yo' res'; Wisht you could allus know ease an' cleah skies; Wisht you could stay jes' a chile on my breas'—Little brown baby wif spa'klin' eyes! (*Little Brown Baby* 4 In the lighthearted exchange between the father and his child, Dunbar subtly addresses the topic of the black child's identification, as the father humorously insinuates that the youngster may not be a member of the family and that they might discard him or relinquish him to the "buggah-man." The erroneous labels "tramp" and "straggler" are ultimately dismissed by the father, underscoring the significance of the child's role within the family structure. "He is neither a vagrant nor a drifter, of course; / He is his father's partner, playmate, and source of joy." The misidentification is rectified at the poem's conclusion, as the youngster embraces his father, a bodily gesture that confirms his position within the family unit. The father's remark, "Dah, now, I thought that you'd embrace me closely," signifies the poem's climax, as the child's embrace reinstates the connection between father and child. In the poem's conclusion, the father expresses a desire to shield his kid from the harshness of the external world: "Wisht you could allus know ease an' cleah skies; / Wisht you could stay jes' a chile on my breas'." "I wish you could always know peace and clear skies; I wish you could stay just a child on my chest." The poem encapsulates the tension between the aspiration to safeguard the black child and the challenges inherent in realizing this objective. Smith asserts that the father understands the child cannot retain infancy in the face of racism and the institution of slavery, as well as the inherent transience of youth; the unfortunate inference is that the child may be unable to evade minstrel stereotype (127) Dunbar composed this poem during a time barely one generation after slavery, when African American families were still striving for genuine freedom and social justice. Dunbar positions the child at the heart of a supportive family to rehabilitate the representation of the African American family. In her work "Through a Glass Clearly: Positive Images of African-American Fathers in Young Adult Literature," Marcia Baghban asserts that "Slavery in America destroyed the sense of community that Africans had derived from their tribal lives and extended family ties" (226). Consequently, there is no direct correlation between African familial structures and those developed in America. Moreover, the black family did not achieve stability post-emancipation, as the former slaves were conditioned to exist within the paternalistic framework of slavery. E. Franklin Frazier, an American sociologist, asserts that ex-slaves exhibit irresponsibility due to the tremendous economic disadvantage imposed by racial discrimination following enslavement. As a result, the majority of them were poorly suited for life following slavery" (qtd. in Hamer 3). Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan's book, *The Negro Family: A Case for National Action*, characterizes African American households as "a female-headed tangle of pathology" (qtd. in Baghban 229). This prevalent notion has been historically accentuated, but Baghban illustrates that "African-American families have been two-parent families" (229). Patricia C. McKissack asserts that the poem "Little Brown Baby" has contributed to dispelling the misconception that black men are indifferent to their children, when, in reality, they have always cared. Although Dunbar composed "Little Brown Baby" in black dialect, its concept introduced a novel approach to addressing African American issues. This poem conveys that Black children can possess strong families with loving, responsible fathers, thereby countering racial stereotypes and providing "counter-stories" regarding Black fatherhood and family dynamics. Dunbar's "voice of color" redefines black childhood by emphasizing the love, care, and protection of the black father towards his little brown child, a perspective absent during the era of slavery. He also redefined black fatherhood and challenged the Critical Race Theory principle of "differential racialization," which posits that dominant white narratives portray black fathers as "phantoms or villains" who purportedly exhibit minimal or no genuine concern for their families' welfare" (qtd. in Hamer 1). Baghban distinguishes between biological and social paternity, asserting that "Any man can conceive a child, but only a father can nurture a child." Successful parenthood can only be assessed via the perspective of the children, specifically the actions of the father that the children genuinely value or recall. Smith asserts that, in "Little Brown Baby," the child's gesture confirms the father's role as a loving guardian and the child's position as an essential member of the family. The embrace signifies the family's identity, serves as the pivotal action of the dramatic poetry, and concludes the father's game" (126). Ultimately, the embrace crystallizes the poem's deeper message, that love, protection, and identity are silently but powerfully affirmed within the bonds of Black family life. "At Candle-Lightin' Time" (1901) is a poem from the children's collection *Little Brown Baby*, wherein Dunbar illustrates the profound familial bonds and stability within the black community. The poem depicts the evening rituals of a black family on a southern plantation. It commences with the father returning home after a strenuous day in the fields. The family congregates to share a meal, followed by a delightful time filled with music, play, and storytelling. When I come in f'om de co'n-fiel' aftah wo'kin' ha'd all day, It 's amazin' nice to fin' my suppah all erpon de way; An' it 's nice to smell de coffee bubblin' ovah in de

pot, An' it 's fine to see de meat a-sizzlin' teasin'-lak an' hot. (Little Brown Baby 43) Dunbar underscores the significance of the black father inside the family as a supporter and protector of his children. He illustrates the lives of Black children as replete with love and care, which are essential for their emotional development. The mundane pleasures of daily occurrences impart genuine significance to the experiences of African American children within the framework of black familial structures. Engaging in activities such as dining, playing music, and narrating stories fosters robust familial connections that can reinforce the identity of Black children and provide them with a sense of belonging. Furthermore, they can provide joy to marginalized families and their children, whose happiness is rooted in love rather than wealth. The poem highlights African American culture and traditions, with traditional elements such as banjo playing and shadow figures being passed down through generations. Emphasizing black traditions would empower black youngsters by instilling an appreciation for their culture, hence fostering pride in their racial identity. My ole 'ooman says, "I reckon, Ike, it 's candle-lightin' time." Den de chillun snuggle up to me, an' all commence to call, "Oh, say, daddy, now it 's time to mek de shadders on de wall." So I puts my han's togethah—evah daddy knows de way, An' de chillun snuggle closer roun' ez I begin to say:—"Fus' thing, hyeah come Mistah Rabbit; don' you see him wo'khis eahs? (Little Brown Baby 43) The prevailing narrative among white individuals seeks to diminish and marginalize the black family, especially the black father. Critical Race Theory's concept of 'differential racialization' characterizes African Americans in the dominant society as "threatening, prone to violence, and, concurrently, often lazy" (Tyson 358). In this poem, Dunbar challenges the prevailing narrative by presenting a "counter-narrative" that depicts a good and resilient black father and family, so subverting prejudices. Moreover, the affirmation of children through familial connections not only advantages the youth in Dunbar's era, but his affirmative portrayal of black families and children acts as a potent instrument for future generations of black children within a racially oppressive society and its persistent racism. Rudine Sims asserts that black children require good representations of themselves in children's literature to cultivate a robust sense of their own humanity (650). Dunbar's dialect poetry, while ostensibly crafted for a white audience, evidently provided advantages for black pupils by enabling them achievement inside the prevailing educational framework of white society. By engaging with Dunbar's poetry, which was embraced by white readers, black children would acquire a strategy for assimilating into predominantly white educational environments. Creating a filtered representation of black culture, described by biographer Marion Cuthbert in her 1936 work *We Sing America* as "Dunbar's white-approved version of folk culture," enables African American children to see portions of their culture reflected in school curricula and children's literature. Moreover, Dunbar's work not only provided affirmation for black children but also humanized the experiences of African Americans, which were frequently dehumanized by white society. As mentioned by Cuthbert that Dunbar's "writings told many things about people that we like to hear how they felt, what they did, their joys and sorrows" (qtd. in Smith 121) At the conclusion of the poem, the father narrates the final narrative to his children before bedtime, centering on the "boogeyman." The speaker asserts that the children do not genuinely fear this narrative; rather, they typically feign terror, fully aware of their safety within their father's home. "Den I hollaahs, "Now be keerful—dis hyeah las' 's de buga-man!"/ An' dey runs an' hides dey faces; dey ain't skeered—dey 's lettin' on:" The children's ability to regulate their fear, aided by the reassuring presence of their father, encourages black youngsters to feel secure in their homes. Smith contends that the affirmation of black children through familial connections has persisted since Dunbar's age, noting that "the performance of these family bonding poems during the 1920s and 1930s evokes the era's insistence on the primacy of the domestic in cultivating progressive children" (127) Dunbar acknowledges the emotional, imaginative world of the childhood, where myth and family storytelling play a role in shaping understanding and boundaries. The legendary "Boogah Man" appears again in another poem of the collection to humorously warn or guide behavior. The notion of the Boogeyman is found in every culture; he is a figure often used by adults or mostly parents to warn children about misbehavior. This myth "helps to pass down traditions and unite people within a culture" (Wood 7). Dunbar's Boogeyman reflects a common cultural myth that many African American children would understand. Kathryne Wood comments on the importance of the myth, she states that; "because the US is relatively new, it lacks the rich mythology of ancient civilizations. It is important that we build up our cultural heritage, and pass down cultural values, beliefs and customs that make us "American" (7) The poem "The Boogah Man" opens with a spooky description of the night when the Boogeyman arrives. For children's innocent imagination, the world is a magical place in which anything can happen and anything can exist. The ghostly scene of darkness is combined by the sound of this creature who is unknown and unseen. Thus, "the Boogeyman is posited as a monstrous foreigner who defines the shared boundaries of the group by reprimanding

disobedient members of the community” (McGuinness 6). In this statement, McGuinness locates the Boogeyman as an outsider who reflects an external threat. Regarding the Boogeyman as a “foreigner”, emphasizes the idea of “Otherness”, and suggests that safety is achieved only within the community. Therefore, “The Boogeyman” functions as a tool to strength children identity, as he helps distinguish between acceptable and unacceptable behaviors, and also between the safe, internal community and dangerous external one. W'en de evenin' shadders Come a-glidin' down Fallin' black an' heavy Ovah hill an' town Ef you listen keerful, Keerful ez you kin, So 's you boun' to notice Des a drappin' pin; Den you 'll hyeah a funny Soun' ercross de lan'; Lay low; dat's de callin' Of de Boogah Man! Woo-oo woo-oo! (*Little Brown Baby* 39) However, the poet ensures the black children that they could be saved from this scary creature if they behave properly. Hence the poem serves as a moral lesson that teaches the black children their responsibility in keeping themselves safe through ethical and moral actions such as loving their mothers, obeying their fathers, “Ef you loves yo' mammy,/ An' you min's yo' pap,” and saying their prayers every night, “Ef you says yo' "Lay me"/ Evah single night.” Connecting to religion is something important in the blacks' life, “Maturing during a period that saw the revival of the so-called Negro spirituals... Dunbar's poetry gives witness to an intensely religious sensibility that has been shaped in part by the cultural forms, rituals, and beliefs of the black church” (Gabbin 228). This spirituality could create a system for Black children to recognize moral and ethical values, fostering a sense of right and wrong shaped by both cultural legacy and individual experience. Although these values emerge within specific communities, they ultimately reflect principles that are “not culture-specific or time-bound,” reinforcing the idea that “morals and human values are universal” (Al-Husseini and Al-Zubbaidi 37) while still being meaningfully rooted in Black identity and tradition. Dunbar utilized this mythical figure to establish a dichotomy between fear and reassurance for black children; the Boogeyman embodies both terror and safety. If black children adhere to proper conduct, they need not fear the Boogeyman: “But you need n' bothah '/ Bout de Boogah Man!” Consequently, this myth serves to motivate and instruct black youth to adhere to proper conduct and honor the regulations of their society. The Black child is urged to demonstrate affection for their mother, compliance towards their father, and spiritual devotion through evening prayer. Dunbar elevates these quotidian actions to poetic importance, asserting the Black family as a locus of care, structure, and cultural pride, thereby contradicting the prevailing racial stereotypes of late 19th-century minstrel and plantation literature. In “The Boogah Man,” the poetics of affirmation for Black children and familial connections manifest through a synthesis of rhythm, dialect, folklore, and emotional closeness. The poem employs a lighthearted warning tone, however its primary purpose is to emphasize familial care, protection, and cultural continuity through poetic narrative. The imagery provided by Dunbar, including phrases such as “wind is shivering,” “evening shadows falling black and heavy,” and “owl's a-hootin,” effectively conveys a scary mood that aligns with storytelling traditions intended to impart a moral lesson. Dunbar's employment of musical rhythm, internal rhyme, and alliteration, engenders a stimulating aural experience for children. The poem's auditory quality resembles a lullaby or bedtime chant, soothing the kid while addressing dusk and the enigmatic Boogah Man. The onomatopoeic phrase “Woo-oo woo-oo!” in “The Boogah Man” illustrates what Haitham K. Al-Zubbaidi refers to as the “musical, thematic, and at the level of meaning” (181). Dunbar's recurring “Woo-oo woo-oo!” mimics the ghostly sound of the Boogah Man, establishing an instant musical tone that captivates the young listeners, and engages them in the poem's disturbing atmosphere. This sound is not just a sound, it is functional, enhancing the poem's theme of protective parenting through subtle menace, so adding an interpretive dimension to the poem's emotional and cultural significance. The onomatopoeia “Woo-oo woo-oo!” conveys significance beyond its auditory quality; it indicates danger, conjures the supernatural, and serves as the auditory manifestation of the Boogah Man. The sound evolves into a character indicator, a psychological stimulus for compliance and vigilance in the youngster. Dunbar's affirming force is largely attributed to his usage of Black dialect. Instead of being disparaging or demeaning, the dialect turns into a literary expression of love and safety. The dominant post-Reconstruction stereotypes that portrayed Black homes as chaotic or immoral are challenged by Dunbar, who places a Black youngster in a calm, creative, and ethically grounded domestic environment. Dunbar takes the Black dialect away from minstrel shows that “told jokes and did skits, using a nonsensical language that was supposed to be black dialect” (McKissack 32), while, in reality, it was not. The comedy routine was supposed to be a parody of Black life presented by minstrel shows showed Black people as lazy, shiftless, irresponsible, tricky, ignorant, and childlike. Hence, the minstrel shows did a great deal to build racial stereotypes that lasted well into the twentieth century (33). Thus, the poem presents a counter-narrative instead, one in which Black families are caring, Black children are cherished and mentored, and cultural customs are carefully transmitted. Food motifs occasionally show up in Dunbar's children's

poems, highlighting the familial bonds that empower Black youngsters. One poem in the children's book *Little Brown Baby*, "When De Co'n Pone's Hot," captures the warmth and delight of family meals when eating at home. In "When De Co'n Pone's Hot," Dunbar talks about the comforting and stable effects of a simple family ritual: eating cornbread prepared by the mother. Michelle H. Martin says that "food helps to define familial relationships" (111). The poem demonstrates the close family ties while gathered around the dinner table and affirms African American cultural customs. Dunbar assures the Black youngsters that their families will remain resilient during difficult times, offering them love and support that may empower them via basic living customs. The speaker claims that his grief and sadness can be eased only by spending time with his family at the table in a beautiful and cozy setting. According to Wendy R. Katz's article "Some uses of food in children's literature," "A child's attitude toward food is an index to that child's emotional stability" (193). Dunbar encourages Black youngsters to see and value the beauty of ordinary pleasures and highlights their importance. The critic Joseph G. Bryant discussed Dunbar's capacity to highlight the good and restorative aspects of even the most dire circumstances in an essay published in 1905, he wrote: Hope and joy are the dominant notes of his song. No poet more effectively warms the cold side of our life and sends sunshine into grief-stricken souls than he. He laughs sorrow away; he takes us into the huts of the lowly and oppressed. There we find, amidst poverty and illiteracy, unfeigned contentment and true happiness; a smile is on every face, and hope displays her brightest gifts (qtd. in Wheat 30). Thus, Dunbar's poetic optimism functions as a quiet but powerful resistance, reaffirming dignity and humanity in domestic spaces often misrepresented by dominant narratives. Dunbar gives a new vision where familial warmth and emotional richness counteract societal devaluation and assert that Black life is worthy of celebration even in the face of structural hardship. When you set down at de table, Kin' o' weary lak an' sad, An' you 'se jes' a little tiahed An' purhaps a little mad; How yo' gloom tu'ns into gladness, How yo' joy drives out de doubt When de oven do' is opened, An' de smell comes po'in' out; Why, de 'lectric light o' Heaven Seems to settle on de spot, When yo' mammy says de blessin' An' de co'n pone 's hot. (*Little Brown Baby* 55) In line with Martin's assertion that "those who grow and prepare food bind families together," the speaker in the poem rejoices in his family get-together and his relationship with his mother, who brings her family together through cooking and serving food (108). According to Katz, "to understand the relationship between children and food is to understand the world of the young" (25), eating, food, and manners are significant topics in children's literature. Dunbar highlights the spiritual aspect of eating; for the Black family, gathering around the table serves as a spiritual bond with their faith in addition to providing physical sustenance. Black children who start to perceive themselves as a part of the comfort system that their families symbolize are empowered by the mother's act of blessing them, which also reinforces the family's oneness. "Dunbar's poetry fuses the racial and spiritual as an articulation of the black identity" (Fattah and Yousif 616). In this poem, Dunbar utilizes food as a major theme to teach black youngsters the value of family, their duties within it, and how to honor their elders by sharing a meal. The act of sitting at the table respectfully awaiting the mother to say the blessings reflects a social power structure that resists stereotypes. During Jim Crow period, African Americans thought of culture, including the domain of food, as a key part to struggle for civil rights, they tended to uplift their race by following public behavior at dinner table which became a space of what Evelyn Higginbotham called "the politics of respectability" (qtd. in Wallach 26). By doing so, the black people aimed to challenge stereotypes. In her book, *Every Nation Has Its Dish*, Jennifer Jensen Wallach states that The agenda of uplift at the dinner table was similarly designed to counter ubiquitous representations of gluttonous black people with outsized appetites for watermelons and chickens as well as for foods like opossums or raccoons, which were associated with rural southern poverty and deemed loathsome by middle-class white consumers (27). By rejecting these degrading stereotypes, Black families asserted dignity, refinement, and cultural pride in everyday domestic life. When de cabbage pot is steamin' An' de bacon good an' fat, When de chittlins is a-sputter'n' So 's to show you whah dey's at; Tek away yo' sody biscuit, Tek away yo' cake an' pie, Fu' de glory time is comin', An' it's 'proachin' mighty nigh, An' you want to jump an' hollah, Dough you know you 'd bettah not, When yo' mammy says de blessin' An' de co'n pone 's hot. (*Little Brown Baby* 56) Michelle Martin asserts, "The centrality of food in children's lives in large part defines who they are" (108). Dunbar celebrates the blacks' soul food such as "cabbage", "cornbread", and "chitlins", these black traditional dishes are important cultural benchmark in African American community. By mentioning these traditional meals, Dunbar emphasizes African American cultural heritage and shows black children how their ancestors could survive during the difficult times of slavery. Telling the stories of their forefathers creates an influential source of motivation and empowerment for black children. Although the speaker mentions the sadness and the hardships of life, he could find solace in black traditional meal such as

'Chitlins'. Chitlins signify both the painful history of slavery and the resilience of African American communities. "The chitterlings are a revealing symbol of rural southern blackness, since "such food as chitlins [also known as chitterlings] came into the 'soul food' diet because of the necessity for rural poverty-ridden southerners to use every bit of food available" (Graves 127). Black people consider 'chitlines' as a "symbol of resourcefulness, survival, or sharing in the southern black community" (127), this is significant for black children as they are empowered through traditions. In her article, "Still Hot: Great Food Moments in Children's Literature," Linda Sue Park writes: "our choice of food is neither trivial nor merely personal but has lasting social and cultural significance" (232). Hence, food often symbolizes more than nourishment; it becomes a cultural marker and a vehicle of memory, tradition, and identity. By incorporating familiar foods and intimate family settings, Dunbar empowers Black children through traditions that affirm belonging, history, and pride. Conclusion The poems in Dunbar's collection, *Little Brown Baby*, focus on black children's experiences and present warm scenes of family life. Dunbar's collection reflects his distinctive style, blending themes of affection, humor, and social discussion with the use of dialect. The selected poems in this study show how Dunbar could challenge racial stereotypes rooted in American society in the post-Reconstruction era. Dunbar counters dominant racial stereotypes by presenting a tender, joyful portrait of Black family, fatherhood, and childhood grounded in love, safety, and cultural affirmation. Dunbar's rhythmic intimacy and vivid imagery validate Black childhood and familial affection, placing Black children in the center of a loving familial space as worthy of poetic expression and attention. His Black dialect gives a profound and meaningful depiction of black life. Throughout the black dialect, Dunbar challenged the racial prejudice prevailing at that time by adding sensitivity to his characters that emphasized the humanity and dignity of the black race. His depiction of the Black family reclaims Black identity from the constraints of minstrel caricatures and affirms a vision of Black life marked by joy, care, and continuity.

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