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Taught by Literature: Recentering Black Women Intellectuals. A Digital Project by Denise Burgher, Brigitte Fielder, and Jean M. Lutes

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Taught by Literature: Recentering Black Women Intellectuals, A Digital Project by Denise Burgher, Brigitte Fielder, and Jean M. Lutes, <https://www.taughtbyliterature.org>.

In her essay “Negro Literature for Negro Pupils,” Alice Dunbar-Nelson writes, “We do not teach literature; we are taught by literature.”¹ She argues that for Black children to grow up believing in themselves, they must have access to literature written by Black authors. This framing guides the digital humanities project *Taught by Literature: Recentering Black Women Intellectuals*, which seeks to introduce readers to Black women whose intellectual and creative work has too often been overlooked. Beginning with Dunbar-Nelson’s ‘Steenth Street Stories, *Taught by Literature* weaves together archival and pedagogical elements, centering accessibility and creative engagement while increasing the recognition of early Black women intellectuals’ lives and work.

Project founders Denise Burgher, Brigitte Fielder, and Jean Lutes began the work that would become *Taught by Literature* in 2021 as a digital recovery initiative focused on increasing access to Dunbar-Nelson’s ‘Steenth Street Stories. Through conversations with public school teachers, the project’s founders realized that providing resources and pathways for Black children and educators to access and teach the work of early Black women intellectuals would be a priority. Dunbar-Nelson wrote the ‘Steenth Street Stories after teaching Black kindergarteners in New York City from 1897 to 1898 and drew directly from her time as an educator, shaping her experiences into fictional narratives with themes that continue to resonate today. The full collection was never published, though eight of the twelve stories appeared individually in various newspapers and magazines during Dunbar-Nelson’s lifetime. *Taught by Literature*’s efforts to recover, contextualize, and disseminate the ‘Steenth

Street Stories as a full collection works to address these fragmented archival conditions obscuring Dunbar-Nelson's work.

As entry points into the larger project, Dunbar-Nelson and the 'Steenth Street Stories foreground the pedagogical motivations of *Taught by Literature*. Arguing for the significance of Black children reading literature by Black authors, Dunbar-Nelson wrote:

How much finer for the Negro boy and girl to know of these lives, and of the work they did; to read the burning, living words that are the work of their own blood and kin; to feel that the lowly ones of the cabins in the country, or the tenements and alleys in the city, may yet give to the world some gift, albeit small, that will inspire and ennoble countless dark-faced children struggling up towards the light.²

Selecting Dunbar-Nelson as a leading figure for the project establishes a significant connection across time, reminding us that the goal of ensuring Black children's access to writing by Black authors is a concern that Black educators have been addressing for over a century. Within this context, Dunbar-Nelson is positioned as both an important historical figure within the project and as an active interlocutor in *Taught by Literature's* approach to education, representation, and access.

"His Heart's Desire," the first of the 'Steenth Street Stories in this new edition, offers a window into the project's editorial vision. By presenting the story in both the originally published form that appeared in the *Chicago Daily News* in 1900 and a later, revised version, the project invites readers into Dunbar-Nelson's creative process. Here, we can take notice of the subtle decisions and revisions that shape a story's development. For students and teachers alike, this is a rare chance to study an author's process, an opportunity that would not be afforded by a single-text edition.

Taught by Literature presents "His Heart's Desire" alongside newly commissioned and contextual materials. Readers will find illustrations by Miles Williams, an audio recording read by Trinity Rogers, lesson plans for middle and high school classrooms, and background information on the story's themes and setting. These multimedia elements are not simply supplementary; each offers an alternative point of entry into the story while also shaping how readers encounter the text. The background context provides insights into the decisions that influenced the production of these additional materials. The project's authors write:

Alice Dunbar-Nelson does not describe the race of any characters in this story. While some authors and readers take the absence of clear racial descriptions to mean characters are white, it would be a mistake to read Dunbar-Nelson's writing this way, because she often wrote about characters whose race is not clearly stated. Dunbar-Nelson based the 'Steenth Street stories on her experience teaching Black children, so it makes sense not to assume the children of this neighborhood were white, but to read Andy and Sissy as Black.³

The illustrations inform how we see Dunbar-Nelson's characters, and the audio recording suggests what they might sound like. With these materials, *Taught by Literature* offers readers an opportunity to immerse themselves in a political, social, and imaginative landscape formed by a multitude of creative contributions.

The additional materials contextualizing “His Heart’s Desire” also offer insight into *Taught by Literature’s* layered approach to accessibility. The project moves along two intertwined paths: the first broadens access to the work of Black women intellectuals, especially for Black children, through an open-access web platform; the other attends to the ways in which readers might engage with the material differently. The inclusion of audio recordings is one example of an editorial and design choice that supports multiple modes of experiencing the story. This two-pronged approach considers not only the breadth of circulation achieved through an open-access web project but also how specific design features can support a more diverse readership. The project’s attention to multiple modes of access also points toward future possibilities for extending these practices as the collection continues to develop.

Reading “His Heart’s Desire” makes it immediately clear why the project founders selected Dunbar-Nelson as the first figure on whom to focus. Even though the story was written over a century ago, Dunbar-Nelson’s exploration of gender conformity and socialization, made clearer by *Taught by Literature’s* illustrations and historical context, remains as applicable to sociocultural issues today as when the story was written. For Black children today who may be wrestling with internal struggles similar to Andy Belton’s, seeing themselves represented in a short story from over a century ago is of great significance. “His Heart’s Desire” is an apt selection as the first of the ‘Steenth Street Stories to be included in *Taught by Literature*, providing a clear sense of the project’s emerging editorial direction and value as a pedagogical resource.

In addition to this first short story, *Taught by Literature* presents “I Sit and Stew,” a poem by Dunbar-Nelson, accompanied by an educator’s guide, slides, lesson plan, and coloring page. These additional pedagogical resources emphasize the project’s commitment to building an immersive, creative world around each figure’s work, and inviting students and educators to shape these worlds together.

The coloring page for “I Sit and Stew” is one of over a dozen included in the project. This is where *Taught by Literature* begins to introduce more Black women intellectuals, including Frances Harper, Harriet Jacobs, and Sojourner Truth, who are presented alongside Dunbar-Nelson. A video series featuring scholars reading and reflecting on a curated selection of writings by these women further expands the types of content produced by the project. The coloring pages are especially interesting. They are an example of how the project considers young readers by providing another point of entry, expanding the types of spaces to which *Taught by Literature* can bring the lives and work of Black women intellectuals. While there are many approaches the project could take to emphasize the value of cultivating early engagement, coloring pages as an embodied and hands-on form of creative expression are particularly effective. These physical manifestations of the project give young students a tangible representation of their learning experience that can also serve as a keepsake. These are important additions to a project that is otherwise predominantly virtual.

Complementing this approach, the readings and commentary provided by the video series situate the selected writings within a broader scholarly context, reinforcing the project’s goal of increasing the recognition of these figures within the academic record. We are also introduced to contemporary Black women intellectuals and educators who are continuing the legacy of the women whose work they are reading. The video series reveals how educators can teach and engage students with these texts, and alongside the coloring pages, a cross-generational structure emerges that develops pathways for the work of Black women intellectuals to reach readers at multiple levels. Through this series, *Taught by Literature* emphasizes its commitment to layered access, modeling how different forms of mediation can coexist within a single digital project.

As a digital humanities project, *Taught by Literature* shows how digital materials are not just supplements to traditional texts but offer opportunities to transform how readers approach and interpret those texts. From coloring pages to audio recordings, we are invited not just to read but to experience the work of early Black women intellectuals from a variety of angles. The project's web-based platform also opens the door to interactive formats such as collaborative annotation, dynamic visualizations, and reader-driven pathways. Exploring these avenues may allow the project to deepen participation further and expand its reach among young audiences.

Taught by Literature is also an important model for producing collaborative digital projects that incorporate a wide range of scholarly, creative, and technical practitioners. Graduate and undergraduate students are integral members of the team, with an area of the site dedicated to an ongoing student exhibit. The opportunity for readers to move between the video series, featuring reflections from experienced scholars and educators, and the student exhibition, offering parallel written reflections from students, works to support audiences from different backgrounds. The project also draws on the talents of professional illustrators, cinematographers, and designers to produce the website and its contents. Coordinating this level of interdisciplinary collaboration is a substantial undertaking, and *Taught by Literature* demonstrates the value of taking on such a challenge. The project takes seriously the ways in which skill sets not traditionally associated with scholarly work are key components of the project's public humanities orientation.

Collaboration allows *Taught by Literature* to scale up in ways that would not be possible for an individual to accomplish alone. The scope of such a large undertaking poses unique challenges, especially for a project interested in reaching young audiences and providing resources to educators. As *Taught by Literature* grows to include additional Black intellectuals and their work, the question of how readers navigate the site becomes more pressing. The existing information architecture spreads stories, poems, pedagogical resources, contextual essays, and videos across multiple menus and pages. While this dispersed structure reflects the project's curatorial ambitions by effectively conveying the variety of materials included, it also complicates discoverability, particularly for readers encountering the site for the first time. Additional materials will only intensify the navigational complexities facing a project of this scale. As the layout of the website necessarily expands, usability will be a key design imperative to ensure that educators and scholars can consistently locate, return to, and incorporate specific materials into their teaching and research.

Usability, in this sense, is not merely a technical concern but an ongoing editorial practice to shape how the project functions as a scholarly resource. As the project expands, user flows and URL structures that prioritize predictability and stability would help support citational practices that increase the recognition of early Black women intellectuals in scholarly discourse. Building upon the current organizational approach will support several of the project's endeavors.

Taught by Literature: Recentering Black Women Intellectuals offers a compelling example of how digital projects can intertwine pedagogical and archival efforts through interdisciplinary collaboration. Scholarly work is reinforced by creative and technical contributions that help expand both reach and interpretation. By situating recovery and dissemination efforts within broader concerns about the treatment of Black women intellectuals within and beyond the academy, the project remains grounded in the vision set out by Dunbar-Nelson. *Taught by Literature* is a thoughtful model for digital publishing that promises to expand its content and strengthen its approach to accessibility and contextualization in ways that will serve its many audiences.

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1. Alice Dunbar-Nelson, "Negro Literature for Negro Pupils," *The Southern Workman*, February 1922. ↵
 2. Dunbar-Nelson, "Negro Literature for Negro Pupils." ↵
 3. "On Dolls and Race," *Taught by Literature*, <https://www.taughtbyliterature.org/background-context>. ↵