

Northwestern University

**Innovation versus Convention:**  
**Performance, Realist Poetics, and Black Dialect in *Ethiopia Lays* (1900)**  
**by Priscilla Jane Thompson**

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English 397: Nineteenth-Century American Poetry

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Final

On July 14<sup>th</sup>, 1863, a group of cavalymen arrived in the rural town of Rossmoyne, Ohio as part of a regional assertion of power by the Confederate Army (Andres, 2020). When the soldiers arrived on the doorstep of the modest home of the Schneck family in Rossmoyne, they left empty-handed. Having received advanced notice of the attack, the Schnecks carefully hid not only two of their most valuable Spanish horses, but also their riskiest investment: a formerly enslaved family, John Henry and Clara Jane Thompson, along with their firstborn son. The Schnecks had recently helped the Thompsons escape slavery on a Kentucky plantation by way of the Underground Railroad, and upon their arrival in Rossmoyne, gave them work and land. It was not long before the Thompsons gave birth to their next child, Priscilla Jane, in 1871.

Priscilla never left Rossmoyne. Despite suffering from debilitating heart disease for most of her life, Thompson split her time between writing and performing poetry and serving as a Sunday school teacher at a local church. Published in 1900 as the first of her two books of poems, *Ethiope Lays* represents her impassioned defiance of an increasingly assimilationist African American literary tradition. Unapologetically perpetuating the antebellum literary themes of militant verse and protest poetry, *Ethiope Lays* rejects the wilting spirit of blackness ushered in by an oppressive era of Jim Crow. Rather than writing her poetry with the intent of justifying her race to white audiences, Priscilla Thompson published *Ethiope Lays* in order to depict the “real side” of her race to a disenfranchised and dejected Black audience (Thompson).

Both the form and function of *Ethiope Lays* convey its preoccupation with realism. First, Thompson’s strategic combination of lyrical ballads and Black dialect poems enable *Ethiope Lays* to subvert the submissive and idealist tones offered by the author’s most prominent literary contemporaries. In an effort to infuse her writing with authenticity, Thompson draws from personal experience in *Ethiope Lays*, often using her piety to bridge the life experiences of her

formerly enslaved parents with her own witness to racial division in society. Finally, the book's function as a widely circulated good allowed its impact to further transcend from that of an authentic literary showcase to a socially commodified symbol of Black resilience and progress.

### **Racial Unification Through Literary Performance and Accessibility**

From its title to its form to its regional and international performance, *Ethiope Lays* effectively reaches a wide-reaching audience that spanned from the Midwest to the collection of "Colored Literature" at the Exposition Universelle in Paris, France in 1900 (Andres, as cited in "Grand Recital"; See Figure 1). According to Wendell P. Dabney's *Cincinnati's Colored Citizens*, Thompson's poems often "received attention from foreign countries, England, France and Australia being in the number" (319). Perceived as the result of the Black community's internalization of anglicized beauty standards, classism, and refusal to overcome superficial generational differences, *Ethiope Lays* thoroughly presents this intra-racial division as the greatest obstacle toward Black progress. The book's accessible nature became crucial in conveying its fervent calls for Black unity in light of growing division.

The book's title becomes the most apparent evidence of Thompson's desire to appeal to an expansive Black audience. At the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century when she self-published the book, "Ethiope" was commonly known as slang for a dark-skinned person— regardless of their actual ancestral origins— since evolving as a term originally created by slave owners (OED). As a first-generation free African American herself, Thompson's selection of "Ethiope" skillfully directed her book toward a Black collective drawn in by a poignant colloquialism. Additionally, the multifaceted definition of "Lays" helped market the book as accessible while also serving as a guise for its brazen protest of the racism inflicted upon and subsequently internalized by the

Black community. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, “lays” would have signified not only “a short lyric or narrative poem intended to be sung,” but a poem that specifically pertained to “history or romantic adventure.” However, *Ethiope Lays* challenges this implicit conflation between history and romantic adventure by presenting the beauty of Black history and love as severely marred by racism. Thus, Thompson’s employment of the word “Lays” showcases the inherent accessibility of a book offering poetry in a digestible lyrical ballad and dialect form. Moreover, “Lays” encapsulates the ironic juxtaposition between the conventional form of *Ethiope Lays* and its radical revival of protest poetry. Ultimately, the book’s title helped enable Thompson to widely market *Ethiope Lays* as a marker of Black progress and symbol of Black joy while also veiling its harsh critique on the enforced stagnation of her race.

In accordance with the book’s title, Thompson often recited poems from *Ethiope Lays* throughout the Midwest. According to the *Cleveland Gazette*, one of these performances occurred in Wyoming, Ohio, on September 29<sup>th</sup>, 1900, for an “Emancipation Celebration” at the “Carthage fairgrounds.” Thompson performed alongside her brother Aaron, a fellow poet and her best friend. The duo “read poems” after a locally based, white Congressmen gave an opening address and before a Reverend delivered closing remarks. Evidently, the sheer existence of Thompson’s poetry came to signify Black hope and progress in the wake of emancipation. Tucked in between prominent politicians and clerical figures, the performance of Thompson’s poetry was invariably powerful and valued by the event’s organizers as a form of social capital.

Also notable is the fact that Thompson was the only woman invited to speak at the celebration. *The Recorder*, “A Negro Newspaper Devoted to the Best Interest of the Colored People of Indiana” highlights how Thompson’s gender was viewed as an important aspect of her work. “On March 24<sup>th</sup>, 1900, *The Recorder* published a minor column titled “Our Women.”

Thompson is the second of the ten women featured, and the column simply notes that “Mrs. Priscilla Thompson, of Rossmoyne, O, is author of a book titled ‘Ethiop Lays.’” Of the ten women mentioned, Thompson is one of the only women praised for her literary accomplishments; the other is Estelle Hawkins, a teenager who had “been elected Class Poet by members of her class” and the “first person of color that has been thus honored.” Evidently, *Ethiope Lays* was circulated not just for its literary content, but also for its significance as a book written by an African American woman during a time in which African American voices were actively excluded from American literary traditions and society.

Thompson’s regional popularity as a vocal female literary figure and advocate for racial progress continued throughout the decade. As *The Recorder* highlighted in 1906, Thompson gave “recitals at her leisure, and every club or church employing her [were] always pleased. May she make a success of her genius and in so doing, help swell the rank of our colored celebrities” (See Figure 2). Even Thompson’s visits to see her brother, Aaron, and his family in Indianapolis were newsworthy. In addition to publishing when Thompson first arrived to see her brother on September 28<sup>th</sup>, 1907, *The Recorder* wrote that “Miss Priscilla Thompson who has been here a few months with her brother A. Thompson has returned to Cincinnati, with her second volumn [*sic*] of poems completed” on December 21<sup>st</sup>, 1907. Thus, evidence emerges that *Ethiope Lays* paved the way for Priscilla Thompson’s elevated reputation as a recognized literary figure, and moreover, that both her authorship and reputation were influenced by her close relationship with her brother. In fact, *The Freeman*, a different Black newspaper based out of Indianapolis, Indiana, published the following advertisement on December 18<sup>th</sup>, 1909:

## WHEN BUYING BOOKS!

For Christmas, don't forget our Hoosier poet, Aaron Belford Thompson. His book, "Harvest of Thought," handsomely bound and illustrated, will be sent postpaid for 60c. Also books by his sisters, the Ohio Poets "Gleaning of Quiet Hours," by Miss Priscilla Thompson, and "Songs from the Wayside," by Miss Clara Thompson, 60c per copy, or the three for \$1.50. Address The Domestic Publisher, 2109 Howard street, Indianapolis, Ind.

Although *Gleaning of Quiet Hours*

emerges as Thompson's second book of poems, this clipping showcases the ways in which *Ethiope Lays* was likely also commodified as a form of social capital, suitable as a gift "For Christmas" or

other holidays. While Priscilla Thompson's literary success was certainly not dependent on that of her brother or sister, these sources highlight the pronounced intersection between Thompson's literary achievement and that of her siblings. Consequently, with racial unity emerging as the dominant theme of *Ethiope Lays*, one can understand the tight-knit Thompson family as a microcosm for the very same ideals the book calls for. Thus, the circulation of Thompson's familial bonds invariably contributed to the widespread circulation of the book itself.

### Poetic Realism as Literary Innovation: Militant Verse and Protest Poetry

Although literary scholars typically approach realism solely through the lens of prose, Elizabeth Renker questions this genre-exclusivity in her book *Realist Poetics in American Culture, 1866-1900*. An acclaimed literary historian, Renker challenges a major assumption latent in the decision of literary traditions which bar poetry from realist labels: the belief that poetry inherently carries too much idealist and romantic sentiment to classify as such. As *Realist Poetics* argues, however, realist poems deserve recognition and often "situate themselves rhetorically in explicit or implicit contrast to other literary modes, especially idealism, romance, and sentiment" (6). Renker also notes how literary scholars continually understudy ballads written by Black poets in favor of poems that feature Black dialect (14). Coining the term "realist

gentility,” Renker claims that *Ethiope Lays* deserves a spotlight for its novel depiction of “genteel poetic conventions as the ground for a realist counter discourse speaking back to those very conditions” of systemic oppression (Ibid). Referring to the frequent dismissal of the realities expressed by Black poets on account of their perceived convention and conformity, *Ethiope Lays* actively rejects these “conditions.” The paratext and militant verse present in *Ethiope Lays* not only enables Thompson to call upon Blacks to face their subjugation and unite in order to overcome it, but to also transform *Ethiope Lays* into a quintessential display of realist gentility.

Thompson’s interest in displaying *Ethiope Lays* as a realist work becomes apparent just two pages into the book. As Thompson claims in her introduction, “In this little volume, entitled ‘Ethiope Lays,’ I have endeavored, as nearly as possible to picture the real side of my race bringing in the foreground, their patience, fortitude and forbearance, devoid of that undertone of sarcasm, generally courted. I hope it will prove satisfactory to my readers” (See Figure 3). This introduction showcases several interesting facets. To begin, while Thompson’s reference to her book as “little” could serve as an objective observation of the book’s relatively short length, one might also view this modifier alongside her “hope that it will prove satisfactory” as a display of feminine modesty. As an unmarried Black woman writing not long after a literary era in which women often sought out male voices to preface their work in order to authenticate and legitimize it, perhaps Thompson’s adherence to feminine modesty intended to fill this perceived void.

In addition to helping her gain the trust of her readership, Priscilla’s employment of feminine modesty also serves to temper her bold display of realism. In her introduction, Thompson explicitly states her intent to subvert the conventional societal expectation that postbellum African American poets dull their racial protest with a frivolous conformity to idealized expectations from white society. Evidently, Thompson’s introduction sets the stage for

her daring employment of realism throughout *Ethiope Lays*. Despite serving as an aggressive literary stance for her to take, this lens allows Thompson to shorten the distance between her and her readership in order to make her emphasis on the importance of racial unity more impactful, urgent, and proximal.

In order to construct the backbone of *Ethiope Lays*, Thompson intertwines the core themes of generational difference, slavery, religion, and the perception of beauty and purity throughout her poems. While the vast majority of the poems employ ballad meter, several poems only showcase black dialect. Thompson literary content and form uncover buried Black feelings of Black pride and generational trauma and offer them as the common grounds from which racial unification can take place. “The Inner Realm” is a quintessential example of this strategy:

There is a sphere, a secret sphere,  
 Within each human’s breast;  
 A sacred realm shut in from sight,  
 Securely closed from outward light.  
 Where faintly fall the sounds, repressed,  
 Upon the outward ear [...]  
 Our sad regret doth there abide;  
 Our weakness coated o’er with pride (Thompson, 18)

In claiming that all humans possess a “sacred realm... securely closed from outward light,” and proceeding to address her audience as “Our,” Thompson forms a dichotomy between lightness and darkness. In turn, this dichotomy comes to symbolize the binary between whiteness and blackness. Thus, Thompson conveys the idea that this “outward light,” or the white gaze, contains a sort of penetrative quality that inherently stifles the genuine expression of Black sentiment. Moreover, Thompson further evidences the imbalanced nature of this dichotomy when she claims that one’s “sacred” inner realm desires the opportunity to be listened to, but is ultimately rejected and “repressed” by “outward” influence.

Nevertheless, Thompson quickly shifts the subject of her poem away from scrutinizing an oppressive white gaze and toward the role that African Americans play in facilitating their own oppression by “coat[ing]” their “sad regret” and generational trauma “with pride.” That is, Thompson casts judgement onto the Black collective for glazing over their trauma with superficialities before taking the time to fully examine and process said trauma as a unified collective. In addition to perfunctory displays of pride, Thompson also assigns responsibility to a “Sharp yearning after wealth and fame” for contributing to the plight of the Black collective, where “Past follies, fraught with burning shame / Find refuge from man’s cruel eye, / And daylight’s open glare” (19). Thus, Thompson overtly names classism and social stratification *within* the Black community as barriers to racial unification. These barriers, Thompson argues, must be brought to light and acknowledged as superficial in order for the Black race to progress.

Thompson then maintains her focus on African Americans throughout the rest of the poem, ultimately arguing that Blacks must tap into this “inner realm” in order to most truthfully confide in God and receive his salvation (20). Thus, “The Inner Realm” wholly encapsulates the central realist message of *Ethiopia Lays*, which is also echoed by poems like “To A Deceased Friend” which center the “inmost self” (55). The shared reality of African Americans, Thompson argues, *does* and *should also* count as “reality,” whether or not it manifests in the form of poetry, or subverts conventional literary discourse and societal expectation for Black authors. Moreover, Thompson offers introspection as the key to unlocking this shared reality.

Thompson’s display of an unapologetically realist attitude throughout *Ethiopia Lays* challenged 20<sup>th</sup> century American literary traditions for several reasons. While antebellum era African American poetry centered around the fugitive slave narrative, militant protest poetry, and a heated struggle for recognition in an overwhelmingly white literary arena, Reconstruction

ushered in a dramatic shift in the Black literary landscape (Andrews; Sherman). As Joan R. Sherman claims in “Invisible Poets: Afro-Americans of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century,” violent racism after the Civil War stanching the flow of expressions of Black trauma and triumph: “The most distinctively black poetry appears before the Civil War... it has the soul: the cry of ‘How long, oh Lord’; the festering despair and fury of a dream deferred” (xxii). As Sherman notes, the era of Reconstruction placed a crushing burden on African Americans to justify their race as worthy of participation in a predominantly white society. This pressure only heightened after 1877 with the emergence of an oppressive era of Jim Crow, and in response, the American literary tradition faced a complete abandonment of racial issues as subjects in favor of “down-home and upward-bound postures” by the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Ibid.). Nevertheless, *Ethiophe Lays* joins the work of Frances Ellen Watkins Harper in becoming an exception to the rule of avoiding the issue of race in literature (Sundquist et al.).

Rather than striving to “justify the race to white society” like many of her contemporaries, *Ethiophe Lays* argues that in order for African Americans to collectively succeed, they must first justify their race to themselves. That is, Thompson uses *Ethiophe Lays* to not only expose and protest against the deep bruise that the white-led oppression left on Black consciousness, but to also argue that this bruised consciousness demands amelioration through self-repair. With the ultimate goal of achieving racial unity, *Ethiophe Lays* offers three interdependent modes for this self-repair: militant protest, adherence to religion, and a chauvinistic embrace of Black love, beauty, and family.

In “A Southern Scene,” Thompson tells the tragic love story of a free Black couple who dreams of moving from the South to the North, for “there black and white, have equal right, I’ve heard the northern Yankee say” (30). At six pages, the poem is the lengthiest in all of *Ethiophe*

*Lays*, and Thompson describes the plight of Henry and Ellen with sobering detail. Before the couple is able to flee to the North, a group of “pale faced foes” attempt to lynch Henry, and when he successfully “breaks those hateful ropes that bind,” he discovers that “his frightened Ellen” has arrived on the scene to save him. While Ellen is caught up escaping the tussle, “a vicious outlaw, wild / with murder in his heart” shoots her, and what follows is a display of militant protest poetry that American literature had scarcely witnessed since before the Civil War:

On Henry’s breaking heart she rest,  
While once again the mob upstart.  
The Ethiopes are rallied now,  
A deadly fray ensue [...]  
The outlaws, cowardly retreat,  
To seek protection not their due [...]  
How long, oh Lord, wilt thou permit  
Such direful deeds as these? [...]  
When shall Caucasia’s blows be staid?  
When wilt thou hush her foul upbraid,  
On those who doth on Thee believe? (34, 35).

Paralleling the “The Inner Realm,” Thompson establishes a firm dichotomy between African Americans and whites, denoted by “The Ethiopes” and “Caucasia’s blows” respectively. With the “deadly fray” coming to symbolize the violent tension that underscores this racial division, Thompson argues that only divine intervention can quell this fighting. Thompson also depicts this warring as the direct result of white aggression toward Blacks as opposed to emerging as a mutually-incited feud. While Thompson removes responsibility from African Americans for causing this interracial warring, she makes the implicit yet normative claim that the Black collective should band together in response to racist attacks when she remarks that “The Ethiopes are rallied now.” Thus, Thompson argues that a white-led attack on one Black person is an attack on Blackness as an entire race, thereby necessitating the formation of a united campaign in response.

Notably, the poem also features layers of both realism and romance. At face value, Thompson's rosy depiction of the affection between Henry and Ellen arrives as a confirmation of the sort of conventional idealism that pervaded African American poetry in the postbellum period. However, Thompson intentionally tempers her romantic depiction with realism in order to preserve the realist message of her poem while still permitting a fictional and poetic showcase. This realism is most apparent on the second page of the poem when Henry assures a worried Ellen that the duo will make it "Far to the North":

And Ellen, honey, when at last,  
We'll rest on freedom's clay,  
I'll show a self, my little elf,  
Which here dare not to show. I may;  
The foul and loathsome chains I'll break  
From inner man, and bid him wake,  
To bright and gladsome freedom's day (30).

Evidently, "A Southern Scene" becomes a continuation of "The Inner Realm" in conveying the split consciousness that becomes intrinsic to Black identity. With the "little elf" and "inner man" becoming analogous to "the inner realm," Thompson impresses the idea upon her Black readership that one must strive to venture to a safe haven where one can safely embrace one's entire identity without fear of repercussion. Once again, Thompson argues that one's compromised identity emerges as a function of one's proximity to racism. While this safe haven emerges as an intangible product of one's mentality in "The Inner Realm," the dichotomy between the North and South in "A Southern Scene" allows Thompson to expand the situation of this racially tolerant oasis to the physical realm. Furthermore, made both implicit and explicit in Thompson's juxtaposition between the North and South is the elevation of the North as the supreme location for Black joy. This ideal representation of the North likely contributed to the widespread circulation of *Ethiopia Lays* in Midwestern newspapers and society.

Ultimately, “A Southern Scene” offers not only grief and generational trauma as grounds for racial unification, but also self-defense and a desire to preserve Black love and family. Reminiscent of antebellum protest poetry like “On Liberty and Slavery” by George Moses Horton (1829) and *Forest Leaves* by Frances Ellen Watkins Harper (1846), “A Southern Scene” joins other ballads in *Ethiope Lays* like “The Old Saint’s Prayer,” “The Muse’s Favor,” and “Address to Ethiopia” in stressing the importance of appealing to God for strength. This divinely conferred strength, *Ethiope Lays* argues, becomes essential in order to overcome racist tyranny. Furthermore, Thompson’s spirited protest poetry allows her to cast a powerful emotional appeal to her readership. In graphically depicting the role of racism in squashing the universal ideals of hope, love, and safety for Black people, Thompson lays the groundwork for collective healing, resistance, and racial unification over common ground.

### ***Ethiope Lays Meets Lyrics of Lowly Life: Nuance in Black Dialect***

On February 9, 1906, Paul Laurence Dunbar passed away at the age of thirty-three (University of Dayton). At the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, literary critics acclaimed Dunbar as one of the greatest African American writers of his time (Ibid.). Dunbar was born in Dayton, Ohio in 1872— less than fifty-miles away from Rossmoyne and just one year after Thompson’s birthdate— and grew famous not as a result of the profound self-awareness, grace, and novel understanding of nature latent in his work, but for the infrequent employment of black dialect in his poetry.

Receiving significant financial support from an expansive network of white benefactors including influential childhood friends like Orville Wright, Dunbar was able to publish his first book of poems *Oak and Ivy* at United Brethren Publishing in 1893.

From thereon, Dunbar's literary popularity snowballed until famed American writers like Frederick Douglass, William Dean Howells, and James Whitcomb Riley doled out praise for Dunbar's work (Poetry Foundation). Although Paul Laurence Dunbar is significantly better known in the 21<sup>st</sup> century than Priscilla Jane Thompson, out of every other African American poet active during the early 20<sup>th</sup> century—including her brother, Aaron, and younger sister, Clara Ann—on March 10<sup>th</sup>, 1906, a Black newspaper in Indianapolis lauded Priscilla as the next Dunbar in the wake of his sudden death. Granting her an entire column on the newspaper's front page, *The Recorder* writes:

In the disappearance [*sic*] of the brightest [*sic*] star from our literary sky, in the person of Paul Laurence Dunbar... we involuntary [*sic*] turn our eyes to the horizon in search of another rising star to fill the vacancy. Among the rising young writers, Miss Priscilla Jane Thompson, also a native [*sic*] of Ohio, bids fair of making a bright future... She has published a volume of poems entitled "Ethiopia [*sic*] Lays," which has been well received. Miss Thompson is a talented electuionist [*sic*] and her recitals meet with the approval of every audience. Her poems are smooth and original and deal cheftly [*sic*] with the joys and sorrows of her own race... (See Figure 2).

Furthermore, the column provides excerpts from two poems in *Ethiope Lays*: "Address to Ethiopia," the book's most overt display of militancy in its explicit call for Black separatism, and "The Turncoat," one of the book's only poems written using black dialect. In proceeding to claim that "Miss Thompson is commendable as a humorist as seen in a poem she has written entitled 'The Turncoat'," the column relays a critical understanding of black dialect poetry that Joan R. Sherman expresses almost a century later in *Invisible Poets* (See Figure 4). As Sherman argues, dialect poetry "mythologized the Southern past, obscured present ills, and avoided the future" and "reinforced stereotypes," even likening the use of dialect to minstrel shows (xxvi).

In spite of the array of literary commentary that casts black dialect poems into a superficial, performative, and self-sacrificial realm, a close reading of Thompson's "The Turncoat" reveals the literary richness that a poem written in black dialect can exhibit. In contrast to the *Lyrics of Lowly Life*, "The Turncoat" reveals how Thompson reimagines what James Weldon Johnson refers to as an inherently limiting "mould of convention in which Negro dialect in the United States has been set" (Johnson). In "The Turncoat," Thompson features Turner and Jonah, a father and son duo who presumably work as sharecroppers, and Thornton, their overseer. The poem begins with Turner admonishing his son for refusing to challenge Thornton when he called Jonah "de laz'est fellah, / Dat ebah grabbed de hoe;" and refuses him pay at the day's end. Turner then claims that he would have never submitted to such injustice and would of "weighed ole Turnah down" instead. Nevertheless, the moment Thornton arrives on the scene, Turner swiftly changes his stance:

Good ebnin' Mistah Thon'ton;  
 I've heayed all 'bout dis day.  
 An' I'm rakin' obah Jonah,  
 'Boat his good fah nottin' way.  
 You say dat you've considahed,  
 An' bein I am lame,  
 You'll,— shet yo' mouf, man Jonah,  
 Fah you's goin' jest de same!  
 You's in yo' teens yit, many  
 And I'll teach you fah to know,  
 Dat in my 'periah wisom,  
 I'll tell you when to blow. [...]  
 You 'spose I'll stan' dat Tho'nton;  
 Fah my flesh an' blood to say,  
 Dat his pappy am a turn-coat?  
 Lizie, tek dis boy away! (47-48)

Evidently, although Thornton attacked Jonah's character and initially refused to pay him before appearing to change his mind, the story's tension quickly transfers to that between Turner and Jonah. Thompson characterizes this disconnect between father and son as emerging from stubborn generational difference, employing phrases like "ole pappy," "teens," "'periah wisdom," and "flesh an' blood," in order to emphasize this juxtaposition. Moreover, Turner's physical limitation in being "lame" prompts Thornton to reconsider giving Jonah his pay, which allows Thompson to further distance Turner from Jonah's youth while also contrasting the son's purported unwillingness to perform manual labor. While it becomes obvious that the ironically named Turner changes his stance on a whim, like that of a turncoat, it is also notable that Thornton, the presumably white overseer, also abruptly changes his stance. Thus, it is conceivable that "The Turncoat" intends to launch a dually pronged attack; Thompson argues that while white supremacy strongly contributes to the plight of Black America, trivial generational differences within the Black collective swell the negative impact of these disturbances, inviting them to reverberate throughout the cracks of a divided race.

Impressively packed with literary meaning and immense societal value, "The Turncoat" might appear "humorist" or to "reinforce stereotypes," but it actually exemplifies the way that black dialect poetry can cloak profound meaning. However, as *Lyrics of Lowly Life* (1896) showcases, the value of black dialect poetry emerges as a function of the author's proximity to whiteness. Unlike Dunbar, whose literary success depended on the generous yet often patronizing celebration of his work by distinguished white men, Thompson self-published *Ethiope Lays* and was most strongly influenced by

only her Black family and God. The reception of Dunbar's black dialect poems in *Lyrics of Lowly Life* by William Dean Howells—whom many literary critics consider to be the founder of American realism—is featured as the book's introduction (Renker).

Howells' condescending review of *Lyrics of Lowly Life* sheds light upon the enormous pressure that Dunbar faced to write his poems in such a way that would appease his white sponsors and readership. In fact, Dunbar once told James Weldon Johnson that "I've got to write dialect poetry; it's the only way I can get them to listen to me" (qtd. in Johnson). Howells' introduction highlights Dunbar's compromised position:


"So far as I could remember, Paul Dunbar was the only man of pure African blood and of American civilization to feel the negro life aesthetically and express it lyrically... I said that a race which had come to this effect in any member of it, had attained civilization in him... We call such pieces dialect pieces for want of some closer phrase, but they are really not dialect so much as delightful personal attempts and failures for the written and spoken language... he reveals in these a finely ironical perception of the negro's limitations" (Howells, Introduction, *Lyrics of Lowly Life*).

As this pointed excerpt highlights, Dunbar's literary success came at a monumental price that Thompson chose not to pay; that is, the need to partially suppress the cruel reality of being Black in America in favor of an idealist perspective that would be palatable to white audiences. This excerpt also suggests two of the most rational explanations for the absence of literary acclaim for *Ethiophe Lays* and research on Priscilla Jane Thompson: that is, literary critics either fail to see beneath her strategic veil of black dialect, or view Thompson's ardent desire for Black unification against white oppression as too radical for white and Black audiences alike. Nevertheless, tempered with realist authenticity, Thompson's lyrical ballads and black dialect poems gracefully coalesce and make *Ethiophe Lays* a work not of convention, but of brave, provocative, and brilliant literary innovation.

## Appendix

Figure 1:

Grand Recital June 27, at the Zion Church



Grand Recital of original poems given at Mt. Zion Baptist church corner of 11th and Lafayette streets Monday evening June 27, by the celebrated authors Mr. Aaron B. Thompson and sister Priscilla J. Thompson of Cincinnati. Mr. and Miss Thompson have recited extensively in Ohio and have never failed to delight their audience. Their looks were favorably received in the collection of Colored Literature at Paris Exposition, and also at the American Expositions. Mr. and Miss Thompson are accomplished Elocutionists and are never at home than when reciting their own productions. Come early and spend an enjoyable evening with the Ohio poets.

Figure 2:

Miss Thompson is at present giving recitals at her leisure, and every club or church employing her are always highly pleased. May she make a success of her a genius and in so doing, help swell the rank of our colored celebrities. Miss Thompson can be consulted through the mail, by any organization requiring her services. Address Rossmore, Ohio, (Box 17.)

Figure 3:

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INTRODUCTION.

In this little volume, entitled "Ethiopia Lays," I have endeavored, as nearly as possible to picture the real side of my race bringing in the foreground, their patience, fortitude and forbearance, devoid of that undertone of sarcasm, generally courted. I hope that it will prove satisfactory to my readers.

THE AUTHORESS.

Entered according to Act of Congress, in the year 1900, by Priscilla Jane Thompson, in the Office of the Librarian of Congress, at Washington.

SECOND COPY, 4411  
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## Appendix cont.

Figure 4 (Zoomed in for clarity):



Miss Thompson is commendable as a humorist as seen in a poem she has written entitled "The Turncoat," a few verses of which are given below.

### A CASUAL REVIEW

NEWS GATHERED FAR AND NEAR—INTERESTING

### PAYS TRIBUTE TO DUNBAR


Two Young Poets Who are Striving to Perfection—Political Pot on The Boil

In the disappearance of the brightest star from our literary sky, in the person of Paul Laurence Dunbar, the late colored Ohio poet; we involuntarily turn our eyes to the horizon in search of another rising star to fill the vacancy.

Among the rising young writers, Miss Pricilla Jane Thompson, also a native of Ohio, bids fair of making a bright future. Miss Thompson resides in her birth place, Rossmoyne, O., a suburb of Cincinnati; she is a child of slave parents, who emigrated to Ohio after the late rebellion, she was educated in the public schools and evinced a talent for writing poetry, while still a child. Miss Thompson is a sister of Mr. Aaron B. Thompson, the young colored poet of Indianapolis, Ind. She has published a volume of poems entitled "Ethiopia Lays," which has been well received. Miss Thompson is a talented elocutionist and her recitals meet with the approval of every audience.

Her poems are smooth and original, and deal chiefly with the joys and sorrows of her own race, an extract from one of her poems entitled "Address to Ethiopia," reads as follows:

Oh, ill starred Ethiopia  
A weak and trampled race!  
With fathomless emotion,  
Thy dismal path I trace.  
Thy bright and stalwart swarthy  
BOYS,  
Thy meek eyed daughters fair;  
I trace through centuries, by-gone,  
Of misery and despair.



PRICILLA JANE THOMPSON

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