



 **Anna Pochmara**

University of Warsaw

A Review of Eve Dunbar's *Monstrous Work and Radical Satisfaction* (University of Minnesota Press, 2024)

Eve Dunbar's *Monstrous Work and Radical Satisfaction* examines how Black women writers during the era of Jim Crow and early desegregation reimagined ideas of work, worth, and satisfaction in ways that both challenged and transcended the promises of racial integration. At its core, the book contends that liberal humanism, racial integration, and pluralism fall short of addressing the most pressing challenges facing the Black community. Rather, Dunbar highlights a counter-narrative through the concept of “monstrous work”—a term encompassing both paid and unpaid forms of domestic, cultural, and community labor that defy categorization by dominant economic and social discourses. Dunbar defines “monstrous” as “a turn away from the forms of life that are offered by the state and other hegemonic agents toward more radical forms of Black being” (10). This shift opens the door to a kind of radical satisfaction that transcends the need to prove that Black people are “‘human too’ or ‘worthy’ of American citizenship” (3). This satisfaction, she argues, lies in the affective possibilities that allow Black women to feel whole and complete. “I examine texts that explore Black women’s completeness, joy, and happiness outside the bounds of normative racial inclusion,” Dunbar declares (3). Throughout the book, she interweaves insights from Black feminist thought and literary criticism, drawing on a range of influential scholars, from Audre Lorde’s discussion of the erotic as a source of power to Saidiya Hartman’s theorization of wayward lives. Her argument is further enriched by the work of Angela Y. Davis, Hazel V. Carby, Patricia Hill Collins, Toni Morrison, Hortense J. Spillers, Claudia Tate, and Sylvia Wynter, among others. By bringing together these voices to analyze the fiction of Ann Petry, Dorothy West,



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Alice Childress, and Gwendolyn Brooks, Dunbar's project envisions a powerful tradition of Black women's writing and criticism.

Dunbar opens the volume with a deeply personal preface that situates her inquiry within her own family history. She reflects on the contradictions of Black womanhood—caught between the need to conform to societal expectations (which prized relentless productivity and visible utility) and the equally compelling need to affirm self-worth outside those narrow parameters. Her recollections of her mother's precarious labor experiences and the challenges faced by her grandparents provide the backdrop for understanding how Black domesticity and labor have historically been both essential and systematically devalued. This personal narrative is not simply anecdotal; it frames the broader scholarly investigation into the alternative forms of satisfaction and identity forged under segregation.

In the Introduction, Dunbar problematizes the national narrative of desegregation. Drawing on Zora Neale Hurston's controversial 1955 critique of integration—a critique that warned against accepting racial “progress” at the cost of genuine Black dignity—Dunbar points to the tradition of Black thought that resists superficial claims of inclusion. Hurston's skepticism about integration's capacity to heal racial wounds lays the groundwork for Dunbar's exploration of how Black women writers, through their creative work, prioritized self-affirmation and community-building over an integrationist model that demanded assimilation to mainstream ideologies steeped in patriarchy and white supremacy, ultimately forging alternative visions of Black identity and liberation.

Dunbar's analysis begins with the writings of Ann Petry, whose protagonists engage in what she terms “ugly work”—the labor that is decried or marginalized by mainstream society yet is vital for survival and self-assertion. Focusing on the supporting female characters from *The Street* rather than on its main character, the author shows that the ideology of respectability and bias against sex work has blinded critics to the radical ways in which those women use their work as a means to assert autonomy. Their marginal position uniquely empowers them to challenge oppressive social, racial, and gender norms—ranging from rigid standards of propriety and beauty to restrictive ideals of womanhood. In this context, their engagement in sex work or witchcraft becomes a radical act of resistance, subverting mainstream expectations by demonstrating that labor deemed “monstrous” can yield alternative forms of satisfaction and foster a strong sense of community among Black women.

Dunbar extends this analysis to other canonical writers of the period. She challenges the conventional view of Dorothy West's work as a Black Bourgeois novel of manners, contending instead that in her fiction, the domestic sphere emerges as a site of both vulnerability and liberation.

West's narratives counter the prevailing negative stereotypes of the Black family by foregrounding domestic work—child-rearing, cooking, and the nurturing of kinship networks—as a form of political and cultural resistance. Furthermore, rather than constructing a hegemonic heterosexual private sphere, West introduces a queer family of two women—a move that leads Dunbar to describe *The Living Is Easy* as an early Black queer domestic novel. Overall, instead of conforming to the state's narrow definition of domesticity, Black women in West's texts reclaim the home as a space of creative possibility and self-determination.

Alice Childress's writings add to the corpus of monstrous work by focusing on the experiences of Black domestic workers. Dunbar begins the chapter with an examination of Childress's FBI file during McCarthyism and argues that her portrayal of Black working-class women is dangerous to the state because, functioning outside a fixed routine, they are challenging to surveil. Through their quiet acts of resistance—what Dunbar terms “domestic work”—these women assert their agency, carving out spaces of autonomy within environments that are systematically designed to oppress them. Invoking communist rhetoric, they cast themselves as radical workers and not obedient servants. Drawing on her own experience, Dunbar constructs a vision of Gramscian Black working-class “organic intellectuals” (100), whose political and intellectual engagement is deeply intertwined with Black social life and the joy of communal bonding.

The fourth chapter is informed by the recent developments in critical theory and the emergence of animal studies. Dunbar explores the interstices between the human and the nonhuman in the texts of Gwendolyn Brooks, demonstrating how she revises the dominant discourses that have historically used animalization to dehumanize Black people. Brooks's strategy, Dunbar demonstrates, is distinct from that found in canonical Black male texts such as Frederick Douglass's slave narrative or Richard Wright's protest novel. In contrast to the Black male tradition, Brooks engages with the nonhuman world, illustrating how connections with animals and other life forms can serve as metaphors for radical forms of belonging. In doing so, Brooks's work expands the definition of community beyond strictly human relationships, enabling Black women to articulate new modes of satisfaction that transcend divisions and binary oppositions that have long been inclined to devalue their lives.

In her coda, Dunbar reflects on the enduring legacy of these literary practices of Black women writers of the Jim Crow era. Pondering over a portrait of Breonna Taylor—a Black woman killed by the police who wrongfully entered her house in 2022—she emphasizes the urgent need to carve out space and time for Black women's self-affirmation, a radical act in a world that persistently devalues their lives.

Overall, *Monstrous Work and Radical Satisfaction* stands as both a scholarly study and a political intervention. Dunbar delivers compelling and meticulous close readings of the texts under examination while situating them within broader critical and historical discourses. Her eight-page analysis of the chicken-hacking scene in Brooks's *Maud Martha* exemplifies this approach, demonstrating the depth and nuance of her interpretations. These readings compel us to rethink the traditional African American male-centered narratives of rebellion, urging us to recognize radicalism in the often-overlooked counterhegemonic interventions of Black women—acts of resistance that frequently unfold within the domestic sphere and the fabric of Black social life. This study will appeal to scholars of African American culture and feminist thought, while its clarity and accessibility, despite an extensive theoretical framework, make it a valuable resource for all students of literature and culture.

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Anna Pochmara is Assistant Professor at the Institute of English Studies, University of Warsaw. A former Fulbright fellow at Yale University, she completed her doctoral research under Hazel V. Carby. She is the author of two monographs: *The Making of the New Negro* (2011), which received the Polish Minister of Science and Higher Education Award, and *The Nadir and the Zenith* (2021), which earned an honorary mention in the 2022 American Studies Network Book Prize. She has published over thirty articles and reviews in American studies. Pochmara co-edited *Cosmopolitanisms, Race, and Ethnicity* (2019) and a 2022 special issue of the *European Journal of American Studies* on boredom. Most recently, she co-edited *The African American Novel in the 21st Century* (Brill, 2024) with Raphaël Lambert.

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8860-687X>

a.pochmara@uw.edu.pl