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## **'Woman thou art loosed': Black Female Sexuality Unhinged in the Fiction of Frances Harper and Pauline Hopkins**

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**'WOMAN THOU ART LOOSED': BLACK FEMALE SEXUALITY UNHINGED  
IN THE FICTION OF FRANCES HARPER AND PAULINE HOPKINS**

A Dissertation Presented

by

CRYSTAL S. DONKOR

Submitted to the Graduate School of the  
University of Massachusetts Amherst in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

September 2017

W.E.B. Du Bois Department of Afro-American Studies

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## **DEDICATION**

To my uncle, Kwasi Adusei. May I never disappoint.

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history. You were the first writer I witnessed and your commitment to writing solutions to the problems of a race, a country, and a people have had a profound impact on my life.

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## ABSTRACT

### **‘WOMAN THOU ART LOUSED’: BLACK FEMALE SEXUALITY UNHINGED IN THE FICTION OF FRANCES HARPER AND PAULINE HOPKINS**

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Race-sex narratives that dominated in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries permeated the political, scientific, and social fabric of the nation, but did not solely center on black bodies. These narratives demeaned and degraded a race of black citizens, characterizing them as sexually deviant social pariahs. Consequently, these same notions elevated whites to the highest rungs of society, marking them as moral and desirable. This crafting of racial identity acted as just one way to justify racial subordination through the creation of notions that proved detrimental to black life and worthiness. Writer-activists penning their tales of fiction after the Civil War understood that presenting challenges to prevailing racial ideologies in their literature would be essential to advancing the cause of black equality in the post-bellum period. Thus, the import of these subjects into African American fiction became central to dismantling stereotypes and refiguring notions of black personhood.

The challenge of (re)presenting the race was all the more fraught for black women writers and is the analytical focus of this study. *‘Woman Thou Art Loosed’* explores Frances Harper’s and Pauline Hopkins’s literary undertaking of the subjects of

black female sexuality and desire amidst a culture that simultaneously hyper-exposed black women's sexuality and obscured black women's sexual autonomy. This project's explicit focus on the late nineteenth and early twentieth century literatures of African American women seeks to uncover how these literary artists rendered black women's sexual selves (and the layered significance of such rendering) despite the pressure and stigma of already codified cultural narratives of the period. Furthermore, this project analyzes where works such as *Minnie's Sacrifice*, *Trial and Triumph*, *Hagar's Daughter*, and *Contending Forces* fit in the matrix of racial uplift, prompting a re-evaluation of current understandings that reflect more masculine influenced uplift ideologies of the time. I further the notion of Hopkins and Harper as writer-activists, examining their political agendas which were made radical by their, at times, non-conformist sexual politics buried within the nuances of literary expression.

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**INTRODUCTION:  
BLACK WOMANHOOD AND SEXUALITY IMAGINED ANEW**

“And when Jesus saw her, he called *her to him*, and said unto her, Woman, thou art loosed from thine infirmity. And he laid *his* hands on her: and immediately she was made straight, and glorified God” (*King James Bible*, Luke 13:12)

Black women writers of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries perform a literary “laying on of hands” to redefine representations of black womanhood and sexuality by using their fiction as a kind of cultural healing. Scholarly criticism of this period’s literature often analyzes the trend toward respectability politics by black women writers in texts like *Iola Leroy*, *Minnie’s Sacrifice*, *Sowing and Reaping*, and *Contending Forces*, among others. In these novels and serial works, Frances Ellen Watkins Harper and Pauline Elizabeth Hopkins unfix black womanhood from the damning stigma of racial and sexual narratives with which black women had been long associated. *Woman thou art loosed: Black Female Sexuality Unhinged in the Fiction of Frances Harper and Pauline Hopkins* performs alternative readings of some of the most popular and lesser studied fiction of these writers to explore how they operate within and beyond models of late nineteenth and early twentieth century respectability politics.

The central orienting principles of this project are transgression and revision. I employ two meanings of the word transgression: one to define how each author represents “misbehavior” or sin in the novel and the other to signify the writer’s own crossing of boundaries through form, technique, and invention. Often, my use of transgression centers on the ways in which these writers trespass or encroach upon the supposed limits of black womanhood. This study is most concerned with how Frances Harper and Pauline Hopkins create new paradigms for black women’s sexual and gender

expression, desire, womanhood, and racial uplift. At times, I discuss these works as having transgressive potential, meaning that the subtleties of the texts house the possibility for alternative readings which are not immediately apparent. My work then, has been to further develop these potential areas for boundary crossing through my analysis to show us how we might read these texts in ways that add new dimension to the authorial capacity of turn of the twentieth century black women writers. My use of revision also appears under the language of rescripting, redefining, reshaping, reframing, and reimagining throughout the body of this study. These terms intend to consider not only the ways that these writers adapted and modified visions of black womanhood and sexuality, but also the way that they correct and sometimes replace the originators of certain texts about black women.

*Woman thou art loosed* is an exploration of the post-emancipation world as envisioned by the very people whose freedom and standing in that world was so fragile. Central to black women writer-activists' visions of the future of African Americans was an address of prominent negative perceptions that in part, stood in the way of black advancement. African American women writers had long taken up the issue of black female virtue in their fiction. While some writers remained focused on the moral representations of black women to fit into mainstream standards of the politics of respectability, other black women writers pushed the envelope further still. Black women writers living at the turn of the century were not immune to the politics of respectability. However, some women writers simultaneously subverted dominant patriarchal agendas in ways that, although incomplete, prompt critical analysis of their near-revolutionary approach to imagining alternative possibilities of black womanhood, sexuality, and

desire. Black women writers not only challenged the politics of black women's sexuality and desire but did so in ways that acknowledged race as inextricably intertwined to black women's sexual identities. These challenges confronted an uplift politics that represented a masculine ethos that promoted feminine suppression over expression, with little variance. It is my argument that Frances Harper and Pauline Hopkins add this variance, sometimes just a little and more often than not, as my readings will suggest, these writers made a considerable departure from the frequently deployed one-dimensional script of black womanhood.

To date, scholars of African American women's writing have provided insightful criticism of the novels unearthed and widely publicized by *The Schomburg Library of Nineteenth-Century Black Women Writers*. Once neglected, these works became the subject of much critical focus in the late twentieth century in an attempt to understand how Black women writers either understood and reflected the world around them, or imagined possibilities in a fictional world that provided them spaces that the real world withheld. My study engages the foundational work accomplished in Claudia Tate's *Domestic Allegories of Political Desire* in which she argues that "idealized domesticity" in black women's post-Reconstruction novels act "as a fundamental cultural symbol of the Victorian era for representing civil ambition and prosperity as a nineteenth-century 'metonym for proper social order,' a symbol that black women writers in particular used to promote the social advancement of African Americans" (5). Although black women writers engaged in this very process, they rebuffed certain prescriptions of behavior from within the black community while simultaneously adhering to and creating new forms of sexual behavior and ways of being. In so doing, they challenged both black and white

ideas of “norms,” present in daily life and those reflected, imagined, and endorsed in the literature. Thus, notions of black sexual savagery, wantonness, immorality, and even certain politics of respectability were thwarted or at the very least shifted to make way for newly imagined sexual selves. In turn, these redefined selves, served as alternative models and pathways for advancement. In this way, Frances Harper’s and Pauline Hopkins’s agendas pushed far beyond the mere social advancement of black people. What figured into their notion of civic or political work was also the social advancement of black women and in some cases, women writ large.

Historian Jenifer Morgan’s work *Laboring Women* (2004) is crucial to understanding how early European encounters with black bodies on the African coast, in the colonial West Indies and on the North American mainland helped to create and shape mythologies about black sexuality. Further, Deborah Gray White’s scholarship on the global circulation of ideas of black licentiousness and their concretization in a specifically North American iteration, though preceding Morgan’s work, is a compliment to understanding how narratives around black women’s bodies, both locally and globally, became pervasive and remained resilient. Hazel Carby’s scholarship on nineteenth century black writers highlights a class of intellectuals who prominently influenced the fields of fiction and politics. Carby sees black women writers as “authors [who] intended that their texts contribute to the struggle for social change in a period of crisis for the Afro-American community” (“On the Threshold” 264). Carby’s analysis causes critics to consider the possibilities that existed for these writers in their literature that they could not exercise in more explicit political discourse. Overall, this scholarship is foundational to this project’s understanding of the historical, cultural, and literary contexts which

frame the abstract and concrete narratives which were engaged by black women writers' bodies of work.

This project approaches the literature of black women writers from two distinct theoretical frameworks. First, *Woman Thou Art Loosed* is interested in how these writers participate in an albeit black feminist production that “expanded the limits of conventional ideologies of womanhood to consider subversive relationships between women, motherhood without wifehood, wifehood as a partnership outside of an economic exchange between men, and men as partners and not patriarchal fathers” (276). Though, not always explicitly stated as feminist practice throughout the dissertation, I repeatedly capture spaces where these dynamics present themselves in Frances Harper's and Pauline Hopkins's fiction. This project is also interested in understanding how Audre Lorde's premise of the erotic presents itself as being “a bridge between the political and the spiritual and the emotional” (Lorde 56).

It draws on the black feminist perspective of black feminist thinkers like Patricia Hill Collins, Barbara Christian, Beverly Guy-Sheftall and others. This framework allows this project to explore how these women fit into a trajectory of black women's activism. Literary scholar Carla Peterson situates the new popularly novelistic form of the mid-nineteenth century as “an ideal vehicle through which African Americans could speak to one another...and thereby imagine community” (149). Though Peterson situates this critical practice of community shaping through text particularly within the antebellum period, the literature of African American women writers of the post-bellum period demonstrates that they continued to see the novel (and more often, the serial) as an important tool in imagining community in ways that defied ever-present notions of an



uncivilized black community. This dissertation is particularly concerned with how African American women used the novel and serial form to discuss issues of black female sexuality and sexual desire in ways that sought to restore dignity to and profess the humanity of this imagined community through rupture. Accordingly, they complicate popular notions of black womanhood and black sexual morality. This project also recognizes that writers' particular engagements with the subject of black female sexuality and sexual desire were not entirely divorced from the larger project of creating an atmosphere of social liberty that was in concert with the legal freedom garnered through emancipation.

Re-framing everyday American perceptions of black womanhood and sexuality was challenging for African American women writing from the mid-nineteenth through the early twentieth centuries. Unlike their white female counterparts who had to combat heteronormative versions of repressed sexual desire, much like Kate Chopin did in her turn of the century novel about a woman's journey toward a more sexually liberated self in *The Awakening*, black women writers had to contradict triply charged notions<sup>1</sup> of sexuality that together, crafted an aberrant black female sexual persona. As historian Jennifer Morgan's critical study *Laboring Women* explains, concoctions of black female sexual deviance and "the meanings attached to the female African body were inscribed well before the establishment of England's colonial American plantations" (16). These interpretations of African and later African American women as sexual savages became

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<sup>1</sup> Triply charged here only refers to the three sexual personalities that I will be discussing (oversexed, sexually repressed, and the "mulatta" as a spell-binding figure of desire) and is not intended to place a limit on the multiple ways in which African American women's sexuality may have actually been envisioned during the period.

part of what Daphne Brooks discusses as the cultural marginalization of African Americans.

For African American women writers then, the charge of their literature produced in the post-bellum period was to move black women's sexuality from outside of the cultural margins. It is important to note that not all black women writers of the period had the same vision of this move from the margins, nor were their visions always fluid and without their own limitations. Writers like Frances Harper often tracked her black female characters into the cultural sexual mainstream, equipping them with virtues that resembled (though did not always mimic) those of the dominant society's view of women's sexual purity. Conversely, novelist Pauline Hopkins sometimes stayed within the realm of "sexual propriety" while at other times, she transcended both the mainstream and the margins to allow her female characters to challenge notions of womanhood and sexuality that extended beyond any evident constructions.

Contrary to what scholars and critics of the literature of this period contend, these writers did indeed confront and challenge the politics of color in the literature. Often, literature of this period relied on the near-white heroine to be the paragon of black virtue and morality. Herself, not hued in any apparent shade of brown, this "black" heroine, who learned of her heritage through racial discovery, was to stand as a challenge to white cultural perceptions of black womanhood, femininity, and sexuality. While critics saw the use of these heroines in black women writers' fiction as capitulation to white norms of beauty, womanhood, and Victorian era morality, I contend that neither Frances Harper nor Pauline Hopkins found it "too burdensome...to disturb that ideology while

attempting to teach new social codes about moral development, social responsibility, and equal opportunity to black and white audiences,” as Tate suggests (63).

My research also asserts that these women writers challenged notions of gender and heteronormative sexual identity in much the same way that they tackled issues of color privilege and identity. These literary works are themselves a history of black women’s sexuality and sexual agency. More than being mere works of fiction, they are spaces where black writers shaped an erotic self that was black and feminine (and sometimes masculine). I first encountered this idea of the shaping of an erotic black feminine self in what Sydney Lewis would likely refer to as a “neo-cultural narrative,” in Toni Morrison’s 1987 novel, *Beloved*. In Morrison’s novel, Sethe, once a fugitive slave, now a woman living free but still in a type of peril, remembers the forgotten mechanics of desire. Through Sethe, Morrison imagines and commits to historical memory the silence that surrounds black female sexuality and sexual desire. Morrison’s imagined scene gives readers more than the sex between the formerly enslaved. She gives us glimpses into black desire and longing. What Morrison is able to unearth is the long-silenced sexuality of black women as she imagines it to have emanated from their bodies, hearts, and minds. It seems that the ghost of 124 is not just the ghost of a prematurely dead baby girl whose mother wanted to free her from the shackles of slavery by chaining her to death; it is also the ghost of other things held captive, the ghost of all things imprisoned by the warden of slavery. *Beloved* functions as a ghost-whispering novel that revives many things buried, including desire.

It was Morrison’s attempt to expose and speak for that which was silenced that speaks so profoundly to this topic and first generated my interest in representations of

desire. If a late twentieth century black woman writer, centuries removed, could so vividly capture black lust, desire, and pleasure, how then, did black women writers much closer to the period in question write and imagine themselves? How did black women writers in postbellum America write enslaved black women's relationships to desire, or that of the formerly enslaved, much like the Sethe that Morrison penned? How did they write the women of the next generation, born free, yet still hemmed in by the already solidified and codified notions of black sexuality bred during slavery? These questions, among others, emerge out of my own desire to understand the cultural impact that writings about black desire and black female sexuality by black women writers could have had on the simultaneous project of racial uplift, the politics of the Progressive Era, and the emergent notion of the New Negro Woman.

Chapter I, "Finding Progressive Possibility in *Minnie's Sacrifice*" examines the relationship between the serial novel's two protagonists, Minnie and Louis. It suggests that by paying acute attention to their twin evolution and development throughout the narrative, we can locate Harper's radical claim about the role of women in the future of racial uplift. This radicalism traverses the sexual, racial, and political boundaries of its time. It disrupts the politics of both color and sex in its bucking at conventions of interracial desire so often utilized and relied upon or esteemed in late-nineteenth century writings of black novelists. Harper's radicalism here also lies in its uplift politics that are at once married to the idea of a kind of self and community love that is erotic. This is not to suggest that Harper herself intended the deeply erotic nature of her political protest nor is it to suggest that she did not. Simply, this chapter asks us to see a little bit more deeply

into the clues that Harper leaves for the discovery of a more feminine influence in the future of racial uplift.

Chapter II, “The Trials of Fallen Womanhood in *Trial and Triumph*” is primarily read through Hazel Carby’s discourse of the fallen woman. It engages how Harper revises the consequences of fallen womanhood for black women while remaining attentive to many of the moral and social repercussions of such transgression. To perform this reading, I analyze Harper’s Lucy Harcourt alongside Emily C. Judson’s Lucy Dutton to illustrate how Harper diverges from many popular conventions of the fallen woman narrative to craft new possibilities for black women. Finally, I discuss the limitations of Harper’s intervention as she simultaneously distills desire and sexual freedom for black women in this serial.

Chapter III, “Boundary Crossing: The Marriage Plot Revisited in *Contending Forces*” examines the radical manifestations of desire in Pauline Hopkins’s most popular novel, *Contending Forces* (1900). Published exactly at the turn of the century, *Contending Forces* represents the axis between conventional and radical sexual expression. It complicates the traditional marriage plot, introducing alternative narratives of being that run counter to nineteenth century socio-familial norms. This chapter positions Hopkins apart from Harper – an activist against racism and sexism in her own right – for Hopkins’s sexual politics defy nineteenth and early twentieth century norms in more absolute ways. This chapter looks closely at how the bounds of friendship and feminine intimacy are quietly pushed over the rails of sexual propriety. Specifically, it reads Sappho and Dora’s intercoursures as pseudo sexual transgressions alongside racial ambiguities and interprets them through the lens of queer theory. On this point of

analysis, it considers the following questions: What are the linkages between race and sex in this novel? How does Hopkins move beyond heteronormative discourses of black female sexuality? In what ways does Hopkins shift the burden of black female sexual debasement onto white men? How does Mabelle's reincarnation as Sappho defy the trope of the fallen woman and, in turn, allow black women to move from villainous to virtuous?

Chapter IV, "Unsettling Genre in *Hagar's Daughter*" explores the multilayered genres surrounding Pauline Hopkins's creation of her serial novel, *Hagar's Daughter*. First, it analyzes Hopkins's engagement with the biblical Hagar and positions Hopkins as an usurper of the Hagar story from the apostle Paul. Thus, I argue that Hopkins's intervention is one which gives black women direct access to lines of divinity and spirituality, a concept that is countercultural at the turn of the twentieth century. Secondly, I argue that there existed a symbiotic relationship between Hopkins and *The Colored American Magazine* which provided complex meaning to both Hopkins's serial and the magazine itself.

## CHAPTER 1

### FINDING PROGRESSIVE POSSIBILITY IN FRANCES HARPER'S *MINNIE'S SACRIFICE*

Frances Ellen Watkins Harper's literary career as a notable fiction writer emerged in an era barreling headfirst toward the dawn of U.S. Modernism<sup>2</sup>. In the three decades following the Civil War, Frances Harper serialized three works of fiction that helped define her as "the most popular African-American writer of the nineteenth century (Foster 4)," and I would contend, one of its most prolific. Her entrée into serial fiction with the publication of *Minnie's Sacrifice* (1868) was a departure from Harper's well known work as a poet, public lecturer, and activist of the century's most prominent social reform movements. Harper's fiction adhered to the more traditional mores of respectability politics of Christian temperance and moral virtue when compared to another serialist, Pauline Hopkins, the writer whose literary career would most closely follow Harper's own trajectory. Harper's didacticism is the primary window through which readers encounter her approach to uplift politics and literary marriage in *Minnie's Sacrifice*, a text whose potential for radicalism can be highlighted when read through a variety of theoretical approaches including psychoanalytic frameworks. Specifically, this chapter is concerned with how one might read more transgressive manifestations of desire and relationship in nineteenth century African American women's fiction when animated through multiple frames of analysis. I argue that one can better discern how Harper transgresses the boundaries of gender, kinship, and being with a fixed eye toward

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<sup>2</sup> See James Smethurst, *The African American Roots of Modernism: From Reconstruction to the Harlem Renaissance* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2011), for a useful discussion of the rise of U.S. Modernism and the advent of Jim Crow.

character development in the novel, in ways that allows us to permeate much more deeply, Harper's politics of uplift, which were an essential principle of her literary activism.

Harper's work in the Temperance Movement and overt Christian messaging in her public life and literary productions suggests virtuousness, absent any radical sexual or identity politics, as the most suitable lens through which her legacy can be assessed. In this chapter, I suggest a more experimental reading of Harper that is inclusive of such radical politics in ways that encourage contemporary critics to move away from the trend to limit her radical potential to suffrage. According to literary scholar Jen McDaneld, Harper's progressivism in this vein is often eclipsed by a tendency to erase Harper's radical feminism. In McDaneld's estimation of the historiography of early Black women's feminism, it is Sojourner Truth who emerges as the face of Black women concerned with suffrage, but more importantly, it is Truth who is readily recalled as symbolic of this first wave of American feminism (395). How then do scholars who refuse to accept the one-dimensionality of Harper's activism find more radical potential in her life and literary work? Perhaps we turn to those who know her best through careful study and extensively mined research embodied in the work of scholars like Melba Boyd. While most readings of Frances Harper's writings have focused heavily on her poetics and secondarily, her most popular novel, *Iola Leroy* (1892) Melba Boyd's biography of Harper recognizes one of her lesser acclaimed texts, *Minnie's Sacrifice*, as reflective of Harper's "activist aesthetic." In particular, in which ways did this "activist aesthetic" in Harper's serial differ from that which Harper presented in her post-Reconstruction novel and other novels that were contemporaneous to *Minnie's Sacrifice*? The following



reading of Harper's *Minnie's Sacrifice* encourages an examination of Harper within this first wave of early radical feminist activism. This chapter's reading of Harper's fiction asks what happens when we read against Harper's evangelical impulse. What new potential readings may scholars be able to perform when we regard Harper's fiction as being capable of something more than a reminder of how to work toward uplift in ways that reify nineteenth century codes of behavior?

### **The Christian Recorder**

The *Christian Recorder* (CR) was an appropriate home for Harper's first novel which envisioned the dream and startling reality of the Reconstruction South. As a "vehicle for nationwide debate regarding issues such as emigration, suffrage, and social equality" the *Christian Recorder* had already been subsumed with the debates that would come to frame much of Harper's novel (Lee 731). As the periodical arm of the AME church, which as Mitch Kachun notes, was the largest and most successful Black organization in the United States before the Civil War, the *Recorder* was no less essential in the divisive days that characterized the Reconstruction era (651). The *Recorder* did not operate in a way that represented it as purely beholden to the interests of its patron, the A.M.E. Church. Though Eric Gardner summarily describes the *Recorder* in his comprehensive study of the magazine in *Black Print Unbound*, as "a periodical that was conceived by African Americans, edited by African Americans, written primarily by African American Americans, and largely distributed by African Americans to an almost completely African American audience," he acknowledges the complexity of views within its pages (4). Often, the divisiveness of the period permeated the interior world of the magazine as evidenced by the "sometimes contradictory assemblage of texts

distinguishing the interests of the A.M.E. Church” (Garner, “Remembered” 234). Among these interests of the Church, Leslie Lewis reminds us, were “increasing literacy and strengthening the African-American literary tradition” (756). The publication of writers like Frances Harper whose texts often espoused Christian notions, Gardner notes, not only functioned as part of the magazine’s literacy project but had the potential, I argue, to have subverted some of the magazine’s politics.

*Minnie’s Sacrifice* first comes to life amidst the promise of the Reconstruction amendments and the contested pages of the *Recorder*. The “Information Wanted” feature of the *Recorder*, which routinely published inquiries of those searching for missing loved ones, existed in direct response to the first of the Reconstruction amendments<sup>3</sup> which abolished slavery throughout the nation as it dealt directly with the aftermath of freedom. As several scholars note, the priority of freedom became reunion for many, if not all of the formerly enslaved.<sup>4</sup> In fact, the power of this phenomenon becomes a large foundation of Harper’s only standalone publication *Iola Leroy* twenty-five years later, which figured the search for families in the aftermath of enslavement. Similarly, so too does this theme of reunion find prominence in *Minnie’s Sacrifice*. Eldie Wong’s reading of these featured advertisements for loved ones, highlight how they “offer[s] a stunning sense of how urgently freed people struggled for reconnection and kinship in the wake of racial enslavement” (693). This urgency bleeds into the pages of Harper’s narrative because these very advertisements surrounded her serial in the magazine and embody the

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<sup>3</sup> The 13<sup>th</sup> Amendment.

<sup>4</sup> See Jean Cole and Eldie Wong’s “‘Neither is Memory Always Thus Avenging ‘Longing for Kindship in Julia C. Collins’s ‘The Curse of Caste’ and the ‘Christian Recorder.’”

narrative's primary theme. As a Reconstruction era text which figures both the nation's bloody campaign for reunification and the aftermath of that struggle, *Minnie's Sacrifice* reflects the advertisements' desire to reconcile these post-war realities.

The September 4, 1869 issue of the periodical, presents the often symbiotic relationship of the *Christian Recorder* itself and Harper's novel serialized within. For the second time in one week, the daughters of Minnie Mayes issued an advertisement for the whereabouts of their mother in the Information Wanted section of the magazine. The lines of inquiry are few and the circumstances of their mother's disappearance are vague. Minnie was last known to be accompanied by a widow in Alexandria, Virginia. The widow and the deceased are named, as well as the address where any information can be received by Minnie's daughters. How Emma Monroe and Millie Johnson came to lose contact with their mother is unspecified and leaves readers to wonder if like many other Black families, Minnie and her daughters were "torn asunder by slavery and the war" or some other means of separation (Gardner, *Black Print* 11). While other listings in the Information Wanted columns of the *Recorder* sometimes note previous slave-owners, last points of sale, and other evident ties to enslavement, the search for Minnie makes no such mention. What is clear, given the six days between the daughters' last appeal for their mother's whereabouts, is the urgency with which they desire to locate Minnie. Although the *Recorder* did appeal for families to write in notices of reunion, possibly for publication, there is no further record of any additional inquiries or notice of reunion

between Minnie and her daughters. There is however, a gleam of hope for reunion that surfaces in the very same issue, albeit for a different Minnie and her family.<sup>5</sup>

In the eighteenth installment of the novel that appears in the very same September 4, 1869 issue of the *Recorder*, a family once parted has reunited. Harper writes: “After spending a few weeks with Camilla, Louis resolved to settle in the town of L – n, and as soon as he had chosen his home and made arrangements for the future, he sent for Ellen, and in a few days she joined her dear children, as she called Louis and Minnie” (Harper 74). After their wedding and resettlement South, Ellen comes to live with her daughter Minnie from whom she had been separated since she was a small child. For Minnie and her mother, this happy reunion that opens the chapter stands in stark contrast to their first meeting which brought with it the shock of a long-lost mother accompanied by the knowledge of theretofore unknown Black ancestry. The reunion of this fictional family parted by the consequences of slavery is the only resolution this issue of the *Recorder* can bestow upon its readers. Thus, Harper’s text represents the promise of what Reconstruction can offer to families. However unrealized in the material world of still divided African American families, this isolated scene gives readers and subscribers a vision of what is possible.

The promise of Harper’s vision for Reconstruction is at the heart of this chapter’s exploration of the serial. Appearing to readers of the *Recorder* just four years into Reconstruction, Harper surely pulled much of the material foundation for her novel from the exposure gained during her extended lecture tours in the Reconstruction South begun

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<sup>5</sup> Information wanted of the whereabouts of Minnie Mayes. September 4 1869. *The Christian Recorder*, African American Newspapers: The 19<sup>th</sup> Century. Accessible Archives, Malvern, PA. <http://www.accessible.com/accessible/print>. 4 January 2017.

in 1867 (Cohen & Stein 56). Given her proximity to both the achievements and failures of the period, as well as her vast prewar experience as an antislavery lecturer and activist, Harper was primed to present readers with a more than accurate view of the continued struggle for justice, freedom, and citizenship rights. Accordingly, Harper's tale is as much an ode to the Thirteenth Amendment as it is to the yet unfulfilled promise (as her novel reveals) of the Fourteenth and Fifteenth amendments<sup>6</sup>. It is the very rights to citizenship and equal protection under the law that remain the question on which the novel cliff hangs and that, I argue, Harper sees as one of which African American women are best suited to represent the dilemma or failure of. Though Harper shapes her narrative when the final outcomes of the period are yet undeveloped, some eight years before the end of Reconstruction, her narrative straddles the present yet anticipates the hope and despair of the era. *Minnie's Sacrifice* becomes at once reflective and prophetic of the sacrifice that Minnie and so many Black women like her would come to make in the dawn of freedom and the days to come.

Harper's fictional Minnie and Minnie Mayes were not the only two women of the name to grace the pages of the *Recorder*. Countless Minnies appeared in some mention between 1860 and 1901. Mentioned in "Information Wanted" columns, short stories, obituaries, or as in the case of Minnie Bond who found herself at the center of a jealous suitor's murderous revenge<sup>7</sup>, use of the name Minnie was not wanting in the periodical.

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<sup>6</sup> The Fifteenth Amendment was being debated as Harper's narrative emerged.

<sup>7</sup> A Minister's Confession of Murder. 18 January 1894. *The Christian Recorder*, African American Newspapers: The 19<sup>th</sup> Century. Accessible Archives, Malvern, PA. <http://www.accessible.com/accessible/print?AADocList=1&AADocStyle=&AAStyleFile=&AABeanName=toc1&AANextPage=/printFullDocFromXML.jsp&AACheck=1.1.1.2.1>. 4 January 2017.

In fact, Minnie saw national popularity as the sixth most popular female name by 1880<sup>8</sup>. While these records do not break down the use of the name according to racial demographics, the national popularity of the name coupled with its frequent appearance in the *Recorder* suggest that a sizable number of Black women bore the name Minnie and in part, resolves the mystery around the choice of naming for that title character in Harper's novel. I say, in part, because while readers may not question Harper's use of such a popular name, her use of Minnie as the titular character in a novel evenly devoted to the lives of two principal characters (Minnie and Louis) remains a question.

While the obvious answer of the sacrifice of Minnie's life to the "racialized and gendered violence" at the end of the novel may resolve the question for some scholars, I suggest that Harper may have a still more provocative rationale for her choice (McDanel 409). Rather, while it is Minnie who made the ultimate sacrifice in the layered struggle for reconstruction of Black lives in the wake of war and slavery, she is not singled out by Harper to only symbolize Reconstruction's potentials and terrors, but for an altogether different purpose. Jen McDanel's assertion that "it is Black women, not Black men, who are depicted as the primary victims of white male violence" is but a part of Harper's project (410). Rather, while Black women may be read as victims by some, it is also they, not Black men, who are depicted as the promise of the future and agents who have the power to compel the nation to live up to the goals set forth by the Reconstruction amendments. Through her representations of desire and relationship throughout the narrative Harper suggests that Black women are the conduit by which the bright future of the race can be realized. She first illustrates this through the character development of

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<sup>8</sup> See Social Security Administration records from 1880.

Minnie and Louis – two characters so parallel that, excepting a few deviations, they read as reflections of one another. I use the term parallel here to remark on the astounding similarity in the development of characters whose evolution occurs side by side in the novel. What might such a reflective reading of Minnie and Louis, two characters who will chart the narrative’s primary romance, produce?

### **Paired Protagonists**

In her introduction to Frances Harper’s *Three Rediscovered Novels*, Frances Smith Foster refers to the character arrangement of *Minnie’s Sacrifice* as embodying a technique “So common to fiction of [the]era” in her use of the term “paired protagonists” (xxx). This term “paired protagonists” quite obviously refers to the principal characters in the novel, Minnie and Louis. With almost equal attention given to the development of these characters, one must wonder what the value of such figurative and literal pairing (as their marriage makes clear) can be to the novel thematically. While Foster does not offer much more by way of explanation of the use of this technique in *Minnie’s Sacrifice*, its mere mention in relationship to this text is quite useful in providing a building block for this chapter’s analytical framework.

To aptly read Minnie and Louis as paired protagonists in my estimation, one must go beyond the apparent proportionate attention given to each character and explore the parallelism that Foster suggests, often accompanied such pairing. For Harper’s protagonists, the first instance of their parallel development presents in the history of Minnie and Louis’ parentage. Louis is the son of an enslaved woman, Agnes, and his mother’s master, Bernard Le Croix. At the behest of his half-sister Camilla, infant Louis is adopted as his master’s son after his mother dies in childbirth. The irony, of course, as

is common in novels of the period, is that Camilla “Would like him for [her] brother” because “he looks like us anyhow” (Harper 8). Young Camilla is unaware that Louis is indeed, already her brother, bearing the traces of familial resemblance. Like Louis, Minnie derives from similar origins. Minnie is the child of Ellen, an enslaved woman on Pierre Le Grange’s plantation. Ellen’s indictment of Mr. St. Pierre that he “would not sell that child [Minnie] when it is your own flesh and blood?” serves as the text’s revelation of Minnie’s paternity (Harper 19). Of course, Minnie and Louis being of mixed racial ancestry and born enslaved could only derive from this exact formulation<sup>9</sup>.

The parentage of Louis and Minnie is not the only axis on which their parallelism hinges. The character and plot development become primary scenes that evidence how Minnie and Louis’s lives continue to reflect one another. Louis is removed from his southern home of birth and installed at a New England school, having no knowledge of his African ancestry. Similarly, Minnie is removed to the North and placed in the care of a northern family. Rather than being under the care of a school matron, Minnie’s Quaker adoptive family secures her in their Philadelphia home. Minnie, too, remains ignorant of her African roots despite her proximity to her slave past. Minnie’s proximity to slavery is established by the fact that “she has known for years that their home has been one of the stations of the underground railroad” (Harper 31).

The most significant and final parallel in the lives of the novel’s paired protagonists before their marital union, is the method by which their ancestries are revealed. For both Minnie and Louis, their maternal ancestors become central to the

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<sup>9</sup> Acts XII, Laws of Virginia, December 1662 decreed that the condition of the child shall follow the condition of the mother and so the only permutation that exists for the parentage of Minnie and Louis, is that of the enslaved mother.



dramatic revelation that leads to racial discovery. While on a shopping trip with her school-friend Carrie, Minnie finds herself accosted by a “tall, slender woman about thirty-five years old, with a pale care-worn face” (50). “Heaven is merciful!” Ellen exclaims, “I have found you at last, my dear, darling, long-lost child” (50). Minnie is immediately horrified by the threat that this potential association poses to her racial and class stability:

Minnie trembled from head to foot; a deadly pallor overspread her cheek, and she stood still as if rooted to the ground in silent amazement, while the woman stood anxiously watching her as if her future were hanging on the decision of her lips. “Who are you? and where do you come from?” said Minnie, as soon as she gained her breath (50).

Minnie’s response to a yet unfounded claim is quite remarkable. What it illustrates here via Harper’s critique, at once, is the hypocrisy of northern whites, even those who aligned themselves with abolitionist sentiments. Still thinking herself white, Minnie, at present, becomes a stand-in for Northern whites and Quakers even, who would support the cause of the enslaved in the abstract while they would shrink at the merest hint of unity or commingling with the race. This critique is reinforced by the response of Minnie’s friend Carrie when she suspects that Minnie may in fact be descended from African ancestry. Carrie remarks that those who sympathize with Minnie’s plight “may put [themselves] on equality with niggers” but that she refuses to follow suit (55).

This scene between Minnie’s school friends’ houses Harper’s other critique of the very concept of racial discovery. Minnie’s schoolmate Carrie claims that she “know[s] white people from colored” because she’s “seen enough of them” (54). Of course, the fallacy here lies in the fact that Carrie could not distinguish Minnie as one in whom “colored” blood flows prior to Minnie’s exposure. What Harper’s subtle critique intends

to illustrate, is that these young school girls would not know their own selves from “a colored woman” or a white woman, for that is how adulterated the supposed purity of white blood is during this period. Even Minnie’s own reaction to Ellen is rooted in this idea of an unconscious anticipation that might suggest the lack of racial security embedded within any one who may appear white, for Minnie is already nervous, pale, and breathless before her mother, Ellen, is able to provide any verifying details or evidence of their relation.

Louis’s racial discovery is no less dramatic. Louis sides unflinchingly with his section although “he is neither coarse and brutal in action, nor fanatical in his devotion to slavery” (36). Accordingly, Louis’s commitment to the South primes him to take up arms and join the Confederacy. His sister Camilla appeals to Louis’s sensibilities to encourage him not to join the “rebels and traitors in the South” (58). Harper sets readers up for an intentional parallel to Minnie’s revelation by switching the voice of revelation in this scene. It is Camilla who is primed to tell Louis that to fight for the Confederacy would be a crime against his own humanity, yet Harper steals the words from Camilla’s mouth and allows them to escape Miriam’s tongue.

“Louis,” said she, her whole manner changing from deep excitement to profound grief, “Oh, Louis, it will never do for you to go! Oh, no, you must not!”

“And why not?”

“Because,” – and she hesitated. Just then Miriam took up the unfinished sentence, “– because to join the secesh is to raise your hands again your own race.”

“...I mean that you Louis Le Croix, white as you look, are colored, and that you are my own daughter’s child” (59).

As with Minnie, Louis enters his knowledge of African ancestry through his maternal ancestor, his grandmother, Miriam. Again, such a revelation is met with horror. Louis

feels displaced by this new knowledge and is as Harper describes, now a man without direction. Minnie's health fails dramatically after she learns of her Black blood. For both protagonists then, this significant racial discovery has catastrophic effects before they both accept their new heritage. Readers seem to be set up for the tragic mulatta/mulatto narrative but it does not take flight. Instead, Minnie and Louis wed and commit themselves to the people and destinies from which they once shrank. For Harper's protagonists, racial discovery does not offer peril, but purpose.

### **Turning on a "Double Center"**

There are several instances of Minnie and Louis's parallel development before they pair off to live life joined in the union of holy matrimony. Donald A. Ringe has another (yet like) phrase to describe what Foster labels as paired protagonists in *Minnie's Sacrifice*. In his analysis of American novelist, George Washington Cable's first two novels, Ringe determines that Cable crafts his late nineteenth century fiction using the narrative technique or literary device of the "double center". This term emerges from Cable's very own novel, *The Grandissimes* (1880), in which, the "narrator stresses the fact that the story turns around two main characters...as on a double center" (Ringe 53). One way in which Ringe defines this "double center" is as one in which the novel shifts focus, bandying back and forth between the text's protagonists (53). In this regard, Ringe's theorizing of the "double center" is akin to what Foster alludes is operating in Harper's novel. Ringe's thorough explication of this literary phenomenon, however, provides an analysis that cannot be got from Foster's mere mention. Thus, that the central conflict, plot element, textual event, and theme, cannot be understood by examining one of these characters but hinges on both. "To consider either of these characters alone as

expressing the central theme,” Ringe writes, “is to miss the important dialectic embodied in their relationship, a dialectic that provides the book with its basic meaning” (53). In Cable’s fiction, this dialectic is embodied through same gendered relationships between two men. Identified as heroes, neither of Cable’s protagonists “dominat[e] the action” and their fates are “controlled to an extent by what the other does” (53). The turning of fate in *Minnie’s Sacrifice* is a bit more complicated given the novel’s outcome and the sophisticated dynamics of Harper’s narrative techniques at play. Namely, that the “double center” applied to Harper’s story, yields to a kind of singular consciousness that materializes by way of the feminine.

The reflexivity expressed by Cable’s characters is facilitated, in part, by two male characters. This “pairing” or “double-centering” is same-sex in both of Cable’s expressions but differs, at least in Harper’s. While Harper’s expression of this device centers on opposite sex characters, it is still useful to view her character’s pairing through Ringe’s analysis of Cable’s strategy, and perhaps to an altogether different, however similar purpose. What makes Harper’s protagonists’ relationship unique is that the nature of their intimacy goes beyond that of Cable’s characters. Accompanied by Minnie and Louis’s reliance upon each other is the intimacy of their marital union and the physical intimacy of the marriage bed which represents the consummation of that union. Ringe asserts that the established intimacy in a text which utilizes this “double center” concludes that the meaning, cannot reside in one character alone (58). Harper ramps this up nearly a decade before Cable when her two characters become one, both through marriage, and I argue, symbolically.

According to Ringe's interpretation the "double center" is marked by both influence and thematic effect. To locate influence in Harper's narrative, specifically the influence of the feminine, one need only return to the moment of Louis's racial discovery. The development of Harper's theme is grounded in both the literal and representative union of the text's protagonists. Part of this chapter's desire is to read Harper's two parallel or paired opposite sex protagonists as evolving into a symbolically feminine identity as a way to recognize further potential in Harper's clarion call for a dynamic kind of uplift politics.

One way that the primacy of the feminine can be determined is by analyzing the points of racial discovery in the novel. The feminine largely, and Black maternal specifically, is figured as a source of hidden, secret, and necessary knowledge, given women's positions as revelators in the narrative. Camilla most certainly could have appraised Louis of his past as could have Minnie's adoptive parents, of hers. Yet it is the Black maternal which takes the stage at the moment of racial discovery. The feminine also marks powerful influence much earlier by way of a girl child. In her girlhood, Camilla convinces her father to adopt a posture, not of shame and neglect in the face of his son conceived with an enslaved woman, but rather one in which he acknowledges his son through "adopting" him and giving him formal education and status within the family. While this is the first way in which women display their influence in the novel, it is not the last. It is Minnie's influence over Louis which is most remarkable:

"Louis" said Minnie very seriously, "I think the nation makes one great mistake in settling this question of suffrage. When they are reconstructing the government why not lay the whole foundation anew, and base the right of suffrage not on the claims of service or sex...is it not the negro woman's hour also? Has she not as many rights and claims as the negro man?" (Harper 78).

Minnie puts forth the question of Black women's suffrage before Louis. At first, Louis attempts to dismiss Minnie's address of the nation's "great mistake" by suggesting "What elevates him helps her" (78). Harper allows this private scene to reflect the contemporary clashes on this issue outside of the novel in which "woman's suffrage clashes with the interest of Black suffrage as a cohort of Black reformers who had previously collaborated and fought bitter public debates over whether Black men should attain voting rights before women" (O'Brien 605). Taking up the argument for Black women, Minnie goes on to state that they, too, have "pressing claims" and "should have power to defend [themselves] from opposition" (Harper 78).

Unbeknownst to the reader and Minnie herself, the case which she makes is urgently marked by her impending death at the hands of white men. As C.C. O'Brien summarizes, "the moment of the heroine's conception and her death exemplify African American women's distinct need for citizenship rights in order to combat a history of sexual abuse" (169). Indeed, the ambiguity surrounding Minnie's death due to the missing installment is one imbued with the violent sexual abuse rampant during enslavement of Black women and that continued as a tactic of Reconstruction era terror. What suggests this fate for Minnie, at least, is the description of a young woman's death in the wake of the mourning period for Minnie. Although the installment is missing, Louis' desire to hear "any word that told him of Minnie before death had robbed her of life" is a testament to an almost assuredly violent end that she must have met (87). The word "robbed" used here not only signals so but so too does the abruptness of her passing which came just a day after she was visiting homes in the spirit of comfort toward those who had been terrorized by the "Secesh" (87). Further, the "death agony" that had

“passed away by the contraction of the muscles” sounds the alarm to her tragically intimated demise (87).

Finally, the tale of Aunt Susan’s daughter, Amy, and her violent assault and lynching seem to be a plausible stand-in for the kind of violence Minnie met in the absence of the installment (McDanel 409). Therefore, when Minnie challenges Louis about women’s rights to have a hand in their own protection against particular kinds of crimes perpetuated against Black women, she is arguing for the protection of her future self. It would be remiss to neglect the inherent sexual nature surrounding Amy’s murder. Amy is lynched/hang’d because she “threatens”, or expresses a desire to marry a “Linkum Soger” (87). Amy’s desire, however playful, and likely more an articulated desire for freedom, proved incendiary because it is a threat to the white social order in which Black women are disempowered from possessing control over the desires of their hearts or their bodies. The suggestion of interracial sex by a Black woman then, violates white male patriarchal authority. Amy’s lynching confirms that only white men may make such claims upon an alternatively raced body. This incident finds its inspiration in Frances Harper’s own travels South. In her May 13, 1867 letter from Darlington, South Carolina, Harper reflects on the reception of her speech at the city church, which drew a crowd so large that she had to deliver it at the door so that she could be heard by all who had gathered. At the wonder of having attracted such a sizeable crowd in a city where her friends had expressed misgivings about her traveling there, she writes: “and this, in Darlington, where, about two years ago, a girl was hung for making a childish and indiscreet speech... that she was going to marry a Yankee and set up housekeeping. She

was...arrested, cruelly scourged, and then brutally hung”<sup>10</sup>. Thus, the novel chronicles the very real anxieties surrounding not only interracial sex but black women’s autonomy through free speech as a reflection of what Harper reveals as being the realities of southern life .

Given the coded manner of violence black southern women faced, Minnie’s argument then, that women’s “common humanity” need equally be at the forefront of the suffrage movement, is a poignant and ominous one that compels Louis. “I think you are right in that remark,” he says (Harper 79). Albeit a brief scene, this line is an extraordinary mark of feminine power in the novel. Minnie has persuaded Louis to the side of Black women’s suffrage. In this moment he embodies Douglass’ early suffrage spirit as a Black man committed to the uplift of the entire race, not through men alone as a vessel but through both sexes. In Louis’s case, it is a woman who brings him to this moment of enlightenment. This preponderance of the feminine in the novel and Louis’s crossing over to a woman’s viewpoint supports a reading of the paired protagonists evolving into a single feminine. What then might this mean? What meaning might such a reading produce and what is its value to the novel? So much of Minnie and Louis’s parallelism hinges on the exactness of their similarity, namely Harper’s draw away from what was a common formulation of relationships in racial discovery fiction – to make interracial rather than intraracial pairings. Harper invokes the near white protagonist, not once, but twice in this novel. What proves interesting perhaps, is the union and desire that forms between these two characters.

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<sup>10</sup> “I am in the Sunny South,” May 13, 1867, in *A Brighter Coming Day: A Frances Ellen Watkins Harper Reader*, ed. Frances Smith Foster (New York: The Feminist Press, 1990), 123.



Interracial romance or suggestions of desires for such couplings were familiar in nineteenth century African American fiction. Julia C. Collins' *The Curse of Caste; or The Slave Bride*'s "mixed-race" heroine and her white suitor, Count Sayvord are but one example serialized in the *Recorder*. Sayvord's desire to remove Claire to his family's French estate after they wed draws upon another popular theme in racial discovery plots in which new lives are made/proposed abroad where true happiness and freedom from "the curse of caste" can be achieved. In *The Slave Bride*, living abroad is only a proposal, for Claire is murdered by the Count's jilted love in "The Tragic Ending". Or so goes Claire's fate in this version of the novel. Given that Collins died before her novel could be finished, this and another ending were written posthumously. Still "The Happy Ending" in which Claire does not die concludes with her removal abroad to Europe after marriage. The implications of such patterns in the fiction not only suggest that the "curse of caste" will condemn the interracial couple that remains in the U.S., but also, that there can be no place for them among Black society either, certainly not in the crucial post-war days. Those who wed, but do not commit themselves to the uplift of the race vis-à-vis intraracial marriage, must be outcasts, or so the trends in the literature seemed to suggest. Even pre-war novels like William Wells Brown *Clotel; or, the President's Daughter* (1853) offer a similar configuration of European retreat when an intraracial romance does not follow the conventions of a white suitor, and yet the newly minted couple must relocate to Europe. Certainly then, this theme of European retreat is not unique to post-emancipation literature. However, the conditions and circumstances of the uplift agenda in Reconstruction fiction necessitated its continued use in interracial couplings. In fact, in African American women's fiction, such permutations became less frequent so that a

politics of racial unity could prevail. Harper's post-Reconstruction novel, *Iola Leroy* designs the possibility of both interracial and intraracial romance to highlight the primacy of racial and sexual union among one's own lot. Thus, Iola must spurn Dr. Gresham's marriage proposal, for such an interracial arrangement can only mean the desertion of her race and likely, her county of origin. Instead, Iola chooses Dr. Latimer, a Black man with whom she can remain committed to the cause of uplift and liberation.

Leslie Lewis suggests that the romance which anchors *Minnie's Sacrifice* symbolizes a kind of "biracial promise" in the New South. In effect, Lewis actually focuses on the individual ancestries of mixed race identity of the characters, drawing away from readings that maintain such permutations are written to "arouse white reader's sympathies" (756). "Instead," she argues "these stories about near-white characters appealed to an African American readership and leadership interested in self-determination as well as self-expression" (756). How then do Minnie and Louis's story of self-determination as "biracial" characters differ from others who aligned themselves with the cause of their brethren previously held in bondage and what is so promising about their union? Harper offers her own critique of the current trend in African American fiction when she pointedly concludes her novel stating:

"while some of the authors of the present day have been weaving their stories about white men marrying beautiful quadroon girls, who, in so doing were lost to us socially, I conceived of one of that same class to whom I gave a higher, holier, destiny; a life of lofty self-sacrifice and beautiful self-consecration" (91).

Harper's language here is a useful point at which to return to this idea of the paired protagonist morphing into one. Harper, stepping in as narrator here outright states that she gave her reader's "one of that same" class. As per my reading of the transformation

that occurs in this novel, Harper has given her readers two and have consecrated them, one to other. This is why marriage is so important to Harper's theme here, because it allows for the symbolism of two becoming one spiritual body. Self-sacrifice here can be read more literally so that Minnie's death, although real, is also symbolic for she lives on in the new kind of hero that has been borne of her sacrifice. That is, the "generous and loving diffusion" is one of "a true manhood, and a truly dignified womanhood" which merge to form this new hero in the uplift battle (91-2).

It is perhaps then, that as separate beings Minnie and Louis represent two warring ideologies of the masculine and the feminine that need unite to create the perfect uplift warrior necessary for the kind of combat in the pursuit of racial justice that the times dictate. As I have previously observed, Harper gives every indication that the power of feminine is of particular importance in this novel. This view is not a departure from earlier Black women intellectuals who had made similar claims about Black women's noteworthiness as emblematic of the destiny and future of the race. As one of the premiere Black woman intellectuals of her day, Anna Julia Cooper articulates that it is the "colored woman" who will mold an entire race. Cooper's post-Reconstruction rhetoric states quite clearly this: that it is "woman's influence [which] are needed as never before; needed to...bring a moral force into the utilitarian motives and interests of the time" (131). And it is precisely this explicitly articulated idea of woman's influence not only as useful or important, but as necessary that Harper's *Minnie's Sacrifice* demands readers recognize. In this very meditation on the essential role of Black women, Cooper asserts that "among the pioneers, Frances Watkins Harper could sing with prophetic exaltation" (140). This notion of Harper as prophesizing, not only in her

speeches or activism but also in her literature is what allows us to read ever more deeply into the promise for which she advocates in the novel. Not only is this a call for readers to recognize the power of women and the sacrifice they make to the nation's future, but it is also a call for men to follow the path that women chart forward in service to the cause of racial uplift.

### **Gender Performance**

Throughout this chapter, I speak of masculine and feminine energies that fit fixedly within the boundaries of conventional notions of nineteenth century gender models because Harper's presentation of male and female characters reflected these conventions. These conventions in the nineteenth century were none other than the ideals of the "true woman" and can be expected of Harper. For as Mary Helen Washington reminds us, "with a race to uplift and every poisonous slander against its women and men used to justify continued oppression, Black women race leaders could hardly be expected to reject the ideals set up for 'true women' for what they were" (74). Washington adds that in "attempts to give their women autonomy and power" Harper still had to bow to "obligations of affectional and domestic life" (76). Some circumstances of the novel certainly suggest this to be outright truth given that Minnie and Louis wed and settle into a "pleasant home-life" (Harper 81). Yet, Harper ruffles this notion of uncomplicated domesticity and family life by setting the couple on equal footing in their activism. Neither character models any remarkable achievement without the other so there is still yet balance in the power in this relationship before and after marriage. What motivates the courtship and marriage between these two parallel characters is a desire for the self that can be transmuted into a higher, more ideal self, more adequately fit for the project

of uplift. Transmutation, the process by which a species or element is converted into a whole new state is the process that I would briefly like to apply to how we read Harper's construction of desire in this novel. For although Harper represents the heteronormative conditions of the true woman (and man for that matter) in the novel, perhaps an application of gender theory will illuminate how Harper's novel, at the very least, allows for a transmutation that has the potential to push past these supposed limitations of her authorship.

If we think of Louis as being transmuted not into a wholly feminine essence but one which acts as a bridge between the two proscribed gender identities, then it is best to adapt Judith Butler's view of how gender performance may be enacted differently or is in transition in this novel. The "gendered stylization of the body" as Butler terms, "is manufactured through a sustained set of acts" (16). For Louis, one of these acts then is the rejection of the masculine or hypermasculine, I should say, in his decision to not join the confederacy after all. What complicates this rejection of a kind of masculinity is its inextricable tie to race. Thus, in a sense, Louis's rejection of the "masculine enterprise of war" is in essence, exchanged for an alternatively feminine identity that is designated by his newfound blackness. The rejection of the masculine here is buttressed by the presence and influence of the feminine through Camilla and Miriam's presence at this scene. This analysis is not meant to suggest that there is something lesser in this thrust toward the feminine. On the contrary, given that it is a relinquishment of a white masculinist patriarchal identity aligned with a treasonous regime that Louis disavows for the noble cause of being "allied to the Negro race," the feminine thus becomes the mark of a higher, more honorable identity. Accordingly, Louis's debate with Minnie over the role

and rights of Black women in the struggle for suffrage and citizenship becomes evidentiary fodder for this analysis. His actual change in frame of mind from not seeing the value of giving women the ballot to determining that Minnie is right in her remark, is another example of his transmutation.

Gender performance in this novel not only figures through its explicit expression through the actions of the men and women in the novel, but also in much subtler significations present in Harper's framing. For example, I return to the question of naming in the novel. Whereas I had earlier settled the question of Minnie's naming, now I turn to her mother, Ellen. It is not a trifling subject to explore the significance of this name in the novel, but a rather substantial inquiry that speaks, more largely, to what I posit, is another example of Harper's gender play in the narrative, albeit through signification. Minnie is parted from her mother Ellen on account of her resemblance to the children of her mistress, Mrs. Le Grange. This resemblance is not happenstance given that Minnie is indeed the child of her master and is reported to be "the very image of her father" by guests of the Le Grange plantation (Harper 16). In her jealousy over the confusion, Mrs. LeGrange cuts Minnie's beautiful locks of hair. Afraid of his wife's further retribution against the child, Mr. LeGrange schemes to deliver Minnie to the care of a Pennsylvania family under the guise of a sale. This occurrence has striking familiarity to the fate of another Ellen, known to the public some two decades before Harper's presentation of the separation of this family.

In 1848, Ellen and William Craft made, what many scholars and contemporaries of the period have recognized to be, a daring escape. From a bird's eye view, Ellen and William escaped from slavery in plain sight by challenging class, gender, and marital

norms of the nineteenth century. Disguised as an invalid white gentleman of means, Ellen Craft guided herself and her husband, then posing as her enslaved manservant, to freedom aboard the railway, from Georgia to Philadelphia. Yet in her girlhood, young Ellen was as disposable to the will of others as was young Minnie. In the recollection of their dangerous endeavor, William Craft narrates that as a child, his wife Ellen was given away at age eleven and separated from her mother because her mistress had been “annoyed, at finding her [Ellen] frequently mistaken for a child of the family” (Craft 29). Ellen was, indeed “a child of the family” as she was the daughter of her white master. It is thus, beyond coincidental that Frances Harper would have chosen Ellen to be part of the equation of the separation of mother and child. Nor is it a mere mention without some categorical significance, for it seems that Harper was harking upon (however inadvertent) the very gender and marital dynamics that flood my reading of *Minnie’s Sacrifice*.

Pre-emancipation Frances Harper was as much an activist for the rights of the disenfranchised as she was in the days following freedom and quite likely, was very aware of the Craft affair. As an activist, Harper not only spoke out on the public circuit against the horrors of slavery but also put herself on various stages of the frontlines in securing freedom for the enslaved. In her 1859[?] correspondence with William Still, Harper asks, “How fared the girl who came to you robed in male attire?”<sup>11</sup> Harper’s inquiry is followed by her insistence that Still allow her to make financial contributions to the Vigilance Committee in the cause of those seeking freedom by way of the Underground Railroad. She is not only “able to give something” but is also “willing to do

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<sup>11</sup> “I Am Able to Give Something,” 1859(?), in *A Brighter Coming Day: A Frances Ellen Watkins Harper Reader*, ed. Frances Smith Foster (New York: The Feminist Press, 1990), 51.

so.”<sup>12</sup> In an earlier letter, Harper writes, “that the humblest and feeblest can do something”<sup>13</sup> in regards to assisting those who travel the path to freedom as fugitives. These accounts alone demonstrate that Harper was well versed in the affairs of those who traveled the Underground Railroad and was eager to be of help to the cause. As Frances Smith Foster writes, Harper often found her efforts at contribution obstructed by “obdurate sexist attitudes of many underground railroad leaders” (16). Despite these roadblocks, Harper’s desire to advocate for those seeking freedom and her awareness of the most obscure of cases (as noted in the aforementioned inquiry made of Still) makes certain that she would have been well acquainted with one of the most famous cases of the day, William and Ellen Craft’s escape. By the time Harper published *Minnie’s Sacrifice* in 1868, she would have been well furnished with the biographies of both William and Ellen through Craft’s publication of *Running a Thousand Miles for Freedom, Or, The Escape of William and Ellen Craft* (1860). Accordingly, the Ellen of Harper’s fiction seems to be a deliberate reflection of that pair of mother and daughter whose family ties were ruptured by the evils of slavery.

While I believe Harper’s intentional naming of Ellen in the narrative to be based on Ellen Craft herself, Harper signals to something much stronger through this association. The gender and martial norms troubled by the Craft’s escape find their literary parallel in *Minnie’s Sacrifice*. As I have argued, Harper cedes Louis’s masculinity to a more feminine ethos. He goes from a rather staunch, although unaggressive, southern

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> “I Have a Right to Do My Share,” March 31, 1859, in *A Brighter Coming Day: A Frances Ellen Watkins Harper Reader*, ed. Frances Smith Foster (New York: The Feminist Press, 1990), 47.



secessionist politics to an advocate of racial uplift and Black citizenship rights irrespective of sex. Throughout the novel, Louis comes to embody the feminine in ways that certainly do not make Minnie expendable, but it does mean that her absence from the future of uplift work is not all but lost if the power of the feminine remains, now found in Louis. Or that perhaps, her death all but signifies that the feminine embodied in male form is the most that the current climate can handle – that a woman so empowered as a Minnie, will not be permitted survive, let alone thrive in the future of uplift politics. How then, does this parallel the Craft story?

*Running a Thousand Miles for Freedom* is presented through the narration of William Craft. In fact, it is his name alone that bears the privilege of gracing the cover as author of the narrative. Within the cover pages, William writes that he engineered the plan of escape against the backdrop of his wife’s preoccupation with discovery: “It occurred to me that, as my wife was nearly white, I might get her to disguise herself as an invalid gentleman, and assume to be my master, while I could attend as his slave...After I thought of the plan, I suggested it to my wife, but at first she shrank from the idea” (Craft 29).

Yet as much as William Craft claims authorship, and sole authorship at that, his singularity as originator is contested by Josephine Brown’s account of Ellen Craft’s description of the events to her in the 1850s:

“Now William, said Ellen, “listen to me and take my advice and we shall be free in less than a month.” “Take part of your money and purchase me a good suit of gentleman’s apparel, and when the white people give us our holiday, let us go off to the North. I am white enough to go as the master, and you can pass as my servant.” “I fear you could not carry out the deception for so long a time, for it must be several hundred miles to the free States,” said William. “Come William,” entreated his wife, “Don’t be

a coward! Get me the clothes, and I promise you we shall both be free in a few days” (64).

Brown’s recollection of Ellen’s testimony is a significant discrepancy from the much famed events as retold by William.

In the introduction to *We Are Your Sisters*, a documentary history of Black women in the nineteenth century, Mary Helen Washington writes that with freedom from enslavement came new boundaries for Black married women that had been much less rigid, or nearly nonexistent, under slavery. The “egalitarian slave marriage” in which enslaved women labored and then returned to the hearth was one in which equality in decision making and love, unadulterated by status or wealth, flourished (Sterling xiv). Yet, Washington argues, some visions of emancipation sought to place free Black women into territory previously occupied by many white women. Decrees of formal marriage by “Union soldiers, Freedmen’s Bureau officers, missionaries and teachers from the north” intimated that “sex roles must change” (xv). The irony of this of course, is that in an era where distinctions between sex and gender were emergent, Black women had already begun manipulating gender in the pursuit of freedom. Women like Ellen Craft, the girl “robed in male attire,” and Maria Weems<sup>14</sup>, who donned the identity of Joe Wright to secure safe passage to William Still’s Philadelphia home, are stunning samples of women who used the subterfuge of male dress and masculine gender performance, to subvert enslavement.

The discrepancy in the narration of events by both William and Ellen Craft is suggestive of this war over sex roles. In this regard, Ellen and William’s marriage serve

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<sup>14</sup> See William Still’s *The Underground Railroad*.

as a microcosm of the global atmosphere for post-emancipation Black couples. Although Ellen performed the labor of disguise and male performance under the greatest duress for nearly a thousand miles, she dissolves into all but a prop in a male-authored narrative of the ingenuity of escape. The well-known image of her male attired self, masks the woman beneath, who, as Josephine Brown recounted, was very much the fearless, aggressive, architect of escape. William's narrative (whether or not it is an accurate reflection of events) of Ellen shrinking from the grandeur of his idea, is an attempt to subdue the unquestionably evident courage of his wife, Ellen. Ellen's appearance in Harper's narrative then, is very much an ode to women and the debate over what their place would and should be at the dawn of freedom. Rather than presenting a narrative where Ellen's descendants will shrink under the intellectual or physical power<sup>15</sup> of their husbands, Harper gives us Minnie, who resurrects the portrait of her historical ancestor, Ellen Craft, as portrayed by Josephine Brown. Minnie comes into her own with the knowledge of her Black ancestry and chooses a mate in a way unaligned with the dictates of the conventions of fiction before her that would have her become the object of affection of a white suitor. Rather, Minnie occupies the "holier destiny" and "suffer[s] with [her] own branch of the human race" (Harper 91). Minnie's suffering is not at the hands of her husband since she is able to mold Louis into a man that comes to believe in the necessity of Black women's political activism, but is at the hands of a nation that is not yet ready for a woman like her. While the nation seems prepared to address the embodied feminine that Louis comes to represent in his transformation throughout the novel, the feminine

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<sup>15</sup> See introduction to *We Are Your Sisters* where Mary Helen Washington points to Freedman's Bureau records detailing that frictions in the dual economy households of the newly freed often led to "reports of wife beating, infidelity and desertion" (xvi).

cloaked within a woman's body is too great a threat for the white patriarchy struggling to regain itself in the post-War Reconstruction south.

### **A Psychoanalytic Turn**

The future of reading nineteenth century novels requires that scholars consider experimental strategies of analysis that might present not only interesting and new conclusions but provide an added depth to our understanding of the skill of Black women writers of the period. Our ability to analyze and find nuanced and layered meaning is only as brilliant as the originally crafted narratives themselves. With this, I offer a final gesture toward an alternative reading of the relationship between Minnie and Louis in *Minnie's Sacrifice* that does no more than highlight the wisdom of nuance in Frances Harper's authorship.

The work of psychoanalytic theorist, Juliet Mitchell in her most recent book, *Siblings: Sex and Violence*, provides yet another way to read the relationship between Minnie and Louis in the novel. Mitchell's appeal that we think laterally rather than vertically when it comes to charting the importance and impact of familial relations upends Freud's earlier conclusions of the importance of the mother and father. Mitchell suggests that "thinking siblings," with an eye extended toward peers as approximate siblings, can be a unique and autonomous frame of analysis – that the manifestations of rivalry, war, love etc. do not exist simply in child relations in combat for the affection or attention of a vertical authority (e.g. parent). Rather, Mitchell concludes, that the "psychic and social relationships" can be foregrounded in lateral interactions – the way that children operate within their own distinct social communities that do not follow "lines of ascent and descent between ancestors, parents and children" (1). This feature of Mitchell's argument

is not unlike Wilma King's contention that play between enslaved children "serves as a socializing agent" that "taught children the values and morals of the adult world" without ascribing them to the evaluation of any particular watching parent or adult (109).

Mitchell's conclusions are especially significant in rethinking how we read familial relations for enslaved children, those for whom the Freudian paradigm is not as easily transferrable or at the very least, is distinctly complicated.

The threat of fracture for enslaved families and the prevalence of alternatively formed kinship networks suggest that the Oedipal complex – "the constellation of unconscious ideas focusing on the wish to possess the mother and kill the father (the girl's wish for father and hatred of mother)" – are not rooted in some natural psychosis but in the unnatural absence or phantasm of mother or father (Mitchell 226). This phantasm of the mother or the father looms even in the presence of one or both parents. Much like Mitchell suggests the single child is always living in anticipation of a sibling that will mark his/her own annihilation, the Black enslaved child lives in the aftermath or under the threat of parental rupture or fragmentation that marks their isolation. Therefore, analyzing the sibling or approximate sibling as an analytical tool to understand the socialization of Black children may be particularly useful. And yet this project is not a study of children and so how might Mitchell's theorizing be applied in a way that helps frame the analysis of a decisively more mature relationship, like that of Louis and Minnie?

Both Minnie and Louis live under the specter of the racial discovery novel, that is, that neither is aware of the full equation of their parentage as they are rearing. Up until the moment of said discovery, we can gather that each may be living well within the

range of the oedipal model. And yet the moment of racial discovery marks them anew. The revelation that Minnie and Louis are, in fact, of African ancestry is a rebirth as black that makes them now orphans (in Louis's case) or with the knowledge of one parent, in Minnie's case. Casting them within the web of lateral relations through Mitchell's work may provide a method of reading the perceptible undercurrent of incest I see emerging in the novel. While the descent of Minnie and Louis from independent family lines is made clear at the beginning of the novel, still the complex dynamics of family for the formerly enslaved alongside the parallelism of both characters make such a reading, all but inevitable.

## CHAPTER 2

### THE TRIALS OF FALLEN WOMANHOOD IN *TRIAL AND TRIUMPH*

*Trial and Triumph* (1888-89) was the final novel Frances E.W. Harper serialized in the *Christian Recorder* before publishing her standalone and most well-known novel, *Iola Leroy or, Shadows Uplifted* (1892). While it perhaps would be expected that *Trial and Triumph* would represent the evolving genesis of new approaches to defining black womanhood that began in her earlier serial novel, *Minnie's Sacrifice*, Harper falls short of a more radical vision of black womanhood in this serial. Specifically, *Trial and Triumph* occupies both progressive and regressive determinations of black womanhood at the turn of the twentieth century, as if to signify that the promise of radical black femininity that she engaged amidst Reconstruction, need collapse under the realities of the post Reconstruction era. *Iola Leroy* would go on to solidify the repression of certain elements of black womanhood that were in keeping with the foundation laid by *Trial and Triumph*. Namely, that respectable black womanhood was first and foremost, committed to the cause of racial uplift and solidarity, and second, that partnership in the project for racial uplift by way of marriage, be full of tempered passions. It is the subject of tempered passions which concerns this chapter's primary discussion of *Trial and Triumph*. In the twenty weekly installments issued from October 4, 1888 through February 14, 1889. Frances Harper reclaims womanhood for black women by removing the yoke of the fallen woman that predetermined women's fates in Victorian Era fiction. Instead, Harper incorporates black women into the cult of True Womanhood thus articulating a future for the descendants of fallen women. Yet in this progressive step forward, Harper's definition of virtue confines black women to a life devoid of passion

and desire (except for the political). This chapter will focus on Harper's representations of black womanhood in *Trial and Triumph* grounded by discussions of True Womanhood as laid out by Barbara Welter and other scholars, as well as L.H. Stallings's conceptualization of "wildness" as an agent in establishing radical black female sexuality.

The narrative of fallen womanhood was antithetical to the True Woman. A fallen woman was one who had descended from God's "divine" placement of her upon the throne of womanhood, to the debased status of Eve cast out from the garden. Such was the attitude toward women who had compromised their sexual purity in nineteenth century American culture and Victorian literature. "For a female Victorian literary character" literary critic, Gretchen Braun writes, "maidenly demise is preferable to sexual fall, and should physical chastity be compromised before marriage, an outcast state...is inevitable" (342). Braun continues to explain that while society's fallen women were not entirely irredeemable, "the Victorian novel is clear about the acceptable alternatives for a woman who loses her virginity prior to marriage: death" (351). It is upon these principles that both black and white nineteenth century women writers constructed their female heroines. While white women writers were simply attempting to represent supposed anomalies to the assumed virtues to which society had already prescribed them, many black women writers were looking to forge automatic associations between black womanhood and virtue. Thus, compromises of black women's virtue were often attended by other causes that proved to be no natural fault of black women's characters. Rather than uphold the stigma of women debased by sin and lust that was culturally synonymous



with black womanhood, black women writers rooted “the fall” upon the institution of slavery and white male<sup>16</sup> moral wickedness.

Harriet Jacobs most famously redeemed herself from the narrative of fallen womanhood in her autobiographical narrative, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*. When discussing, the “trials of girlhood” Jacobs writes that it was her master who “tried his utmost to corrupt the pure principles [her] grandmother had instilled” (Jacobs 52). Unlike many of the women in fallen womanhood narratives who are easily led astray due to the lack of appropriate feminine guidance, Jacobs’s mother figure did not shy away from her duties of cementing the values of purity in her granddaughter. It is the very embedding of these principles that causes Jacobs to confess her own “perilous passage” and inability to “keep [her]self pure” (79). Jacobs condemns the laws that would not keep her safe from corruption due to her race and class status, all the while claiming that “the condition of the slave...renders the practice of [morality] impossible” (80). The institution of slavery is responsible for Jacobs’s trespass and by way of its condemnation, she exempts herself from the narrative of a naturally degraded moral state. Jacobs’s self-absolution is made evident by her conclusion that “the slave woman not be judged by the same standard as others” (81). Black women would continue to build upon Jacobs’s lines of distinction between the irredeemable fallen woman of Victorian fiction and black women’s own literary visions of virtue and black womanhood.

The True Woman was one who was incapable of succumbing to the fallen status

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<sup>16</sup> White women are also implicated in this vein of wickedness when they fail to protect black women’s virtue, as in the case of Harriet Jacobs’s recollections in *Incidents of the Life of a Slave Girl* when she proclaims that “it is the mistress, who ought to protect the helpless victim” (45).

of her sinful literary sister. She belonged to the cult of True Womanhood and as the name suggests, was celebrated, if not idolatrized. To this group fell those who were counted as wives, sisters, mothers and daughters – all women who were somehow or the other, under the charge of men who safeguarded their virtue. Those who were not under the banner of male-led households which should have guaranteed the proper domestic sphere, were destined for the fall. Historian, Barbara Welter, made clear the vague designation of True Woman when she outlined her virtues of piety, purity, submission, and domesticity. She explained that nineteenth century advisory literature for women cautioned that they protect themselves by maintaining the utmost distance between theirs and men's bodies. Bodies of nineteenth century literature also suggest that "thoughtless levity" and familiarity could make one susceptible to a scheming man (Welter 155). Here we find renewed relevance for Jacobs's description of her life's events which suggests that she is as much the victim of male cunning as of her own youthful will – thus aligning herself with the trope of the fallen woman. Jacobs describes the man who would eventually father her "illegitimate" children as "an educated and eloquent gentleman; too eloquent, alas, for the poor slave girl who trusted in him" (79). While the general tract in reading Jacobs's loss of feminine virtue by Jacobs scholars has leaned overwhelmingly toward discussions of her agency<sup>17</sup>, attention to language here allows us to understand the deliberateness of her choice while also recognizing her subtly intimated manipulation. In her attribution of the phrase "too eloquent," Jacobs finely insists that Mr. Sands's smooth

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<sup>17</sup> See Colleen C. O'Brien's *Race, Romance, and Rebellion: Literature of the Americas in the Nineteenth Century* and Jennifer Larson's "Converting Passive Womanhood to Active Sisterhood: Agency, Power, and Subversion in Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*."

talking enabled her fall. Yet Jacobs's act, though it may ally her momentarily with fallen women, makes her no less of a virtuous woman. In fact, Jacobs's own version of virtuous black womanhood dismisses the cult of True womanhood altogether in lieu of a more inclusive vision which Jennifer Larson terms, the cult of True Sisterhood – "that not only advocates agency, but that argues for equality among women" (754).

Welter gives us precise insight into these dynamics of womanhood in the nineteenth century, but more germane to this chapter's conversation is another revelation made in her essay. In "The Cult of True Womanhood: 1820-1860," Welter brings to our attention, Emily Chubbuck Judson's *Records of Alderbrook; or Fanny Forester's Village Sketches* (1846). Welter notes a sketch of this work as "a popular and often-reprinted story" in which young and innocent Lucy Dutton first loses her virtue under the guile of a "city slicker" and finally, loses her own life and that of her illegitimate child (155-56). For Welter, this scene is evidence of the pervasive cautionary narrative of the fallen woman who has cast herself down from the heavenly throne of her virtue, and thus acted against her nature as a True Woman. Although this is the end of Welter's engagement with Lucy Dutton, it is an important beginning for this chapter's discussion of Harper's *Trial and Triumph* and its reliance on pre-existing narratives that would help to shape her serial.

### **A Tale of Two Lucys**

Lucy Dutton lived roughly until the age of sixteen before her life was cut short by the strain of a broken heart. Lucy Dutton's heart suffered many strikes, the first of which was the fleeting affection of her neighbor, Howard, for a season. Howard's summer seduction resulted in Lucy's autumn disgrace, as she both gave birth to and laid her infant

child to rest in its grave. The second strike against Lucy's wounded heart lay in her grandmother's shame in young Lucy's condition. While the baby still lived, Grandmother Dutton exclaims the following when Lucy begs her forgiveness:

“Oh! that I had laid you in the coffin with your dead mother when all around me said that the breath had passed from you!” was the unvarying reply; “then my grey hairs might have gone down to the grave without dishonour from the child that I took from the gate of death, and bore for years upon my bosom. Would you have died, Lucy!” (Judson 224).

Grandmother Dutton's fervent desire for Lucy's death so that the horrible events of the present would never have come to pass, produces a heart shattering blow. For one so young, redemption in the eyes of her grandmother or herself, is not yet possible. In agreement, Lucy too wishes that she had died. The very consequence of Lucy's misstep abandons her through its own infant death, hence the third strike to poor Lucy's heart. The community repeatedly rebuffs Lucy at her child's funeral, providing the final strokes which hasten Lucy to her inevitable decline. The short sketch ends with not only Lucy buried in her grave, but also her grandmother, who has come to pity poor Lucy too late, and dies of her own bruised and wounded heart.

Variations of the phrase “poor Lucy,” “poor, poor Lucy,” or “poor Lucy Dutton” are uttered no less than six times by the sketch's narrator. Each appellation strikes a heightened note of tragedy for she to whom the nickname has been bestowed. Most apparently, the phrase “poor Lucy” is the only soothing balm the narrator can offer in a tale so characterized by misfortune. Pity is seemingly all that is in Judson's authorial power. So powerful is Lucy's offense that it kills not one, but three generations of Duttons. By any estimation, Judson's is a convincing portrait of the hopelessness of fallen womanhood. And perhaps in mid-century representations of fallen white

womanhood, these were the only options available. But when Frances Harper revives the fallen Lucy in *Trial and Triumph* as a black woman, a host of new possibilities emerge. Frances Harper's Lucy, the fallen heroine in *Trial in Triumph*, is unquestionably a revival of Emily Judson's character. Harper's serial evidences that she not only read Judson's sketch but deliberately engages much of Judson's original script. Harper's intertextuality then is not a moment that will be lost on its contemporary late century readers, but given Judson's popularity and reproduction, should have brought to mind the limits of white women's authorship when compared to the feat that Harper accomplishes in her serial.

Harper's Lucy Harcourt is one of six children born to Mrs. Harcourt, a widowed mother who loses her husband soon after migrating the family North for better opportunities. All of her children become a source of pride in various professions, as teachers, seamstresses, and medical doctors – all except Lucy. Though Lucy initially enters the teaching profession, she becomes most known in the novel for her dalliance with the man who would bring her to ruin. As in Emily Judson's narrative, the grandmother is the primary caretaker in the story. In Harper's tale, Lucy's mother becomes the custodian of her granddaughter, Annette, and so becomes one of the principal maternal forces in the narrative. In the rearing of their Lucys, both maternal figures find a reflection of oneself in the other. Lucy Dutton is a "child-idol" to her grandmother and is further described as "a pet lamb to an old woman...without friend and protector" (Judson 222). Her grandmother's love and idolatry of Lucy make her blind to blossoming womanhood which Judson symbolizes in her description of the natural environment which surrounds Lucy's home. The natural beauty of the garden, roses, and germaniums veil the impending threat, for they represent the presumed innocence of

Lucy's girlishness in spite of the fact that "her form assumed womanly proportions" (223). Mrs. Harcourt is similarly naïve of the threat which faces her own Lucy. Harper first writes of Mrs. Harcourt's parenting that "Lucy, her youngest child, [was] the pet and pride of the household" and later, that "Mrs. Harcourt had unbounded confidence in her children, and...gave her girls too much rein in their own hands" (191;258). In her research on Victorian literature Jane Kubiesa notes that "a popular belief among Victorians was that it was imperative for both parents to be present during the upbringing of a child to produce balanced and stable offspring" (4). Thus, the two Lucys are predestined for failure because they have no male protector to temper womanly indulgence and promote their proper steering into the cult of True Womanhood. Their fates as fallen women are all but inevitable.

Both maternal figures are poor and struggle to raise their families but poverty has a different impact on each woman's circumstance. Lucy Dutton's grandmother's poverty is overshadowed by her almost foolish devotion to Lucy, for "when poverty came to Granny Dutton's threshold, she drew her one priceless jewel to her heart, and laughed at poverty" (222). Seemingly, the ardor of Granny's love for Lucy keeps poverty at bay for the rest of the sketch, for it neither resurfaces nor appears to have any bearing on Lucy's eventual fall. Lucy Harcourt, however, does not shine bright enough to obscure the dark tint of poverty that overwhelms her life:

For the girls, because they were colored, there were but few avenues open, but they all took in sewing and were excellent seamstresses, except Lucy, who had gone from home to teach school in a distant city as there were no openings of the kind for her at her home (Harper 190).

Unlike her literary progenitor, Lucy Harcourt's poverty is critical to her fall. Harper's revision of fallen women hinges on the racial prejudice which migrates alongside the

Harcourts in their journey from the South to the North. Harper indicts the nation in a web of racism that not only robs families of food, shelter, and resources through its perpetuation of poverty, but also begets a cycle of many ills which include compromised womanhood. The distance that Lucy must put between her and protective community creates the circumstances which lead her to “return[ed] home with a sorrow tugging at her heart and a shadow on her misguided life” (191).

Albeit under different and much simpler circumstances, sorrow befalls Lucy Dutton nevertheless, yet much of her despair is not explicitly recalled. After describing her young and thoughtless beauty aside his “gay, selfish[ness],” the narrator asks: “Needs the story be told?” (Judson 223) The silence which follows signals that the unspeakable events are intuitive knowledge for readers who can predict the outcome when such a pair unites. Within the blink of an eye, Lucy’s gaiety transforms into her “poor broken heart,” for the repercussions of sin have taken root in her womb. Harper amends this silence in *Trial and Triumph*, and though she forestalls revealing the fullest details of Lucy’s shame, she does make the manner of Lucy Harcourt’s seduction clear before the novel’s end. “He was a fine looking man” Lucy’s old friend, Mrs. Lasette, recalls, “but there was something about him from which I instinctively shrank” (Harper 258). Like a magnet however Lucy was drawn to the stranger and “became perfectly infatuated with him” (258). During this scene which reflects upon Lucy’s folly, and repeatedly throughout the novel, readers are reminded that “it was a lack of self-control which had placed [Lucy] where she was” (259). Harper indicates that it is not guiltless innocence that plagues Lucy but an inability to restrain her desire that precedes her defeat.

“Poor child” and “poor Lucy” are constant refrains in Harper’s narrative as well, but they are not the only resolution that she offers her fallen heroine. Harper’s intervention here is in giving black women a fate that mid-century white women could not, or perhaps, dared not even imagine for themselves. Lucy Dutton *and* her child die. The fate reserved for Harper’s Lucy Harcourt in *Trial in Triumph*, is not much different, with a singular exception. Lucy Harcourt’s young child lives, if only to materialize the redemption of her mother’s virtue whilst she lies in her grave. The power of transgression is not enough to kill off the Harcourt women. Harper does not do much to remove Lucy from the limits of the fallen woman trope in her lifetime, yet her posthumous dignity lies in the destiny of her daughter, Annette Harcourt.

### **Resurrecting the Fallen Woman**

Lucy Harcourt is shunned by the community following her fall. Like Lucy Dutton, she meets the cold gazes and muted speech of her family and neighbors. Friends and neighbors turn from Lucy scornfully and her own mother’s head remains “bowed with agony and shame” (259). Whereas Lucy Dutton’s lover disappears from the short sketch never to resurface, the father of Lucy Harcourt’s child deserts her before making a permanent place for himself in the community. Surely, the survival of Lucy’s daughter should have foretold nothing short of a doomed future for “the concept of transference of sin to the child” was a feature of the fallen womanhood trope (Kubiesa 9). As Hazel Carby’s seminal work *Reconstructing Womanhood: The Emergence of the Afro-American Woman Novelist* would later highlight, black women writers did not fully subscribe to the tenets of the genre. Instead, they “adopted, adapted, and transformed [the genre] to effectively...produce an alternative discourse of black womanhood” (6). I argue



that part of Harper's "political agenda of vital self-determination" for black women necessarily entailed the creation of new rules for their successes as well as their failures (Toohey, ed. Feinsod 202). Even if the politics of black respectability could not permit Lucy's disgrace to go unchecked, black women writers were not compelled to condemn their characters to death and cyclical misconduct in perpetuity. Frances Harper uses Lucy Harcourt's daughter to demonstrate that black women could be redeemed from the degraded status to which they have been relegated by the racist, sexist, and classist social conditions which condemned them.

Annette Harcourt begins her life very much enveloped in the shadow of her mother's sin. She is loved by her grandmother but all initial textual references suggest that she is a difficult child. Grandmother Harcourt fears that Annette is "born for trouble" and perhaps this is an apt premonition as she most certainly is born of trouble (Harper 180). Annette begins the novel showcasing her penchant for mischief when she "stopped to pour oil on [Mrs. Larkin's] clean steps" (180). At an utter loss to understand the child's frequent misbehavior, Grandmother Harcourt lamentedly asks "What makes you so naughty?...what makes you behave so bad?" (183). To which Annette replies after some delay, "I don't know, grandma, I 'specs I did it for the devil" (183). What speaks in Annette's protracted silence is the prophecy of the fallen woman which looms large over Annette's fate. Like her disgraced mother, Annette's home does not provide the appropriate maternal care to ensure that she remains on a righteous path for she is under the guardianship of an already failed maternal figure, Mrs. Harcourt:

Her grandmother was kind to her, but not very tender and loving. Her struggle to keep the wolf from the door had absorbed her life, and although she was neither hard nor old, yet she was not demonstrative in

her affections, and to her a restless child was an enigma she did not know how to solve (185).

Not only does Annette seem doomed to repeat her mother's fate by virtue of having the same feeble protector, the allusion to her grandmother's financial trials recall the social conditions that preempted Lucy's fall. In so doing, Harper once again draws reader's attention to how the dynamics of race, class, and gender intersect to create social and moral misfortune.

The promise that Annette will be permanently "handicapped" by her antenatal history is symbolized by repetition and allusion in the novel. Though not distinctly overused in the novel, the term antenatal and other plainer references to Annette's life before her birth serve as a constant reminder of a past which seems to have the power to reach into the present. The lack of self-control which is repeatedly referenced as the source of Lucy's failings is intimated in Annette's impulsive misbehavior. What is alluded to through these associations is that eventually, Annette's childish lack of control will result in a womanly loss of control that will cause to "trail the robes of her womanhood in the dust" (184). In fact, nearly everyone seems to be aware of Annette's antenatal history, except perhaps Annette. Yet Annette's apparent deficient knowledge of her ancestry may be one tool that Harper uses to chart a different path for a generation of black women bogged down under such a weighty legacy. Without traceable evidence of Annette's awareness of her mother's fall in the narrative, Annette does not have to fear that she will repeat the mistakes of her mother. Rather, through ignorance, Annette is able to defy the limited societal expectations placed upon a woman in her predicament. Although community knowledge of Lucy's indiscretion causes many community

members to shun her, Annette's own lack of knowledge gives her the space to live without impediment.

Interestingly enough, formalized community organizations and club movements do not occupy much, if any space in the novel. Contrary to nineteenth century black women writer's tendency to pepper their texts with black women's clubs that were "characteristically composed of elite women who supported reform movements and around issues of 'moral purity, temperance, self-improvement, and suffrage,'" alternative forms of community dominate *Trial and Triumph* (Yellin 56). What Harper seems to develop is an unstructured version of what Hazel Carby describes as the goal of the First National Conference of the Colored Women of America in 1895. Conference organizer, Josephine St. Pierre Ruffin lobbied for "the right of women to organize autonomously and also appealed for the support of black men" (Carby 116-17). Harper's late 1880s representation of the Tennis Court community of the serial serves as a prototypical, unorganized version of the elite club woman's future declaration. The Tennis Court betrays no signs of being an elite community and it is quite plainly described as an undesirable place. Annette is forbidden from repeating the slang she's picked up in her community, for it is "coarse and unrefined" (Harper 218). Despite her somewhat outcast status, Annette's community coalesces around her to form a pseudo uplift assembly that supports her "proper" passage into womanhood. Though Harper's informal novelistic vision preceded the conference, her well documented orientation toward organizing as evidenced by her involvement with women's societies constructed around issues of temperance and suffrage, suggest the novel as a landscape in which she would have

already begun to imagine more egalitarian organizing principles like that which forms at Tennis Court.

The lower class status of the Tennis Court community members is but one indication of difference between this ad-hoc uplift community and the more elite and organized future of black women's club movements. Even where there is education, characters like Mr. Thomas and Charley Cooper spend most of the novel striving for middle class standing through their search for stable employment. Still, Mr. Thomas remains a stabilizing male influence for Annette and thus, an important contributor to her rising above her antenatal history. Mr. Thomas is Annette's former school teacher and continues to support and guide Annette as she moves into maturity:

Mr. Thomas has encouraged her efforts, and taught her to believe that not only is her own honor at stake as a student, but that as a representative of her branch of the human race, she is on the eve of winning, or losing, not only for herself, but for others. This view of the matter increases her determination and rouses up all the latent energies of her nature, and she labors day and night to be a living argument of the capability in her race. For other girls who will graduate in that school, there will be open doors, and unclosed avenues, while she knows that the color of her skin will bar against her the doors of workshops, factories and school rooms, and yet Mr. Thomas, knowing all the discouragements around her path, has done what he could to keep her interest in her studies from flagging. He knows that she has fine abilities, but that they must be disciplined by trial and endeavor before her life can be rounded by success and triumph (226-27).

In committing himself to both Annette's intellectual and social growth, Mr. Thomas plays a pivotal role in ensuring that she will not go the way of her mother. Annette's intelligence and education cannot remedy the fact that prejudice closes doors of opportunity for her as much as it did her mother. Despite her talents, Mr. Thomas recognizes that Annette needs discipline if she will triumph over the unceasing echo of her antenatal history. By using Mr. Thomas as a positive male role model in the novel,

Harper preemptively represents a community engaged in the work of uplift in which black men have a critical role.

Mrs. Lasette's relationship with Annette is another influence which determines that she will not fall victim to the degraded state of a fallen woman. Her status as a married woman and mother make her a paragon of True Womanhood. As was customary for model black women, Mrs. Lasette is involved in the work of uplift. Her domestic enterprise not only entails minding her own home but she also educates mothers residing in Tennis Court "on how to build up light and happy homes under the new dispensation of freedom" (197-98). As Harper's narrator tells the text's readers, "the moment the crown of motherhood fell upon her, as she often said, she had poured a new interest into the welfare of her race" (195). Mrs. Lasette's interest in the welfare of others caused her to praise Annette when others ridiculed her, encourage her pursuit of early talents, and most of all, she instructs Annette in the ways of compassion and self-respect. The impact of Mrs. Lasette's stewardship over misguided Annette is most evident in the aftermath of the scene in which Mary Joseph, the saloon-keeper's daughter, calls Annette a nigger:

In this country Annette, color has been made a sore place; it has been associated with slavery, poverty, and ignorance. You cannot change your color, but you can try to change the association connected with our complexion...Learn to hold up your head and respect yourself.

Mrs. Lasette's extracurricular lesson here provides Annette with a history of her ancestry that performs quite differently than her other, more recalled, personal history. Rather than present Annette's ancestral past as a source of shame, Mrs. Lasette teaches Annette to take pride in her race even if the Mary Joseph's of the world do not.

Finally, Mrs. Harcourt's dinner party mimics the organized structure of a formal meeting in which important issues of the day are discussed along with stratagems to best

aid in the uplift of the race. Mr. Thomas, Mrs. Larkins, Mrs. Lasette, and Reverend Lomax make up the company which graces Mrs. Harcourt's humble table. Of the many issues discussed which concern the future of the race including; education, employment, and racial equality, the subject of womanhood briefly appears as a veiled concern of the community. While I will provide a more detailed discussion of this conversation in the following section, I mention its presence here to evidence that the community saw itself as a collective support to Mrs. Harcourt in raising young Annette. In their short discussion of disciplining her, each offers up their own perspective on how best to redirect her into behavior more befitting of an emergent True Woman.

What finally redeems Annette is the sudden change in her prospects. Her early love for books and poetry blossoms into the focused study that leads to her being first in her class and she is selected to give the graduating essay. The prophecy spoken by Grandmother Harcourt early in the novel that "nobody will ever put up with her" or that "maybe a good husband won't turn up for Annette" is unfulfilled once Annette finds a suitor in young Clarence Luzerne (180;229). Annette's union with Clarence allows her to create the perfect domestic model that she was deprived of in childhood. Accordingly, the perceived recessive threat to womanly virtue she inherits from her mother's transgression becomes further suppressed through these new environmental conditions. Through the work of a pseudo-community uplift program and deliberate mentorship, Harper is able to present a model of redemption from fallen womanhood for the generation of women that would survive their mother's debasement. As if to evidence the final test of the strength of Annette's virtue, Annette severs her engagement to Clarence once his theretofore deceased wife appears in the novel. Annette's not only sacrifices her own happiness but

shows compassion to Clarence's fallen wife through her convalescence as her bedside nurse. Clarence and Annette do eventually reunite once his lawful wife has died, but it is only after Annette has fully proven herself worthy of the ultimate antidote to fallen womanhood – respectability through marriage. “For Harper” Andrea Williams notes, “respectability is an ostensibly value-free trait accessible to all” who earn it (27).

### **Wild Oats**

Frances Harper presents a much more thorough condemnation of the suitor who destroys womanly virtue in her late century novel. Whereas Emily Judson's rogue fades from view, Harper enlists the narrator to critique and challenge attitudes toward men who transgress upon social society in this manner:

Did society, which closed its doors against Lucy and left her to struggle as best she might out of the depth into which she had fallen, pour any righteous wrath upon his guilty head? Did it demand that he should at least bring forth some fruit meet for repentance by at least helping Mrs. Harcourt to raise the unfortunate child? Not so. He left that poor old grandmother to struggle with her failing strength, not only to bear her own burden, but the one he had so wickedly imposed upon her (191-92).

The handsome stranger who seduces and impregnates Lucy may not have met the rebuke of A.P.'s community who understand that “young men sow their wild oats” but Harper does not shy away from indicting men like him where her power lies (261). According to Harper, the handsome stranger should be condemned for more than his abandonment of a pregnant woman, for this act is just an appendage to his original crime. His seduction burdens Mrs. Harcourt with the care of the motherless child as well as the shame of her daughter's sexual crime. Let us be clear that what Harper convinces us to forgive Lucy of through descent, is not the loss of woman's virtue by rape, as is the case of Pauline Hopkins's Sappho Clark in *Contending Forces*, or Harriet Jacobs's sexual assault by her

master. No, what Harper bids us pardon is a woman's desire and requests that readers brace themselves for similar wildness in the child.

From the beginning, Annette's childhood wildness is a metaphor for potential sexual behavior that will bear all traces of her mother's immorality. When Mrs. Harcourt expresses bewilderment over how to subdue Annette amidst the company of her dinner party, an interesting conversation ensues: Mrs. Harcourt: "Yes, I know what she wants; but what do you think she wants?" / Mrs. Larkins: "She wants kissing. I'd kiss her with a switch if she were mine" (202). While it is clear that the conversation is actually a debate about corporeal punishment as a style of discipline, the veiled implications of the language of this scene cannot be eclipsed. That Annette wants kissing acquires two new layers of meaning when read in this context. As if to double down on the dual significance of these lines, Mrs. Larkins follows, stating that girls who are not thus disciplined may be led astray to temptations. First, these lines may be read as Annette's desire for the true physical intimate act of kissing, that she is early indicating the lack of self-control exhibited by her mother. Second, these lines also denote a pre-emptive punishment for the future sin of kissing – that Annette somehow subconsciously desires the whipping as a penalty for her yet, unarticulated desires. L.H. Stallings theorizes wildness like that suggested of young Annette as "autonomy and self-assertion in the invention process of self" (49). Building on bell hooks, declaration of wildness as an expression of radical black female subjectivity, Stallings argues for a more revolutionary approach to reclaiming black sexual subjectivity by those engaged in doing the work of not only racial, but sexual uplift. "Real resistance to negative stereotypes," says Stallings, "would entail more than simply reversing the binary logic of stereotypes about Black



women's sexuality: it would mean destroying systems of gender and sexuality that make the stereotypes possible" (2). Young Annette has the potential to engage in this process of radical black female subjectivity given her self-determination, independence, and what others perceive as her early sense of sexual agency, but Harper thwarts Annette's radical potential.

Harper does not invalidate the presence of feminine sexual desire for, as her characters and narrator repeatedly suggest, Lucy did fall victim to her own sexual desire. Still, Harper acknowledges the presence of sexual desire only to conceal it from the mainstream of acceptable sexual behavior. Annette's bluntness, lack of tact, and unruly behavior may all be read as signs of a lack of self-control that could potentially lead her to tread down the same path of her now deceased mother. Even Mrs. Lasette, Lucy's childhood acquaintance, acknowledges that her fate was a result of her lack of self-control and it appears that Annette too lacks self-control (259). Harper manages to redirect Annette's energies toward her education and allow her become a "noble" symbol of black female sexuality.

While Harper is clearly positively engaging black female uplift and the potential for a fuller black feminine humanity that will be unburdened by the heavy weight of sexual prejudice against black women, one must also take a critical look at the implications of her project. Characters are only virtuous if they live according to certain Christian values that deny them sexual identities outside of marriage. Harper's *Trial and Triumph* is but part and parcel of the activist "climate of sexual repression and silence surrounding the subject of black female sexuality" (Weir-Soley 17). Like black clubwomen of the late-nineteenth century who tried "to protect themselves and their

community...insist[ing] upon the systematic denial of black women's sexual expression," Harper's ideal black female characters are not only absent the freedom of sexual expression in her literature but also are forced to sacrifice personal sexual identities in the service of racial uplift (18).

Although Deborah McDowell locates Harper's textual sexual repression specifically within her first published novel *Iola Leroy*, this "revisionist mission" is certainly apparent in *Trial and Triumph*.

Annette and Clarence Luzerne are immediately taken by each other upon their first encounters. While listening to Annette recite her graduation speech, Clarence appears "spell-bound" and "entranced" (Harper 242). After Annette and Clarence have their first conversation at Mrs. Lasette's party, Annette sits "alone in her humble room with a new light in her eyes and sense of deep enjoyment flooding her soul. Never before had she met with such an interesting and congenial gentleman" (267). The immediate passion displayed by Annette, though in keeping with sentimental fiction, is not condoned by Harper. Even though she and Mr. Luzerne eventually wed, it is only after their passions [or at least hers] have been cooled by distance and time. Once Annette spurns Mr. Luzerne after his estranged wife resurfaces, she relocates to the South to transfer her passions for her ex-fiancé into the work of uplift. The brief interlude between the two lovers before their reunion suggests that love should not be solidified among those who display intense desire but is more befitting in the controlled and measured state. They are "purified through suffering" and again, "purified by that faith which works by love" before the final scene of the novels closes.

*Trial and Triumph* presents its principal female characters as sexually virtuous women and so succeeds in giving sexual virtue and True Womanhood the face of black femininity. Black female sexuality is not lewd and libidinous in the novel, rather, it is human, sometimes misguided, and most importantly, redeemable. Yet in her power to vindicate black women's sexuality from everlasting immorality through fallen womanhood Harper perpetuates the suppression of black female desire and sexuality.

### CHAPTER 3

#### **BOUNDARY CROSSING: THE MARRIAGE PLOT REVISITED IN *CONTENDING FORCES***

Marriage was a shifting terrain in nineteenth century America that presented significant challenges for black and white women alike. For white women in the antebellum period, marriage represented a legal and economically repressive state in which they were paragons of domesticity whose moral, social, and religious instruction were lauded as central to the shaping of the nation. Under the rule of the social and legal doctrines of the era, white women were to be subservient to their husbands and wholly devoted to their children. This subservience was as financial and political as it was behavioral. As sociologist Natasha Kraus suggests, nineteenth century discourses seemed to be engaged in a veritable conspiracy in which “the tasks of guidebooks to marriage and motherhood and, more generally, of the ideology of femininity” was to make women “be convinced” of the importance of domesticity (9). Women’s domestic engagement was to remain uncorrupted by the “evils” of economics, politics, and other spheres that were thought to be more suitable for white men and white men alone (9). In the cases of less affluent white women, domestic engagement involved the burdens of physical labor and employment. Yet, for women who were recommended to remain safely confined within the protected sphere of the home, ironically, nineteenth century marriage was nothing if not political. From laws regarding coverture and spousal consent, which bestowed all women’s property and legal responsibility unto her husband, to the politics of or non-legal marriage for a class of people who often lived as property on the very property of legally wedded white women, nineteenth century marriage was dripping in its political excesses.

Marriage occupied a very particular position for African Americans in the late nineteenth century. Just decades removed from an institution that sometimes criminalized and denied their access to legal marriage and “legitimate” families, state sanctioned marriage (a right gained through newfound freedom) legitimated black families. For white Americans for whom the institution of marriage was less social privilege than social right, marriage was a real life phenomenon turned literary trope. As a literary trope, the marriage plot functioned as an element of domestic fiction that explored the theme of courtship culminating in marriage, or as Kelly Hager suggests in a revised understanding of this trope, “plot[ted] martial failure” (5). The “marriage plot,” Ann du Cille notes, “refers to a fictional formula that foregrounds romantic relationships, focuses on courtship (wanting, wooing, and winning, one might say), and generally culminates in marriage or at least betrothal” (13).

For African Americans, the marriage plot held a distinct kind of cultural capital. It not only defied age-old stereotypes against black families that slavery created and promoted, it also challenged assertions made by white novelists and American popular culture in general. The mere fact that marriage was at the center of an African American narrative, and not the quest for freedom, was quite the change from earlier black-authored narratives. Such shifts were likely aided by black writers move from the autobiographical form to the novel. It would appear that in their embracement of this burgeoning literary form, the novel became for African Americans, a literary symbol of their transition from slavery to freedom. For the most part, African Americans seem to have left behind the literary style which, though it was the outlet for both actual and imagined freedom in the days of enslavement, would not be the form of choice in their “age of freedom.” For

African Americans then, the novel was a place to imagine the newly freed self that claimed citizenship rights granted, and protested for those that were yet withheld. Marriage then became one such citizenship right represented in the landscape of the American novel by black writers.

No scholarly inquiry into the lives of enslaved people during the nineteenth century is complete without mention of the illegality of slave marriage. Gregory Smithers's discussion on forbidden legal marriage of enslaved people is anchored within an exploration of what he calls "reproductive manipulation" – the way in which slave masters sought to maintain economic and psychological control of black bodies through means that went beyond slave breeding. Citing Du Bois's *The Philadelphia Negro*, Smithers equates "the essential features of Negro slavery in America – No legal marriage. No family. No legal control over children," as being the "three central components of reproductive manipulation in the slave-breeding south" (71). Slaveholders continued manipulation of courtship and marriage permitted them the freedom to engage in sexually exploitative practices that well suited their own perverse pleasures (61). Other discussions of the illegal and unrecognized bond of slave marriage become entangled in the nuances of slave market sale in which the separation of husband and wife are nonissues as Walter Johnson reveals in his study, *Soul by Soul: Life Inside the Antebellum Slave Market*. Just as the concept of freedom for whites was defined by the captivity of blacks, so too was the legal marriage of white women defined by the lawful denial of marriage rights for enslaved African Americans. Thus, marriage was strongly tied to the broader political discourse of the nineteenth century from which women, whether white or black, were certainly not excluded.

By mid-century, white women began to challenge the supremacy of the white patriarchal order often through what appeared to be outright protests of marriage. Diary entries of southern white women reveal apprehension tied to fears about loss of a social life, death through high-risk pregnancies, and lifelong commitment to a cruel husband (Censer 31). Cultural shifts also impacted white women's attitudes about marriage. For example, seeming declines in marriage rates were not solely a result of the wartime loss of life but were also theorized to have been influenced by women's increasing self-reliance during the Civil War years (34). Local legislation such as the 1848 Married Women's Property Act and the 1860 Earnings Act in New York State that made clear gains for women regarding ownership and economic rights to one's earnings, were part of the legislative shift that challenged male patriarchy (Kraus 41). These changes and advances made by women were not isolated events but part of the growing social tide that scholars discuss as the Antebellum Women's Rights Movements – nor were they specific to white women's lives.

Free Northern black women were not absent from mid-century social movements, yet their focus was divided between the subjugated status of enslaved black women and men. Their activism was as much about their own marital suppression as well as the very hypocritical denial of marriage of their sisters in bondage and equal if not more urgent, the condition of chattel slavery under which they lived. Frances Harper, a central figure of this study, experienced first-hand the disadvantages of being a woman under nineteenth century marriage laws after the death of her first husband left her almost bereft of property (Jones 2). The marriage debate was just one of many issues circulating within

the Woman Question that preoccupied nineteenth century public culture, historian Martha Jones explains:

In churches, it concerned the propriety of female preachers...In political organizations, it was manifest in disagreements over the election of female delegates...In literary societies, the question was provoked when women took the podium...The parameters of the debate cut across institutional boundaries (4).

While there was no one method or answer to the Woman Question of the nineteenth century, there were some very clear avenues of address, namely, women's fiction.

African American women writers routinely used the literary realm to navigate the very real issues that confronted them in the antebellum and postbellum era. Black novelists commonly addressed the Woman Question, circumventing the public versus private sphere debate by presenting their arguments in the literature. Still, it need be clear that many black women writers like Frances Harper and Pauline Hopkins were not fearful of engaging public debates and often did so as very prominent activists in addition to their literary production. The subject of black Womanhood was a central focus for women writers who chose to take up the pen as weapon against those forces which impeded black freedom and denied blacks full citizenship, yet they approached this subject in complicated and nuanced ways.

To fully engage how women writers addressed the aspects of the Woman Question in ways that converged with black racial identity, it is fruitful to examine the most popular theme or plot line that appeared in nineteenth century domestic fiction – the marriage plot. Black women writers routinely used marriage thematically and the marriage-plot in ways that ran counter to its typical appearance in white women's domestic fiction. In her pivotal study *The Coupling Convention: Sex, Text, and Tradition*



*in Black Women's Fiction*, Ann du Cille marks the ways in which the marriage tradition transforms itself in the black novel:

But while the marriage plot has been coded as white, female and European, its relationship to the African American novel has always been highly political. Making unconventional use of conventional literary forms, early black writers appropriated for their own emancipatory purposes both the genre of the novel and the structure of the marriage plot (3).

Whether it was depicting marriage among enslaved people in the literature or portraying interracial marriage, black writers disturbed traditional renderings of marriage in their texts. In the antebellum period, it was somewhat revolutionary to depict the kinds of marriage that were counterculture and against social norms and laws. In the post war period, revolutionary ways of representing marriage continued, although the tactics had evolved and taken on a new form. The marriage-plot continued to remain a subversive tool for black writers yet its execution changed markedly. While du Cille argues that “reflecting their authors’ concerns with social reform, many novels of this era are characterized by sexual reticence, the literary purification of black womanhood, and the celebration of marriage as a seemingly sexless meeting of like minds and sociopolitical ambitions,” I posit that these were not the limits of black women writers’ expression of black female sexuality (10).

Certainly, black women writing during the post-Reconstruction period were attune to the racist perceptions and injustices that plagued black women and many combatted such harmful representations by clinging fast to Victorian models of womanhood:

Uniquely concerned with the particularly precarious position of black women, these early authors also deployed the social and literary conventions of the day in advancing a political project that sought to

revise, rather than simply inscribe unaltered, the patriarchal standards of female virtue and respectability promoted by the dominant culture. In service to this project, these writers created virtuous, often light-skinned mulatta heroines whose sexual purity reigned on the printed page as a rebuttal to the racist imaging of black women as morally loose and readily accessible (31).

For these writers, marriage was the ground upon which they asserted black female morality as well as citizenship rights. Yet, many scholars are content to limit black women's invocation of the marriage-plot or what Ann du Cille so aptly terms "the coupling convention," to "utopian unions" to women of unquestionable moral conduct (31). By contrast, I argue that novels like Pauline Hopkins's *Contending Forces* reorders gender relations in a way that is more an emblem of marital dystopia in the text. Hopkins's use of the marriage-plot is strategic for it does more than argue for black women's inclusion within a prescribed moral framework. Instead, Hopkins's *Contending Forces* invokes and then complicates the marriage-plot to protest white patriarchal notions of ideal womanhood as well as to challenge black narratives of ideal womanhood and respectability politics.

This chapter explores how Hopkins complicates the traditional marriage plot, introducing alternative narratives of being that ran counter to nineteenth century socio-familial norms. In *Contending Forces* Hopkins creates fissures within the marriage-plot to introduce a realm of possibility for black women's sexual expression and identity. The strength of Hopkins's representation lies in the relationship she creates between reality and possibility to enable a fuller character of black women's sexual identity. Rather than present visions of black womanhood that are merely reflective of ideologies of the cult of True Womanhood as Mary Helen Washington suggests, Hopkins laces *Contending Forces* with critiques of endorsed versions of ideal womanhood (Randle 193). Hopkins

introduces her subtle critiques of nineteenth century feminine ideologies through the tropes of homoeroticism and the fallen woman narrative. The presence of these tropes within the story create ruptures within the marriage-plot that though they do not successfully dissolve that central narrative, they perform other important, intentional work.

In the preface to her debut novel, Pauline Hopkins counsels that “we must ourselves develop the men and women who will faithfully portray the inmost thoughts and feelings of the Negro with all the fire and romance which lie dormant in our history” (14). Hopkins’s vision of fire and romance is the full passion and vigor of black life, both its triumph and its tragedies. In fact, she begins her novel with an account of the very tragedy that had become symbolic of a global black experience. The novel opens with the relocation of the Montfort family and their black slaves from Bermuda to “the shores of North Carolina.” Once in North Carolina, the Montfort’s encounter the predacious spirit of American racism that is even more volatile than what they knew back on the British ruled island. Grace Montfort is suspected of having African ancestry, a natural crime on North American soil that is punishable by enslavement. Accordingly, Grace and her children are captured with intentions to sell following her husband’s murder. The successive tragedies of suicide and enslavement are representative of literal and figurative ancestry in the text. The centralized focus of the remainder of the narrative is on the descendants of the Montforts while other characters, though not part of the Montfort lineage, have inherited slavery’s legacy. The characters are in fact, victims of the irony of birthright for they must all suffer under the burden of racial inheritance. Yet, Hopkins is able to unsteady the framework of inheritance and burden to include its

gendered and attendant social dynamics – all of which are explored through the use of the marriage plot.

In a scene of deep intimate friendship between Dora Smith and Sappho Clark, both young women muse upon the mysteries and annoyances of courtship and marriage. Dora contemplates monogamy and commitment while under the pursuit of two suitors, John Pollock Langley (the descendent of Anson Pollock who brought ruin upon the Montfort family) and Dr. Arthur Lewis (a seeming clone of black intellectual, Booker T. Washington). These feelings are somewhat alien to Dora, divorcing her from what she understands to be the trend in these “matters of the heart” among women of her age. She fears that she may “get tired of a man so soon!” (121). Dora Smith not only wonders upon the fate of an eternity with John Langley but ponders upon a similar fate with any man with whom she’d be joined in marriage, “don’t you speculate about the pros and cons and maybes and perhapses of the situation?” she asks Sappho (119). Dora follows this commentary with perhaps one of the most intriguing lines in the novel, “That’s just what makes me feel so *unsexed*, so to speak” (122). For what does it mean for a woman to be “unsexed” in the first place, and to what specifically, is Dora referring?

Siobhan Somerville explains that by Dora’s use of the word she “locates herself in an unspecified space between genders and outside traditional romance” (91). In a single expression, Dora, by Hopkins’s hand, simultaneously invokes theorist Judith Butler’s “breakdown of gender binaries” (9) and the work of critics like Ann du Cille and Aliyyah Abdur-Rahman, who note that black women writers of the nineteenth and twentieth century defied the traditional romance. Dora’s remark anticipates Butler’s theorizing on gender as culturally constructed, a category based on performance rather

than its implicitness (16). It is precisely the prescribed set of behaviors which characterize gender that Dora eschews in her conversation with Sappho. Sappho's reply to Dora's "woe-begone countenance" is this: "It is generally the other way: the men get tired of us first. A woman loves one man, and is true to him through all eternity" (Hopkins 122). Here, Sappho is pointing toward an inversion of socially gendered behaviors, claiming that Dora is somehow channeling a masculine impulse.

In fact, Dora not only temporarily disavows certain behaviors that are supposedly in accordance with one's gender but she also suspends gendered desire. Dora's exploration into an alternative version of desire diverts her from the path of traditional romance. The flexibility of du Cille's "coupling convention" makes possible an analysis of non-traditional relationships in the text. According to du Cille, the use of the term "coupling convention" permits "freedom to move outside the traditional legal and social meanings of marriage" and I would add, the courtship process upon which marriage is predicated (13). Dora's "*unsexing*," though seemingly theoretical, also possesses a very real quality, for its admission is preceded by what many scholars have assessed to be a highly homoerotic scene cloaked in the romance of friendship. What takes place between Dora Smith and Sappho Clark is an almost literal coupling that is typically only hinted at in domestic novels between heterosexual couples through suggestion and even then, primarily located within the "appropriate" bounds of marriage. All in one scene however, Hopkins gives readers a vision of pre-marital sexuality, same-sex desire, and gender transformation.

## The Romance of Friendship

Dora Smith and Sappho Clark were immediately drawn to one another, as is typical in courtship narratives. Hopkins details “the two girls smiled at each other in a glow of mutual interest, and became fast friends at once” (98). For young and desirous Dora, “Sappho Clark seemed to fill a long-felt want in her life” (98). In fact, it is not at all strange that the young women’s attachment is as strong, if not stronger than in the unveiling romances between their potential suitor(s). *Between Women: Friendship, Desire, and Marriage in Victorian England* argues that deep intimacies between women were common wherein women expressed their devotion to one another through love letters and in verbal pronouncements of deep affection. When reflected in fiction, such female-to-female intimacies were not necessarily meant to be a subversion of the marriage-plot. In her evaluation of this phenomenon in literature, Sharon Marcus explains that it was often typical that before arriving at the final stage of courtship, many women in domestic novels would have already had a spouse supplanted by a close intimate connection with another woman, much like what transpires between Sappho and Dora, each of whom takes a spouse at the end of the novel. Marcus describes these types of female friendships as often quite the platonic romances (75).

Nor were these kinds of female-to-female fascinations novel to black women’s literature or late nineteenth century American fiction alone. For example, William Thackeray’s mid-century masterpiece, *Vanity Fair: A Novel Without a Moral* was grounded in a similar yet complicated friendly feminine romance wherein Amelia Sedley was so enamored and naïve to the character of her often-duplicitous friend, Becky Sharp. What we see at the beginning and throughout the novel wherever the path of these two

characters crosses is a fascination of one with the other. Though the characters in these nineteenth-century novels have differences that vary from race, class standing, and society, their similarities lie in the nature and nuances of feminine friendship they express. Theirs too, is a courtship of sorts in which Thackeray's female protagonists follow the trajectory of bonding, separation, and reunion alongside the traditional joys and perils of nineteenth century romance.

What then, makes Hopkins's friendly romance so remarkable or distinct from other women's relationships in text? What prompts critics to repeatedly engage nuanced homoerotic narratives around Dora Smith and Sappho Clark, even if other scholars like Gloria Randle determines such readings to at times, fall too simply into the "dichotomous categories of either platonic or sexual love" (202). What lens of difference does this study provide alongside the work of scholars like Siobhan Somerville who have thoroughly excavated the subtleties of the relationship between Dora and Sappho? This study's analysis on the controversy of homoeroticism and representative or consummated desire in the novel commands a different point of emphasis than previous scholarship. Traditional scholarly readings have centered upon Sappho's character as the figure or origin of sexual transgression in the novel. My analysis suggests that while we continue to investigate Sappho as a symbol of boundary crossing in the novel, that we also critically consider what new possibilities shifting the lens onto Dora as a figure of transgression might illuminate.

### **The Case for Sappho**

Textual evidence that seems to substantiate a fixed inquiry on Sappho as the symbol of a sexually liberated feminist ethos is gathered from Sappho's pre-reincarnated

self who is quite generally, the seeming embodiment of transgression. In a chapter entitled, "Luke Sawyer Speaks to the League," Luke Sawyer shares the heartbreaking tale of young Mabelle Beaubean whose personal misfortune typifies the experience of women of African descent whose womanhood had been made undignified by the violent savage sexual legacy of slavery. As Sawyer tells it, Mabelle was the beautiful beloved daughter of a "colored planter" who had adopted Luke after his own family was beset by the racist cruelty of lynching and ravishment (Hopkins 257). At the tender age of 14, Mabelle is kidnapped and sold into sexual slavery at the hand of her father's white half-brother. When Luke and Mabelle's father finally rescue her from "a house of the vilest character in the lowest portion of the city of New Orleans," she is but "a poor, ruined, half-crazed creature" impregnated by her defiler (260). Rather than resign herself to motherhood, Mabelle leaves her illegitimate son Alphonse to be reared by her Aunt Sally and takes up lodging in Ma Smith's boarding house, where she first emerges in the narrative.

Sappho comes to represent transgression by virtue of her life events and her subsequent choices which transgressed the norm of women in her social position. The act of sexual transgression committed upon Sappho is not seen as transgressive according to nineteenth century understandings of black women's sexuality, which positioned African American women as naturally desirous and unworthy. Mabelle's uncle frames the sentiments around black female sexuality when, in response to Mousier Beaubean's outrage at the degradation of his daughter, he answers:

Well,' said he, 'whatever damage I have done I am willing to pay for. But your child is no better than her mother or her grandmother. What does a woman of mixed blood, or any Negress, for that matter, know of virtue? It is my belief that they were a direct creation by God to be the pleasant companions of men of my race. Now, I am willing to give you a thousand dollars and call it square' (261).



In both literature and the realities of nineteenth century America, black women were relegated to the sexual realm of white men's pleasures and perversions. The legacy of slavery created a world in which "black women were perceived solely as laboring bodies, available for public use and public viewing. This perception facilitated the enslavement and [sexual] exploitation of black women" (Putzi 3). Women like Sappho were particularly vulnerable in nineteenth century New Orleans for they belonged to an aesthetic community much desired and lusted after. As historian Emily Landau explains, quadroons, octoroons, and other women so described, descended from interracial parentage, were part of New Orleans burgeoning sex market. Such women were sold as sexual slaves and concubines. "Then," Landau further elucidates, "there was the city's unique adjunct to the slave market, the quadroon balls, in which free mixed-race women (i.e., women Creoles of color) met and contracted with white men to be their mistresses" (51). This is the world upon which Hopkins bases young Mabelle's experience, knowing all too well that such circumstances (as well as the opinion of Mabelle's Uncle and captor) are much closer to fact than fiction.

So wherein then, does Mabelle's transgression lie if such behavior is seen as par for the course for women of her heritage? Mabelle's near erasure of this past when she transforms into Sappho Clark is the first indicator of transgression. She is able to flee from the life of a "fancy girl" not through the character restoration that a marriage would provide but from her own self-fashioning, first as Sappho and then as a professional woman. She enters Ma Smith's boarding house as a stenographer with no perceptible trace of her degenerate past. More than that, Sappho is much esteemed in her new community for her grace, beauty, and virtue. It is evident that Sappho sees herself as

transgressor for she seeks solace from the sins of her past. “I mean, do you think that God will hold us responsible from the *illegitimacy* with which our race has been obliged, as it were, to flood the world?” she asks Mrs. Willis (Hopkins 149). The illegitimacy emphasized in these lines is code for Alphonse, Sappho’s misbegotten son through the violation of rape.

Sappho escapes the confines of motherhood through what may be viewed as maternal abandonment but which Jill Bergman defines as something much more nuanced. For how could one abandon that to which one could never lay claim? As both, Jill Bergman and Kate McCullough assert, the fact of Sappho’s rape makes motherhood an inaccessible identity. More explicitly put: “rape strips the African American woman of her right to ‘motherhood,’ to a voluntary and nonalienated relationship to her offspring, placing her in the same cultural space as her enslaved foremothers” (Bergman 39). Sappho’s neglect of Alphonse is a clear violation of the nineteenth century code of conduct of True Womanhood, which promoted domesticity, a sphere from which black women were excluded. Sappho, like the black women who occupied the world outside of the fictional realm, dreamt of “acquiring at least some of the benefits of that elevated definition of womanhood – respect, freedom from constant menial labor, interpretation as a morally pure human being sexually” that would signify “an essential part of her emancipation as a woman” (Ammons 7-8). Sappho is able to acquire this elevation to womanly emancipation and an even greater realm of it, due to the possibilities of womanly emancipation which Hopkins provides and which this chapter will later elaborate upon.

In further making the case for Sappho as the genesis of boundary crossing in the novel, scholars look to the very intentional naming or better yet, renaming of Hopkins's female protagonist. The most convincing argument for Sappho Clark's connection to the homoerotic in *Contending Forces* lies in the character transformation of Mabelle Beaubean to Sappho Clark. Though readers are first introduced to young Sappho and only learn of her previous identity that has been concealed following the trauma and shame of rape and an illegitimate child much later in the novel, the name change signifies greatly on the classical Greek poetess to whom Hopkins could not have alluded by ignorance or happenstance. Gloria T. Randle goes even further, extending this theory onto the novel's Sappho Clark who, given her learnedness, could not have been blind to the connotations of "romantic love between women that her name signified upon (203). Siobhan Somerville also supposes that it is quite likely that Hopkins was familiar with the conversations of the late nineteenth century that had entrenched the name Sappho within lesbian identity:

A flurry of scholarly activity surrounded Sappho after new papyrus manuscripts of some of her poems were discovered in 1879 and 1898. These texts, surviving on remnants of mummy wrappings, were excavated from ancient remains in Egypt. Hopkins was undoubtedly aware of this renewed interest and perhaps read new studies by Henry Thornton Wharton or John Addington Symonds (86).

Hopkins's release of *Contending Forces* occurred amid the cultural resurgence of the Greek lyric poet whose latest lyrical excavation emerged just one year before the novel was copyrighted. Caroline Gelmi's most recent scholarship corroborates the piqued interest in Sappho in a particular form of nineteenth century American media. Gelmi's September 2014 article "'The Pleasures of Merely Circulating': Sappho and Early American Newspapers," reveals the ways in which the figure of Sappho spread as parody

in American newspapers during the nineteenth century and also functioned during this period, as what she calls, allegory for American print culture itself (173).

Greek history and classical mythology, while they widely influenced broader American intellectual and print histories of itself in the nineteenth century, held particular resonance for African Americans who were both looking to assert a cultural and intellectual history long denied them, as well as make apparent their own erudition. As historian Stephen Hall observed, “African American engagement with classical literature...emanated as much from individual and collective desires to promote intellectualism through literacy and literary taste” (Hall 81). Afrocentric historicism rooted in the legacy of Greek intellectualism actually pointed inward to an African legacy of intellectualism rather than a European one. Hosea Eason, minister of the A.M.E church and early African American historian, asserted that Africans broke the barbarity of the ancient Greeks by introducing them to civilization, thus inverting discourses of racial inferiority and imbuing blacks with a sense of racial pride (84). Hopkins most certainly was not unaware of this tradition among her nineteenth century predecessors, nor did she stray from their historicizing and redemptive impulses. She repurposes the classical poet Sappho within a particularly African diaspora framework, thus participating in the custom of nineteenth century black cultural workers (Woodard 76).

Yet, Hopkins’s invocation of this African American historical convention of invoking classical mythology and her appropriation of it in her literature served quite a distinctive purpose. One conclusion that can be drawn about Hopkins’s utilization of this convention is that she is demonstrating her knowledge of a larger literary tradition by conjuring a fellow literary artist in her novel. As Hazel Carby explains, Sappho Clark

embodies the spirit of Sappho of Lesbos for she too is admired by all around her, both men and women (142). Hopkins's parallels between both Sappho of the lyrical past and Sappho of the literary present is evidence that Hopkins is paying homage and tribute to the legacy of women writers, as well as a feminist literary tradition to which she too belongs. Carby suspends her association between the two Sapphos, setting up through her analysis, the parallel framework from which future scholars drew to explore what they saw as more explicitly sexual and erotic similarities.

It is necessary to revisit the aforementioned subject of female friendship to understand scholars' tendency to make a case for sapphism in which their analysis centers almost exclusively on Sappho. While Gloria Randle is utterly unconvinced of anything but a platonic female friendship steeped in the conventions of nineteenth century women's relationships, she does explore the homoerotic possibilities in the novel. Much like how this greater project is an exploration of the possibilities that black women writers offered as possible alternatives for black women readers to exert a self-defined and self-determined womanhood, Randle argues that Hopkins flirts between a line of possibility and practicality for her nineteenth century audience. She contends that "Hopkins couches her generally more progressive views within conventional forms and language, attempting a delicate balance between palatable, acceptable content and perspectives that, at the same time, critique the very status quo she presents" (Randle 204). Hopkins's stratagem allows her to create the illusion of behavior that Randle would argue is not actually present in the novel, a course which Hopkins pursues to trouble "the stifling oppression of women under patriarchy and the subtle aspects of True Womanhood that perpetuated gender oppression" (204).

This behavior in question is the homoerotic undercurrent or the “undeniably homoerotic overtones” that run through the novel’s chapter simply entitled “Friendship” (Randle 200). In this chapter, Dora and Sappho seclude themselves in Sappho’s room with the intention of remaining undisturbed. To her mother, Dora has made her precise whereabouts unknown and only mentions that she was visiting a friend while Sappho has locked her door. Once settled in, the young women end up in a tussle over a cream pie, a scene which intends to be the most erotic event in the novel:

I’ll eat all the bonbons I want in spite of you, Sappho and if you don’t hurry I’ll eat your slice of cream pie, too.” At this dire threat there ensued a scramble for the pie, mingled with peals of merry laughter, until all rosy and sparking, Sappho emerged from the fray with the dish containing her share of the dainty held high in the air” (Hopkins 120).

While Randle asserts that she has taken “great pains” to divine the homoerotic energy of these lines, she concludes that although such readings are plausible, it is friendship that lies at the center of this interaction. Siobhan Somerville however, proposes that such readings are in fact not only valid but a crucial part of the work of understanding how “the simultaneous efforts to shore up and bifurcate categories of race and sexuality in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were deeply intertwined (Somerville 3). Hopkins’s depiction of the seeming erotic romance between two female characters, Somerville argues, is a “powerful political project” motivated by “the right of African Americans to claim and represent their own desires” (79). Thus, the desire envisioned in these scenes is symbolic of both submission and resistance. Both Dora and Sappho simultaneously submit to their desires for pleasure, comfort, and self-indulgence while resisting the impulses of doctrine, such as the tenets of virtue as defined under the cult of True Womanhood.

## The Case for Dora

No character in the novel is perhaps more familiar or at first, emblematic of the tenets of the cult of True Womanhood than Dora Smith. She is the paragon of Christian charity, purity, and domesticity, all traits that are at the core of nineteenth century understandings of the ideal woman. She enters the novel in a fray of domestic undertakings, having cleaned, washed and prepared for a new lodger. Such domestic duties appear to have been second nature to Dora whose disputes with her brother were often the result of her domestic imposition:

The only occasion upon which Will and Dora were known to quarrel were weekly cleaning days, when the latter would insist on ‘tidying up Will’s room.’ The shoes were moved from the mantle and the blacking brushes from the top of the dressing-case; collars, cuffs and ties were placed in their proper receptacles, and garments hung in the clothespress” (Hopkins 85).

In caring for her brother, Dora is also preparing herself for keeping house in a way that is consistent with what would be expected of her as a wife, yet womanly duties are not the simple limitations of her role. Hopkins acknowledges the legacy from which Dora descends and thus complicates the world of domestic labor by making Ma Smith’s lodging house the literal convergence of domesticity and industry. Hopkins conjoins the inheritances of family and the community within Dora’s character, making her both domestic symbol and laboring woman.

In the year that the Supreme Court upheld segregation in the case of *Plessy v. Ferguson*, Dora assumed full control of the boarding house. The significance of this parallel in the novel is manifold for primarily it illustrates the condition of the society in which African American families like the Smiths lived, in which they were barred from opportunities for employment that extended beyond domestic service and personal

service simply because of their racial heritage. Further still, however, this detail of Dora taking charge of the home in 1896, may pronounce another less evident meaning that Hopkins cleverly challenges her readers witness. The decision in *Plessy* is significant for it is the hallmark of the era of legal segregation, a policy which in de facto and de jure, was the order of the day for the politics of American life. The segregation of races and consequently, prescribed behaviors for people dependent upon race and the spaces they could occupy was not at all unrelated to gender relationships of the era. A kind of gender quarantine in which women were relegated to specific spheres and tasks mimicked for men and women, the world that *Plessy* made racial law. Hopkins is identifying this overlap by noting the year of racial segregation as a year of a kind of gender amalgamation in the Smith house, for it is in that year which Hopkins takes pains to specify, that Dora assumes duties that would standardly be a man's task. This is apparently intentional for rather than have Will, the only man in the household, undertake the financial responsibilities of the home, Dora instead, becomes the house manager.

Looking at Dora's trajectory in the novel is critical to providing a new lens of understanding for scenes in the text which have been much analyzed. Refiguring Dora as the focus of homoerotic energies in the text gives not only new life to Hopkins's scenes but perhaps, provides new insight into Hopkins's narrative strategies. If we look to Hopkins as crossing gender boundaries as well as those around sex, then we come to understand that this scene is part of an evolution in the narrative rather than an isolated scene. It is quite early in the text that this intimacy occurs and frankly, quite at the beginning of Sappho and Dora's acquaintance (for the Montfort tale takes up much of the narrative heretofore). To centralize Sappho within these energies requires that we



abandon linearity and read her personal narrative backwards onto the scene. Only then can we presume the relationship between Sappho's past, which is yet unknown to both the reader and Dora at the onset of their friendship and the length of this chapter so entitled. There is no more depth to Sappho's name when the reader does not know she has chosen it. There is no transgressive energy around Sappho for the mystery of her is still unsolved. She has made no hint of her salacious past except for her reticence. The identity of her illegitimate son, the violence of her sexual assault, the tragedy of her experience, and the rebirth through renaming all remain mystery to her companions. How then, can we continue to read Sappho as the fixed center of these narratives? I suggest, then, that while we cannot simply ignore the character of Sappho in the narrative, there is merit in rethinking her significance as part of a central narrative from which Dora must not be overlooked.

The intimate scene in Sappho's boudoir becomes part of an evolution of events and identities in the text rather than a misplaced occurrence when Dora is refigured in the narrative. Dora's troubling of the nineteenth century gendered behavior escalates and reaches its zenith when she acknowledges feeling "*unsexed*" by the fireside. The tussle for the cream pie, like other elements in this chapter, highlight Dora's position at the middle ground of gender identity. Whether it is in her desire to devour the creamy custard "for the fourth time this week" or the threat of consuming both Dora's pie slice and the gift of John Langley's chocolate bonbon's, Hopkins uses this scene to frame Dora's appetite for indulgence (120). Unlike Sappho, Dora does not operate with a concern for restraint but engages in what one could refer to as the masculine impulse of unfettered

desire. It is in this scene that an almost changing of the gender guard occurs and Dora teeters between her domestic grooming and seemingly unfeminine attributes.

What Dora embodies is an emerging version of what scholars like Carroll Smith-Rosenberg and Lyn Pykest have discussed as the New Woman in the American fiction. According to Pykest's definition of this figure in late nineteenth century literature, writers of this period who projected such characters were most concerned with "rewriting" scripts of the feminine and thus "self-consciously explored or implicitly exposed the contradictions of prevailing versions of femininity, or developed new styles and modes through which to articulate their own specific sense of the feminine" (5). New Women writers not only challenged how they represented the feminine but added new complexity to genre when they "reworked and recombined melodrama, gothic, sensationalism and the domestic, as well as developing new modes of 'feminine' writing, such as introspective reverie, dream sequences and, in some cases, a distinctive, idiosyncratic and highly wrought lyricism" (6). Pauline Hopkins's vision of the feminine as well as her narrative style and use of different generic conventions in her novels more than places her among the compass of New Women writers. Although Pykest's *Improper Feminine* completely elides any discussion of how black women writers figure into this makeup, her findings are particularly helpful for understanding how Dora functions as Hopkins's prototypical New Woman:

The New Woman represented a threat not only to the social order, but also to the natural order... Paradoxically the New Woman was represented as simultaneously non-female, unfeminine and ultra-feminine... Her lack of femininity was both the cause and consequence of her resisting traditional womanly roles—"a curious inversion of sex, which does not necessarily appear in the body, but is evident enough in the mind" (both quotations Linton 1891a:79). The New Woman's hyperfemininity [*sic*] was signalled [*sic*] by her extreme susceptibility to feeling; she was a creature whose

proper feminine affectivity, ‘the dearer, tenderer emotions of the true woman’ (83), had become excessive and degenerate and had thus entered the domain of the improper feminine (140).

Dora is Hopkins’s first full-length foray into the figure of the New Woman and as such, serves as a precursor to Hopkins’s later female antagonist, Aurelia in *Hagar’s Daughter*. While not a full embodiment of the “improper feminine,” Dora’s struggles reflect the tensions around feminine identity and the clash (both internal and external) over gendered expectations and social behaviors. Hopkins constructs Dora as an evolving New Woman from the outset and recognition of this structuring all but necessitates a re-examined reading of the scene that takes place in Sappho’s locked quarters.

### **New Paradigms of Womanhood**

While I have argued that Hopkins is seeking to represent in Dora an emerging version of the New Woman, she is simultaneously crafting a new type of woman in the figure of Sappho. Her intention is not to limit Sappho to the realm of True Womanhood, for Sappho far surpasses its simplistic, patriarchal ideals - being educated, enterprising and quite literally, self-made. Rather than having identity bestowed upon her, Sappho’s development throughout the novel rejects the principles of both True Womanhood and Fallen Womanhood. Through the character of Sappho, Hopkins creates a woman for whom morality and imperfection are not at odds but paradoxically engender a nobler version of woman. As Lois Brown indicates in her Hopkins biography, *Black Daughter of the Revolution*, Hopkins’s revisionist agenda is all encompassing for she amends her own personal narrative. Hopkins shields her history as a dramatist and playwright from public view to keep perceptions of herself as a race woman uncomplicated. Hopkins also rewrites herself, adopting the name of her stepfather, William Hopkins, to erase the

stigma of divorce. Hopkins's penchant for revisionism to thwart potentially damaging narratives was by no means relegated to her private life but extended to the public and private identities of black women whose legacies she also believed needed protecting. Hopkins's particular politics of revisionism was not about presenting false truths but rather about restoring and maintaining integrity. In *Contending Forces* in particular, Hopkins aims to shift foci on the legacies of literary representation that dichotomized women's sexual identities as a thing to be either lauded or vilified and instead, provides revised scripts of womanhood.

Hopkins presents us with what Claudia Tate refers to as the "antebellum discourse" around fallen womanhood in the very opening of the novel through the tragic circumstances that befell Grace Montfort after her husband was viciously murdered. Grace is defiled by the very same men who defiled her name in the community by suggesting she was afflicted with the taint of black blood. While Grace's defilement is described as a public lashing of the whip, Hazel Carby's astute analysis of the episode unveils the sexual overtones of the scene in which the whipping displaces the brutal act of rape (132). Thus read, Grace's violation acts as a metaphor for the customary dispossession of black women that was facilitated by sexual violation. For Grace, such dispossession was fatal, resulting in her subsequent death by suicide. Yet within the very same novel, Hopkins presents an alternative to the attempted dispossession of black womanhood by white violence. Hopkins uses the example of Sappho and her eventual restoration as a potential pathway toward disrupting correlations between black womanhood and fallen womanhood.

The community becomes a vehicle by which Sappho can triumph over the fate to which Grace Montfort succumbed. Grace Montfort was pit against a community that devalued her by literally devaluing her whiteness and instead reappraised her as black, a move that critically diminished her social capital and made her ripe for abuse. In Sappho, Hopkins redeems Grace's "fall" and that of other literary women who endured the symbolic death of dignified womanhood. Sappho as the redeemed fallen woman is both an independent venture and a community effort. Through the community, Sappho is given access to the tenets of True Womanhood yet for as much as these are tried on and imbibed, they are not fully absorbed. Instead, they must congeal with Sappho's own independence, which in some instances rebuffs, this framework. Hopkins's New True Woman sits at the bridge of both feminine identities and is but a stepping-stone in the literary evolution of Hopkins's black women's character types. Hopkins also reattributes principles of "virtuous" womanhood that were traditionally denied black women on account of their citizenship status which was fraught with the contradictions of the politics of white supremacy. What is different about what Hopkins does, is that she makes these qualities available to a woman who has "fallen from grace" or in Sappho's case in which Grace Montfort is her literary ancestor, "fallen from Grace." Barbara Welter, whom Hazel Carby labels "a feminist historian," lays out True Womanhood's "four cardinal virtues – piety, purity, submissiveness and domesticity," and it is these principles, I argue, that Hopkins retrieves for Sappho, despite the conventions of the drama or her history (23).

Piety and Christian devotion figure quite prominently in the novel, though it is never exactly at the hands of our heroine, Sappho. Instead, Sappho's beloved friend Dora

and other womanly role models stand in as pillars of piety. Sappho's first encounter with piety is with the Sisters of the Holy Family. It is they with whom she first finds a home after sin has grasped her and planted the seed of an illegitimate child within her. After giving birth to Alphonse, Sappho leaves the care of the Sisters, only to return years later when the villainous John Langley has revealed her secrets. In her shame, Sappho returns to the convent which first received her and once again experiences their gracious support, yet does not fully give herself up to the conventions of the faith. Even the Sisters acknowledge, "she is not of our faith," (Hopkins 349). In this regard, Sappho receives the gift of Christian piety, but does not commit herself to it:

"What shall I do, Mother?" asked the girl [Sappho], as she reverently kissed the gentle hand.  
"Ah, we must think and pray. You do not wish to become a Sister?"  
"No; I must accept the desire of God in the child. I will take a mother's place and do my duty."  
"It is hard for one so young and beautiful to resist the world and its temptations," replied the Mother regretfully; "but we will help you, and the convent will be a home for you always" (351).

The Mother Superior offers Sappho what one can consider the ultimate step in redemption for a woman so disgraced as she has been, an opportunity to join the ranks of those who have renounced the flesh and its desires, and chosen to live in constant communion with God, and yet she refuses. Though at first read this may appear to be an understandable response of one who has a child, it is clear that Hopkins has another intention made clear here. Sappho is not only rejecting Mother Superior's advance, but is also refusing a kind of doctrine of piety that is so affiliated with a specific faith, namely Catholicism. While Hopkins ensures to not present an outright rejection of God, for Sappho intends to "accept the desire of God," but "in the child," rather than in the church. Here Hopkins seems to argue that there is but more than one way to accept God's "call."

Hopkins is careful to invoke the language of desire here to suggest that Sappho's decision to follow God's wish will not be one devoid of pleasure and longing – it is a different kind of piety, yet devotion to God all the same.

Hopkins illustrates the urgency felt to promote one vision of piety by virtue of the Sister's response to Sappho's reply. The Mother Superior is regretful as she predicts that it will be difficult for Sappho to escape a life of sin outside of the safe confines of the church and seems to suggest that protection is only within the convent walls. However, Sappho's insistence at following what she believes to be her designated path, though still divinely guided, is further evidenced by Hopkins's description of Sappho's departure. Following her exit from meeting with Mother Superior, Hopkins notes that Sappho "glides noiselessly" from the room, intimating an almost angelic embodiment of the once fallen woman.

The next virtue of True Womanhood that Sappho Clark embodies is that of domesticity, yet Hopkins presents an interesting caveat to this representation. Though Sappho does not have her own home to make, she displays her talents in her small room in Ma Smith's lodging house. Sappho's domestic style is first noted by Dora when she enters Sappho's room and observes its stark rearrangement from the modest style in which the room was first ordered by Ma Smith:

The iron bedstead and washing utensils were completely hidden by drapery curtains of dark-blue denim, beautifully embroidered in white floss; a cover of the same material was thrown over the small table between the windows; plain white muslin draperies hid the unsightly but serviceable yellow shades at the windows; her desk and typewriter occupied the center of the room, and a couch had been improvised from two packing-cases, and a spring, covered with denim and piled high with cushions; two good steel engravings completed a very inviting interior (98).

Sappho has clearly taken great care to not only arrange the room as best suits her personal comforts but as Hopkins lays out, has also set it up according to her priorities. At the center of the room sits Sappho's desk and typewriter, both signifiers for women's labor. Thus, labor and domesticity are set against each other in this space, presenting a subtle argument against the supposed incongruence of women's work and labor. Hopkins is playing upon "housework" for in Sappho's case, this is work with that generates a stream of revenue outside of the home. Complimentarily, Ma Smith's boarding house as an enterprise, operates off of the same conceptuality.

For Sappho then, her work is as much a domestic enterprise as her decorations. Hopkins has not denied Sappho access to domesticity on account of her status as a fallen woman nor because of her labor. Instead, Hopkins has fused both worlds and builds on this fusion and the potential for women to branch out of the domestic sphere:

"I wish you would show me how to do this embroidery," said Dora, as she lifted the edge of the denim curtain... Where did you learn?"  
"I will teach you with pleasure," replied Sappho...  
"Do you like your work – is it hard?" asked Dora, as she idly wandered from one object to another in the pretty room, pausing beside the desk to glance admiringly at a pile of neatly written sheets, just taken from the machine." (99)

Hopkins cleverly entangles discourses around the public and private sphere as Dora dually admires Sappho's handiwork: her embroidery and her "neatly written sheets". Thus framed, Hopkins makes it difficult for Dora to avoid an encounter with the world outside of the private sphere as she browses Sappho's boudoir. And though she inquires only of how Sappho learned to embroider, it follows that she could as easily begin to inquire about how and where Sappho learned to type and may also be taught by her, "with pleasure".



Though submission, another cardinal virtue of True Womanhood is offered to Sappho on many different grounds, she refuses to submit to any will but her own and that which reflects her choice and independent identity. In the above scene between she and Mother Superior, Sappho refuses to submit as the Sisters of the Holy Family have, insisting on accepting what she believes to be God's will on her own terms. The life of submission that Sappho has chosen is one ill-fitting to the designs she has laid out for her own life. Sappho's submission, or lack thereof, is also deeply connected to the virtue of purity within the novel. Sappho's first act of submission that the reader becomes aware of is that of her body but not of her mind. She maintains her purity while her rapist forces her body into submission to his will. From then forth, Sappho actively resists submission to the role of mother and the demise that would have surely befallen her in accordance with other models of fallen womanhood. Once again, Hopkins has rewritten the script on the role of submission as a tenet of True Womanhood. Her New True Woman, Sappho, eschews submission and embraces her own feminine will and power.

In both deliberate and more nuanced advances upon her sexual morality, Sappho declares quite candidly, that she will not compromise her purity and will not be swayed. Sappho is first subtly approached by her would be suitor who will later become her husband in the novel. In an attempt to model what he views as appropriate courtship behavior, Will begins a custom of clandestinely lighting the fire in Sappho's bedroom fireplace so that she can remain comfortable amidst the chill that overtakes the lodging house. When Sappho discovers Will and playfully admonishes him, he defends his impulse. In the witty banter that follows, Will continues to insist upon making Sappho's fire while she determinedly opposes his desire and chides, "no more fires" (174). While

Will attempts to insert himself in Sappho's life as not only a would-be suitor but further, as a husband fulfilling the role for his "women folk," imbued in this scene is also the heavy laden language of igniting desire.

Sappho refuses Will both the literal and metaphorical pleasure of lighting her fire through her reprimand. The weight of her denial is not merely because of her inability to "pay for having the work done" as she claims but is more telling in her second statement, "it is not proper for you to do it" (174). What occurs in this scene of one of attempted male persuasion in which Will attempts to convince Sappho to not only allow her to become the object of his desire due to his chivalry and directly through the intimation that they pretend to be "sweethearts," but also that she should permit her fire or desire to be kindled by him. To Sappho this is seemingly representative of the kind of sexual impropriety that she must spurn as a woman of good moral grounding. Although Will is an acceptable suitor, his veiled sexual overtures evidence the metaphoric lust and passion of fire starting is unacceptable for Sappho. She is resolute in her dismissal; again and again replying "no" and insisting that Will cease his actions in her sometimes lighthearted rebuke. She does not submit to Will's insistence and this scene becomes emblematic of her defiance of assumed patriarchal authority. She maintains that she is not Will's "womenfolk" and any play at male domination that he suggests she assume as his sister, daughter, or even the mother governed by her son, is not a fantasy she is willing to indulge.

Sappho yet again refuses to capitulate to male sexual dominance when the unscrupulous John Langley accosts her later in the novel. John Langley begins to uncover the secret about Sappho's sordid past in the chapter, "Luke Sawyer speaks to the

League.” After Sappho has fainted after hearing the shame of her rape and impregnation retold before a crowd by the man who rescued her for the cursed fate of prostitution, John inquires to an usher about the identity of the woman who has lost consciousness and is met with the reply, “Miss Sappho Clark” (Hopkins 262). This revelation is two-fold for not only is the usher directly addressing John’s prompt, he is also unveiling the mystery for readers and John that it was indeed Sappho Clark who suffered such brutal tragedies as Mabelle Beaubean. Sappho’s true identity finally becomes explicitly known to John when he visits the seeress, Madam Frances, who also doubles as Sappho’s Aunt Sally in the novel. After eavesdropping on a conversation between Sappho and Madam Frances, John becomes aware of the relationship between the two women and succeeds in discovering “that child – his resemblance to her – this woman the child’s great-aunt and also Sappho’s aunt – the secrecy!” (281).

John Langley’s discovery prompts him to engage in blackmail to win not the heart, but the body of Sappho – the true object of his desire. Despite Madam Frances’ warning to “keep the one you hold,” John propositions Sappho, to resign herself to become his concubine (283). Sappho refuses John and stakes claim to her honor and integrity, “I was a victim! an innocent child!” she protests (319). Despite her protestations, John is insistent upon besmirching her honor stating that she is not worthy of the decency of marriage given her history. Hopkins herself steps in for Sappho and asserts her integrity through the voice of the narrator, noting that Langley’s intentions are akin to murder, a thorough act of violence upon an already violated woman (320). Now an adult woman and in full possession of her own will and faculty, Hopkins gives Sappho an opportunity to assert her honor in her objection. As a child, Sappho had neither the

wherewithal nor the power to deny her aggressor but now, in the face of so much opportunity and promise in the securing of a new life that she surely thought would have concealed her past for all eternity, Sappho risks exposure for the sake of her reputation and high virtue.

Gloria Randle proposes yet another version of Sappho's execution of will in defiance of not only patriarchal but also heteronormative expectations in the novel. In Randle's estimation, desire for Sappho acts as an extension of her will and her opposition to coerced submission given her violent history. Choice is bound up in Sappho's willful submission to the object of her desire which Randle fleetingly hypothesizes could be for either of the Smith siblings. Though Sappho eventually chooses Will as her lover and husband, it is only after exercising her right to deny those who would seek to exercise sexual control over her via any means of pressure or intimidation.

Hopkins's subversion of the marriage plot in *Contending Forces* is centered on the question of who is eligible for the union. In a society which first determined marital eligibility on the principles of racial background while concurrently basing it upon arbitrary markers of sexual and moral purity, women like Sappho were less than ideal candidates for the Christian sacrament of marriage. Sappho is made eligible simply by her fate at the end of the novel when she becomes the dignified and redeemed wife of Will Smith. The coupling occurs despite the factors, which, according to textual tradition, should have barred Sappho from the privilege of marriage. Additionally, Sappho's passing romance with Dora Smith should have precluded her from access to marriage given its infringement upon sexual purity as defined by nineteenth century sexual standards. Dora also realizes the aim of marriage by the novel's end even though she too

has violated the acceptable terms set by nineteenth century moral norms. Not only does Dora represent the possibility of homoerotic romance, she also enacts a crossing that transgresses acceptable gender politics of the era. Hopkins's rendition of the marriage plot surpasses the prevailing image of courtship in African American fiction. Coupling in Hopkins's narrative is not merely upset by the typical disruptions of racism, slavery's legacy, and the struggle for racial uplift and their attendant components but is made complex by revised scripts around gender, sexuality, and womanhood.

## CHAPTER 4 UNSETTLING GENRE IN *HAGAR'S DAUGHTER*

In June 2015, *Guardian US* published a feature article on Claudia Rankine, poet and 2014 recipient of the National Book Critics Circle award for her prose poem, *Citizen: An American Lyric*. In her piece, Paula Coccozza profiles *Citizen's* “brutal” topic of racism, chronicled there in snippets of the experiences of everyday people. Among the variety of compelling, troubling, and illuminating statements that litter the article, many reproduced from the prose poem, the most profound comes from Rankine herself: “How do you keep the black female body present and how do you own value for something that society won’t give value to? It’s a question I try to answer through my own life.” Rankine poses this question at a pivotal moment in American life that contemplates the present and future moment while in simultaneous intersection with America’s past. Recent years have brought to the fore, with incredible visibility, the unchanged politics of racial ignorance and hatred. Acts of police brutality and state sanctioned domestic terrorism, primarily at the hands of white agitators perpetrated against black bodies, have yet again, propelled themselves into the mainstream (if only for a little while). And yet, as Rankine so aptly notes, this visibility remains largely gendered, positioning black men at the frontlines of such brutality. Citing Kimberlé Crenshaw, Rankine notes that statistically, black men are disproportionate targets of white racial violence. And while this statistical evidence bears truth, so too does the written record of black women’s call for visibility – their desire to be counted among the casualties of white racism and its many antecedents.

In fact, Rankine’s method of making black women visible in direct opposition to an agenda of erasure is congruent with the methods of visibility employed by black

women writers more than a century before her time. Using the varied mediums of poetry, prose, essays, and public lectures, black women have long called for the recognition of how the intersections of their racial and gendered identities have led to a very particular kind of devaluation of their lives. This devaluation has not only been the systematic dismantling of black womanhood, but has also resulted in a critical denial of black humanity whose access point heretofore, is most attributed to the black female body. Writing at the turn of the twentieth century, Pauline Hopkins moved to particular address of making black women visible in her fiction. As evidenced in her first novel, *Contending Forces* (1899), Hopkins made visible the sexual degradation of black women at the hands of whites, as well as the struggle to be seen as moral yet fully actualized women with a bevy of desires. Through the sometimes coy language of her text, Hopkins makes a demand for black women's visibility through the age old trope of Hagar. What made Hagar both sympathetic and loathed in biblical memory was much of the very same stigma that culturally paralyzed black women. Hopkins turns to Hagar then, to bring readers to a familiar beginning of judgment of black women for their gendered and sexual identities, but an unfamiliar redemptive resolution. In so employing Hagar, Hopkins wittingly participates in the long held African American tradition of biblical revisionism.

Pauline Hopkins's first serialized novel in *The Colored American Magazine* (CAM), *Hagar's Daughter: A Story of Southern Caste Prejudice*, was thus fitting ammunition in her war for racial justice. In this novel, Hopkins confronts the tenuous systems of identification that had long been linchpins for understandings of self. Neither race nor gender evades Hopkins's careful scrutiny of systems used to restrict and undermine black women's identities, behavior, and morality in particular. She moves her

readers from the black centered world of *Contending Forces* to an ostensibly white one in which the accessories of whiteness – power, wealth, and privilege – are in full vogue. To these, Hopkins adds her own ornaments to whiteness: villainy and duplicity. The novel's primary actors are members of the Washington elite with secrets of identity that meet the prerequisite for the popular fiction genres from which Hopkins borrows many elements. *Hagar's Daughter* bleeds with influences from the gothic, the detective novel, the racial discovery novel, and the passing novel. Woven together, these generic elements create a truly unique literary endeavor in which Hopkins successfully melds popular genre with the unfashionable race issues of the day.

At its first thrust, *Hagar's Daughter* frames the romantic, pastoral pre-  
emancipation South with its full host of characters. Readers encounter two sons of  
slavery's fortune, the Enson brothers, only one of whom will be heir to the riches of the  
institution. Next door to their plantation lives Hagar, the fair-skinned daughter of the  
gallant South, who soon becomes Ellis Enson's wife. Rounding up the cast are the  
villains, of which St. Clair Enson is a member. St. Clair and Mr. Walker perform the  
classic disruption in the novel by revealing Hagar's African ancestry in an attempt to  
thwart the inheritance of Ellis and Hagar's infant daughter. With the help of the scoundrel  
slave trader, Walker, St. Clair dubiously plots his brother's ruin; orchestrating an attempt  
on Ellis's life and subsequently selling his seemingly widowed wife and baby daughter  
into slavery. Distraught, Hagar escapes and jumps with her infant child into the Potomac  
River. The novel reprises with an apparently new cast of characters who make up the  
white Washington elite. However, readers later learn that things are not as they appear  
and that Hopkins's doubling becomes a tool for significant textual themes in the novel.



Hagar becomes Mrs. Bowen, the wife of a successful oil tycoon, Senator Zenas Bowen from the West who moves his family to Washington for the season. Baby girl Enson becomes Jewel Bowen, the stepdaughter of Mr. Bowen and true (although unbeknownst to all parties – including the reader) biological daughter of Hagar, her unsuspecting stepmother. St. Clair and his partner Mr. Walker remain in league in this new social order, now presenting as General Benson and Major Madison. Finally, Ellis Enson resurrects from the novel's margins (and death) as Detective Henson.

Together, this cast performs various scenes that reflect the nineteenth century American paranoia of race, gender, and sexuality, thus framing one of Hopkins's principal themes in the novel – the redefinition of Black women's sexuality and more generally, nineteenth century ideals of womanhood. This chapter explores how Hopkins redefines black womanhood, specifically black female sexuality by unsettling genre. To perform this analysis, this chapter examines Hopkins's engagement with three different types of genre and how her visions of these respective genres run counter to the initial framing of these genres and the narratives they traditionally endorse. My analysis begins with an exploration of Hopkins biblical revisionism through the lens of Black Liberation Theology. I then engage the Hagar myth and how its role as a central theoretical, and biblical justification of the myth of black inferiority, inhumanity, and "natural" subservience is thwarted by Hopkins's representation. The analysis continues by theorizing Hopkins's racial stratagems in the novel around a concept I term "race-play." Specifically, I contemplate how Hopkins uses "race-play" to challenge conventions of the passing and racial discovery genres. The chapter concludes with a deliberation of how the

medium of the serial novel is of particular import for Hopkins as a tool of deliberate use for the redemption of black womanhood.

### **Hopkins and Black Liberation Theology**

Hopkins confronts the cooptation of blackness and then proceeds to redeem Hagar and consequently, black humanity, by engaging both the Bible as beloved and contested ground for African descended people. I frame Hopkins's revision of the biblical Hagar narrative through the lens of Black Liberation Theology to situate her within a larger trajectory of black literary engagement with biblical origin stories. As a twentieth century theology that emerges out of the struggle for Civil Rights, Black Liberation Theology argues that "God, because he is a God of the oppressed, takes sides with black people. He is not color blind in the black-white struggle, but has made an unqualified identification with black people" (Cone 26). This belief goes further, claiming that "The blackness of God...is at the heart of Black Theology's doctrine of God" (121). If Black Liberation Theology is concerned with a God who resides on the side of the poor, weak, and disempowered, if it – as James Cone, a principal theorist of this theology, posits – is reflective of a theology that reflects African American suffering, life, and experience, then black writers have long been articulating a theology of black freedom. For African American poets and novelists, their ability to create and recreate biblical worlds, in either gesture or in complete form, functioned as a direct confrontation to ideas of black inferiority. Notions of black inferiority that were used to justify slavery, codified during the Enlightenment period, and cemented in their North American context, had to be redressed, argued black writers. If there was any opportunity at gaining true freedom and citizenship rights in the post emancipation era, then ideologies of racism had to be

dismantled at their very core. Consequently, black writers repeatedly sought the bible as a battleground upon which to wage war against their dehumanization, using the bible's many origin stories to situate themselves within and beyond God's creation of man.

James Weldon Johnson's 1927 collection, *God's Trombones: Seven Negro Sermons in Verse*, presents the kind of black God, shaping a black world, that Cone claims is essential to a theology of black freedom. As one of the seven sermons, *The Creation*, recasts the story of Genesis in the black sermonic tradition. In it, Johnson presents readers with a voice of God that is distinctly racialized through his use of the black vernacular:

And God stepped out on space, (Johnson writes)  
And he looked around and said:  
I'm lonely –  
I'll make me a world.

Johnson also achieves this signification upon blackness by manipulating the language of darkness found in the original Genesis creation story and interchanging it with blackness. Thus, Johnson's *Creation* skillfully suggests that blackness is integral to the world's creation and that there was, from the very beginning, a space for blackness in God's design. Finally, Johnson's God makes man, not from dust, which may leave room for a racially ambiguous interpretation, but from clay shaped in his own image. Thus, it is a black man into whom God "blew the breath of life". Similarly, Hopkins's narrative affirms blackness at the origin (much in anticipation of Johnson) by having her title character's African ancestry continuously declared in the novel through multiple revelations. In so doing, the novel's repetition of Hagar's African heritage reveals to the reader that the biblical Hagar is decidedly black and that Hopkins, as author of the text, has settled this issue of debate.

Alongside the development of Black Liberation Theology, black arts poet, Nikki Giovanni expresses a similar vein of blackness being the very essence of life in her 1970 publication of *Ego-Trippin (there may be a reason why)*. Giovanni writes:

I was born in the congo  
I walked to the fertile crescent and built the sphinx...  
I sat on the throne  
drinking nectar with allah...  
The tears from my birth pains  
Created the Nile  
I am a beautiful woman  
I turned myself into myself and was  
Jesus  
Men intone my loving name  
All praises All praises  
I am the one who would save

Giovanni crafts embodied blackness on both the human and spiritual level. The subject of her poem is both God and (wo)man, walking the earth and giving life to it. She is both creator and created. This is not simply a black God(dess), but a proud black God(dess) imbued with a distinctly African identity. Giovanni's poem functions as a black creation story that liberates blackness from its cultural and political state of oppression that was characteristic of the 1970s. And while Giovanni wrote her *Ego-Trippin* as a poem that in effect, elevates blackness from its supposed subhuman to divine state, she also frees this vision of a divine blackness from a specifically gendered identity. Hopkins's novel which predates Giovanni's work, is also one of feminine liberation, for she frees Hagar from her historical position as a used and discarded woman to one with real agency in her literary iteration. Though both Giovanni and Johnson sought to define blackness as the very essence of humanity and thus obstruct the grounds for black inferiority, Hopkins anticipates their biblical radicalism right at the turn of the twentieth century in her 1901 publication of *Hagar's Daughter*.

Pauline Hopkins imagines a world grounded in a black theological perspective before both these writers, but not prior to other black thinkers who had long adapted the Bible and its rhetoric for other uses which include both “protest and propaganda” (Howard-Pitney 484). For example, David Walker, in his 1829 *Appeal to the Colored Citizens of the World*, assumed the vengeful power of an Old Testament God in foretelling the coming wrath of black violence in the face of continued white opposition to black freedom through whites’ perpetuation of slavery. Walker’s invocation of The Black Jeremiad<sup>18</sup> is but a precursor to the kind of alliance between God and his children of darker hue, that Hopkins’s rendition expanded. Hopkins’s black theological perspective was one which incorporated a kind of sexual radicalism that was particular to her vision of black women’s liberation.

### **Hagar (Re)Imagined**

Hagar’s first biblical appearance is in Genesis as the Egyptian handmaiden of Abraham’s wife, Sarah. Unable to conceive, Sarah orders her husband, Abraham, to lay with Hagar to produce the child that she cannot bear. Once conceived and birthed, Sarah soon conceives her own son, Isaac, who is to become the fulfillment of God’s covenant promise with Abraham. Jealous of her handmaiden and her growing son, Sarah bade Abraham banish Hagar and Ishmael, commanding, “Get rid of that slave woman and her son” (Genesis 21:10). Aside from the description of Hagar’s descendants which appears in 1 Chronicles 28-30, Hagar only reemerges in biblical memory in Galatians. There, the apostle Paul<sup>19</sup> recalls the Genesis narrative and admonishes the Galatians, insisting they

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<sup>18</sup> See David Howard-Pitney’s “The Enduring Black Jeremiad: The American Jeremiad and Black Protest Rhetoric, from Frederick Douglass to W. E. B. Du Bois, 1841-1919.”

<sup>19</sup> Paul is the author of the epistle – letter to the Galatians.

remember they are the children of Sarah, “the free woman” (Galatians 4). Hagar and her descendants continue to be associated with notions of slavery, disinheritance, and carnality well into the nineteenth century. The link between these ideas of Hagar and her Africanness were not lost on Hopkins, nor were they lost on those who invoked her memory in the frenzy of Egyptomania.

Throughout the nineteenth century, a strain of anti-blackness enveloped the cultural memory of Hagar, a biblical figure whose memory had been much resurrected amidst the era’s fascination with ancient Egypt. Between 1850 and 1913, at least 13 novels featuring a female heroine named Hagar were published. Hagar was the subject of African American sculptor, Edmonia Lewis’ 1875 carved marble statue. She was also depicted in Parisian painter, Jean-Baptiste-Camille Corot’s 1835 oil canvas, *Hagar in the Wilderness*. Perhaps Hagar’s most significant appearance in nineteenth century popular culture was in Pauline Hopkins’s serial novel, *Hagar’s Daughter*. Hopkins uses *Hagar’s Daughter* to read the misuse and abuse of blackness, and of black female sexuality in particular, in the nineteenth century’s fascination with the Hagar of the Old Testament, or what scholars refer to as the Hagar myth.

Much of the interpretative critique of the biblical Hagar has revolved around her ancestry, and while her Egyptian identity is firmly located, the estimation of her Africanness has been widely debated in subsequent renderings of Hagar. Nineteenth century portrayals of Hagar by white artists reflected a white aesthetic, while black artists imbued her with African identity, although at times only subtly so. Other Egyptians of legend had too, been part of this history of a decided racial ambiguity, often steered by whites who, as with the figure of Hagar, wanted to denounce Africanness to lay claim to

histories and legacies of power that proved convenient to their respective agendas. Scholars of Ancient Egypt could not equate intellect, innovation, and the birth of civilization with “African blood “and often filtered Egyptian figures they chose to esteem through other lines of descent. Briefly examining the figure of Cleopatra in nineteenth century popular culture – her mythological presence as well as cultural reception during the period – provides keen insight into this chapter’s analysis of how Hopkins redressed these racial controversies of her day. The insistence that Cleopatra was “Greek by blood,” was part of the “Egyptological debates of the 1850s and 1860s” which included the misuse of Hagar in various literatures and cultural representations by white writers and artists (Trafton 177). Thus, the argument being not that Egyptians were not African or black, but that the most exceptional among these, such as Cleopatra, were not. In his critique of the nineteenth century’s obsession with ancient Egypt and its revisionism of the region’s cultural history and figures, literary scholar and cultural critic, Scott Trafton writes of Cleopatra:

“in her whiteness, she would tend to be associated with purity and taintlessness, yet in her famous role as sexual predator and oversexed seductress she would tend to invoke racist images of the wantonness and licentiousness of nonwhite women and especially of the sexualized stereotype of African American women under slavery” (179).

Hagar’s biblical history, as what some would generously call second wife and to whom others plainly referred to as concubine, coupled with her Egyptian heritage, put her in the same position as Cleopatra in the nineteenth century imagination. Therefore, white women writers who wrote Hagar heroines during the period did so as a way to depict women whose “sexuality acted outside the permissible boundaries of femininity” (Gabler-Hover 9). Southern white women especially, wrote racially ambiguous Hagar

“who were...white enough to allow white women authors and readers to imagine themselves in the role of sexual and political rebellion against the patriarchy, but at the same time black enough to provide them with an escape hatch through which such rebellion could be safely disavowed” (9).

Where then does one such as Hagar fall – a woman of Egyptian heritage whose status as a slave woman would ill fit her for notions of greatness, yet whose biblical presence alone would make her desirable for claim? It is no wonder that Hopkins, in her later serial novel, *Of One Blood*, removes readers from the fraught battleground of Egypt altogether and centers African ancestry in Ethiopia – a region that for however, “denigrated, dismissed, or ignored” was “simultaneously marked as ‘black’” while white scholars had lain claim to Egypt as a ‘white’ civilization (239). In fact, Hopkins’s later work trumps debates over the supposed white origins of Egypt by embracing a doctrine of Ethiopianism which redevelops notions of Egypt as being a “civilization of black rulers” rather than an emblem of black servitude<sup>20</sup>.

Black women’s social condition at the time *Hagar’s Daughter* was published, was one in which they had neither the full rights of citizenship nor access to privileges (albeit it few) of womanhood, for black women were not accepted as “true women.” Thus, Hopkins’s reclamation of Hagar from white writers symbolized an attempt to rescue black women from the circular narratives of sexual licentiousness that had become part of the historical and literary legacy of black women in American life and white fiction. Consequently, Hopkins does not cast Hagar as a fallen woman or concubine as she was

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<sup>20</sup> For a fuller discussion, see Theophus H. Smith’s *Conjuring Culture: Biblical Formations in Black America*.



frequently found in white women's fiction. Given that concubinage was a theme of black women's enslavement in the nineteenth century – often framed as an insatiable desire for their white slave masters – Hopkins also incites a confrontation with the social condition in which the legacy of black women had been tainted. Hopkins's Hagar is the honorable wife of one man and it is the law of slavery, buttressed upon discourses of blood, that corrupts their union, rather than an inherent immorality that can be attributed to Hagar's blackness and its supposed attendant vices.

More interesting, however, is Hopkins's reclamation of Hagar as a way to fix blackness as part of the genesis of mankind in an entirely new light. The biblical Hagar is as much a sexual surrogate for Sarah as she is a reproductive one. Implicit in the conception of Ishmael (Hagar's son with Abraham) is the disposability with which Sarah sends her handmaiden to her husband. Even in the Bible, a black woman becomes proxy for white women's desire, while Sarah remains unassociated with impulses of the flesh. Hagar supplants Sarah's marital duties as mother and lover, thus becoming Sarah's prostitute. While in the biblical scenario, Hagar births Sarah's desire to have a child, for white women adopting the symbolic Hagar and invoking the Hagar myth for their own purposes, Hagar births their desire for sexual pleasure that nineteenth century codes of true womanhood would not allow. The story of Hagar, the Egyptian slave, and Sarah become metaphor for black and white womanhood in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. White women writers who invoked Hagar sought to disassociate her from her blackness so long as it availed whiteness of certain sexual and libidinal freedoms. However, white women simultaneously freed themselves from culpability by

reverting to whiteness in their narratives so as to return to the protections of white womanhood.

Rather than crafting a mere revision of a biblical text as others preceding and following Hopkins had done in their reappraisal of biblical origin stories, Hopkins's authorship suggests that her text is the authentic origin narrative and in so doing, usurps biblical authority from the apostle Paul. Hopkins's very act of writing *Hagar's Daughter* embodies the belief that oppressive "definitions of blackness must be unraveled so that new meanings in old tales" can "emerge as an instrument of black liberation" (Cone 39). Hopkins finds new meaning in the Hagar story in two distinct ways. First, she positions herself within Pauline scholarship – a term meant to designate scholarship about the Apostle Paul and his New Testament writings – as a critic of Paul's interpretation of Hagar. Hopkins sets herself up as Paul's feminine counter in a modern age to not only write the script around Hagar as a means of redemption, but by extension, to cast black women outside of narratives of enslavement and concubinage that are inconsistent with black women's self-determination. Thus, Hopkins proposes that she is as worthy as any biblical male author of God's text, to be the recipient of his divine favor and has a special dispensation to narrate the Hagar story, thus creating an alternate Hagar legacy.

This alternative version of the Hagar story is the second way in which Hopkins finds new meaning in an old tale that becomes a tool in the fight for black freedom. Hagar's son Ishmael was forbidden from fulfilling God's covenant promise with Abraham because he was the child of the slave woman. Like Ishmael, the history of African Americans was one in which their enslaved foremothers birthed them into legacies of disinheritance, as mandated by both law and practice. Hopkins's Hagar story invalidates

the tale of disinheritance by fashioning a new heir - one who best represents the conditions of struggle that God's most oppressed children face, a black woman. In essence, Hagar's daughter becomes the hope for a new future for Hagar descendants. In the novel, the mystery of Hagar's daughter remains almost unknown to the reader until the very end, with possibilities shifting between two women who appear white but who both are revealed to be the children of formerly enslaved mothers. Jewel, Hagar's biological daughter, meets an early demise as is consistent with the tragic mulatta trope in turn of the century African American fiction. Aurelia, who functions as a double for Hagar's daughter, is exposed for the "sin" of her racial passing and immediately disappears from the narrative.

Thus, Hopkins's representation of Hagar not only resists the interpretative gendered critique that was male authority, but also resists narratives that located The Bible as a text which provided ample justification for notions of black inferiority. Biblical history which located blackness as a site of early origin, place "black people in a longer stream of universal and human history that transcended the limitations and constraints of American slavery" (Hall 61). If black people could be traced to a longer stream of human history, perhaps their humanity could be connected to ideas unrelated to subservience and chattel slavery. And yet, Hagar was but a maidservant to Abraham's wife, Sarah, and as the apostle Paul would later tell readers in Galatians, belonged to the slave class. Keeping in line with Hopkins's alignment with Ethiopianism as evidenced by her later philosophy laid out in *Of One Blood*, Hagar's maidservant status is but a footnote when evaluated next to a legacy of not only kings and queens, but of the true origin of humankind and all the markers of civilization which are attributed to Egypt (Trafton 238).

Whereas readers of the biblical text know that the biblical Hagar is of Egyptian heritage, the ancestry and true origins of Hopkins's Hagar are not as straightforward. Upon first novel encounter, Hagar is for all intents and purposes, white and Hopkins codes her as such. For Ellis Enson, "A fairer vision was never seen" and her "pure, creamy skin" arrests him (Hopkins 34;35). Such language, accompanied by the fact that a white man of Enson's standing would be attracted to such a lady, cement Hagar's whiteness to Hopkins's reading audience. This is the first note of difference between the biblical Hagar and Hopkins's Hagar, whom she cloaks in white flesh. However, in similarity to her biblical predecessor, Hopkins's Hagar is cast out, not by a resentful wife, but by a jealous brother. We learn that like the Hagar of the Bible, the Hagar of the novel's union to the man with whom she fathers a child, is not one of legal marriage. While Ellis Enson believes he has married a white woman, he has, in fact, wedded an enslaved woman of African descent. Both these stories function as stories of inheritance, one in which God's promise will be inherited and another in which a great fortune is to be inherited. Essentially, Hagar and their progeny are disinherited by the will of interested parties who would rather see their own selfish aims achieved. Much like her biblical ancestor, Hagar succumbs to her despair. While the biblical Hagar is able to receive an immediate reprieve from the God of Abraham that her son Ishmael will be "made into a great nation," Hopkins's Hagar succumbs to the waters below when she jumps into the Potomac River (*New International Version* Genesis 21:18).

This is where the two Hagar's split fates: biblical Hagar left in the desert, hanging onto God's promises of redemption for her now starving son, and Hopkins's Hagar floating in the Potomac. The reclamation of the Hagar narrative by not just Hopkins

alone, but other writers who would use her story as a jumping point to tell the stories of women's suffering, create a new avenue for Hagar characters. As Dorothea Buehler writes:

The Biblical portrayal of Hagar as a powerless and feeble subject to her owners, Abraham and Sarah, and mere bodily vessel to her son Ishmael, has, through the centuries, become a complex powerful point for negotiating female emotional and physical resilience in the face of oppressive, patriarchic structures and practices (12).

Hopkins's Hagar exemplifies this negotiation of resilience and oppression when she resurfaces from the Potomac as Estelle Bowen. She has shed the identity, but not the spirit of Hagar. Near the close of the novel when she is once again confronted with the black identity that twenty years earlier, had put her in such a state of anxiety – she stands strong and almost proud of a heritage from which she had previously shrunken exclaiming, "*Ellis! Ellis! I am Hagar.*" Narrowly, this courtroom outburst reflects the fervor of a lover's reunion in the midst of the secrets and turmoil just uncovered in the novel. However, readers cannot ignore the layered significance of Hagar's stark admission. At once, Hagar identifies herself as a woman of black ancestry given that the details regarding her former life had just been spilled out before the public at the Bradford murder trial. Now living in the truth of her identity, rather than the shame of it, Hopkins's Hagar becomes the perfect picture of the Hagar trope recast and reconfigured for she stands resolute in her power and blackness.

This coming into self and self-acceptance is resolution for Hagar. Still readers must ask, why Hagar's Daughter? Why not her son? The biblical record offers us Ishmael's conception, Ishmael's birth, and Ishmael's life. It provides us with a description or prophecy of the fate of Ishmael's progeny, first bespoken by Sarah and

later recounted by Moses, “the children of the slave shall never rule over the children of the free,” and finally reinterpreted by Paul where he fixes Hagar and her descendants as fated to servitude (Galatians 4). But Hopkins gives us none of this, instead she gives us Hagar’s daughter. Knowing Ishmael’s fate as prophesized through the male authoritative gaze, what then does Hopkins hope to achieve by imagining Hagar’s daughter rather than the son we have historically been given? I argue that Hopkins shifted focus from the real to the imagined to allow a new realm of possibility for both black men and women, as expressed through the girl child to woman rather than from the male child to man transformation. In so doing, Hopkins positions herself as biblical authority, disrupting not only time but also male power in the biblical tradition by way of God’s divine inspiration, which (as biblical history would have it) had an apparent preference for the male ear. It is not altogether insignificant that it is Pauline Hopkins who usurps the Pauline biblical tradition from the apostle Paul when she invokes the memory of Hagar’s story as Paul before her had done. Pauline being the female counterpart to Paul, it is only appropriate that her narrative becomes a feminine counterpart in feminine authority, further cementing the notion of her special dispensation. Additionally, Hopkins’s shifting of Abraham and Hagar’s progeny from male to female also may suggest a shift in the law as summarized by Peter. While the covenant seals Ishmael and his progeny into a fate of disinheritance<sup>21</sup>, Hopkins reconstitutes the inheritance in identifying Hagar’s daughter as

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<sup>21</sup> Abraham asks God, “Why not let Ishmael inherit what you have promised me?” but God decrees that while Ishmael will be the father of many nations, the inheritance of everlasting covenant promise will be reserved for Isaac, the child of Sarah. See *New International Version* Genesis 17:18.

the offspring rather than Ishmael. Thus, only a close analysis of the fate of Hagar's daughter can reveal this new inheritance and shed some light on its significance.

Ishmael lives 127 years compared to the short life of Hagar's daughter, Jewel. God's promise of many descendants to Ishmael who will form 12 nations is fulfilled. Yet by the end of Hopkins's novel, young Jewel is lying in her grave. Hopkins shuffles the possibility for discovery of Hagar's two daughters by giving us two young women who are appropriate fits for the missing infant. The first is Jewel Bowen, the child of Mr. Bowen's previous marriage and step-daughter to Hagar. The second is Aurelia Madison, daughter of Major Madison. Both young women are of similar age and notable beauty, each being described as "lovely" or "wondrously beautiful" by male admirers (Hopkins 114-15). Jewel and Aurelia are also ostensibly white and this too is a fact much remarked upon by would be suitors and admirers. This is the start of Hopkins's confusion schemes and what critics have referred to, as Hopkins's doubling. We get mirror characters in both Jewel and Aurelia, one representing virtue and chastity, the other representing vice and impurity. But which one is Hagar's true offspring and how does her fate relate to notions of inheritance thus implied?

Hopkins is slow to answer this question for her readers, for in her narrative, she engages in much subterfuge to conceal the mystery of Hagar's daughter. At times we are convinced it is Jewel, if only by the mere relationship of marriage that has brought the two together. One of Jewel's admirers suggests this very thing when he remarks that he would have thought step-mother and step-daughter were "of one blood" (114). However, the very mystery surrounding Aurelia's background also steers readers into suspecting her being the child of Hagar for she is introduced into the novel as the daughter of Major

Madison, but the whereabouts of her mother are unknown. Further, throughout the novel, Aurelia is often suspended in a somewhat dark aura that is symbolic of the “dark secret” of African ancestry. Such a secret would surely make Aurelia Hagar’s daughter, and black ancestry is in fact part of Aurelia’s mystery, but it is not her only dark secret. The other tumultuous events of Aurelia’s upbringing and lifestyle are what cast the shadow over her life. Shortly after Aurelia’s African ancestry is revealed, it becomes apparent that Jewel is the biological daughter of Hagar.

### **Unsettling Genre through Race Play**

Hopkins’s unsettling of not only the biblical genre, namely by rewriting this story of inheritance, but it’s collusion with the racial discovery novel and its primary conventions, help to piece together the puzzle of the significance of Hagar’s daughter rather than the son that the biblical narrative presents. Hopkins’s use of the character Hagar is an intentional engagement with the biblical genre which she intends to dispute by her authorship, as I have argued. Hopkins use of a character of mixed racial origins is another intentional choice that, although a convention of the time, is not put to conventional use in Hopkins’s narrative. Alternatively, Hopkins uses “mulatta” characters who subvert the color line in a way that anticipates the passing novel while transitioning readers from the more popular racial discovery framework of nineteenth century novels that were simultaneously popular. This use of mixed raced female heroines is essential to tying together the mystery of Hopkins’s selection of a female heir. In many ways, *Hagar’s Daughter* functioned as a transitional novel which reflected the transitional energies of what it meant to be upon the threshold of a new century.



The mid-nineteenth century saw robust changes in American life and the literature that reflected the many permutations of American politics and culture. While the nation faced-off against itself, teeming towards combat in the years preceding the Civil War, African American literature saw the rise of its own face-off within the text. Confrontations of identity were brought to the fore in the newly emerging genre of the “passing novel,” ushered in with the 1853 publication of William Wells Brown’s *Clotel; or, the President’s Daughter*, in which Brown’s heroine transforms from an enslaved black woman to a white man. Though scholars often include among passing novels, those in which characters live in the shadows of an unknown African ancestry, as in Julia C. Collins *The Curse of Caste, or The Slave Bride* and William Dean Howell’s *An Imperative Duty*, I refer to such texts as racial discovery novels. The distinction between the two lies in what I and scholars like Susan Bussey refer to as texts “with characters who learn of their race unexpectedly, and reveal it to others unwillingly” (Bussey 38). In essence, these characters are not passing for they do not consciously or deliberately choose one racial identity as do characters in passing novels who either temporarily or permanently, pass into another racial identity for some defined purpose or benefit.

For the purpose of this analysis, I would argue that the genre that we have come to know of as the passing novel did not truly emerge into its concrete form until the twentieth century. Classic member texts which include Jessie Fauset’s *Plum Bun*, Nella Larsen’s *Passing*, and James Weldon Johnson’s *Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* have come to define the criteria of passing novels. However, I believe it remiss to ascribe the title of passing text to all novels in which a transformation of racial identity takes place. Instead, I posit that we acknowledge the primary difference in texts of this

character and texts of the character of what we see writers doing in the nineteenth century, which is hinging the racial transformation on discovery. The crisis of racial identity rides a different wave in these nineteenth century texts, often occurring mid-way through or at the end of the text. Charles Chesnutt's publication of *House Behind the Cedars* (1900) makes the sharp pivot from the racial discovery plotline right at the twentieth century mark. In this novel, brother and sister, John Warwick and Rena Walden, live in white society, concealing the secret of their black identities – a fact which later becomes known and the concomitant tragedy ensues. There is never a moment of racial discovery for the novel's protagonists. Rather, it is only white society who has to learn that some of its members belong to the "accursed caste".

Racial discovery and passing novels have similar tropes but what is categorically different for each genre is the moment in which racial identity is revealed. While both texts hinge on a racial encounter, one is the encounter with whiteness while the other is the encounter with one's own blackness, heretofore, unknown. The trope that permeates both these narratives is that of the tragic mulatta, which can be considered a sub-genre within the literature. The tragic mulatta is able to survive the transition from the racial discovery to the passing novel because the trauma remains the same regardless of one's knowledge of racial identity. The trauma is not of one's blackness but as the indictment of black writers on white society patternistically dictates, the trauma lies in the laws of hypodescent which wrench self-definition and accordingly, self-determination from the hands of black citizens. Several factors encompass the tragedy, all of which are the result of the legal and social status of African Americans. The potential impact of the external knowledge of black blood is most damning and the potential for ensuing estrangement of

a familiar or adopted lifestyle and entry into a subjugated class is enough to send the heroine to an early grave.

Hopkins's *Hagar's Daughter* is an apt transitional text for it is seated right on the cusp of this change in literary tradition. The novel moves us from this period of unregulated racial identity transformation into an era of agency of racial transformation, much like what texts of the twentieth century novels that deal with race would come to represent. Hopkins's penchant for revision of type is exemplified in her take on the passing and racial discovery novels, each a popular and predictable plotline in nineteenth century literature. It is necessary to broadly speak of passing in *Hagar's Daughter* for Hopkins does not rely on one type of racial passing nor does she center her text on passing as merely symbolic of other kinds of transgression. Hopkins relies on multiple yet concrete instances of passing in the novel that touch upon and deviate from the theme of racial passing; invoking the act as commentary on class, gender, and identity. The racial discovery plot too becomes an inversion of itself, whereby the concept of racial discovery is put into question by alternative forms of knowing, which make secrets and hidden dimensions somehow ever-present and always known throughout the novel. These revisions of the passing and racial discovery genres call into question issues of desire and debates such as: who is desirable and who is not, what are the limits of desire, and who is permitted to express desire? Through her subversion of both the racial discovery and passing genres, Hopkins makes an argument for the legitimacy of black women's desire by breaking down notions of sexuality that tie race to prescribed sexual behavior.

Even though I make claim to *Hagar's Daughter* as a racial discovery novel, it evidences some of the tropes of the passing novel. These tropes are symbolized by not only the racial passing that is a prerequisite in passing novels, but also in other symbolic forms of passing and transition that are often contained within this literature. Characters' travel from the south to the north enable the shedding of an old identity under the cloak of urbanity and is one such symbolic form of passing. Hagar's leap into the Potomac River signifies upon the migration journey from the South to the North, even though we learn that Hagar eventually lands out West. The significance of Hopkins's choice of the Potomac is its signification to other narratives like William Wells Brown's *Clotel* and Frances Harper's *Iola Leroy*, in which similar fates of desperate women are referenced:

Thither the fugitive directed her flights. The keeper by this time had recovered from the confusion incident to such a daring and unexpected attempt, he rallied his assistants and started in pursuit. On and on she flew, seeming tireless in her desperate resolve...It was a trial of speed and endurance (Hopkins 75).

This excerpt highlights the Potomac as a symbol of the riverbed of helplessness into which fugitive women found themselves in the face of the institutions of slavery and racism. More than that, it is nearly the same scene that Brown paints for readers when he writes of *Clotel*, "Thither the poor fugitive directed her flight" (Brown 205). Holly Jackson observes that it is at this antebellum portion of Hopkins's novel that she produces a "near-verbatim reiteration" of Brown's narrative (145). Jackson puts forth several theories for Hopkins's seeming cooptation of Brown's form and content and eventually settles on Hopkins not "celebrating the continuity between these epochs in black experience" but rather "present[ing] it as a tragic impasse" that prevents blacks from crossing into progress (145). I argue that rather, Hopkins moves beyond the tragedy in

this recreation by making Hagar's final fate one of resurrection instead of tragic death. Hagar's rebirth is fully realized for the reader, in the urban metropolis of Washington, D.C when the novel resumes 20 years later.

Similarly, economic wealth as a trope of the passing novel shrouds the racial marker of poverty and buys one entry into the white elite<sup>22</sup>. Hagar's new life as Estelle Bowen – the wedded wife to the wealthy and racially ambiguous Senator Bowen – validates this element of the passing novel. It is signified in the self-made character of Senator Bowen who is passing as a man of a certain social standing, although his unrefined manner remains evident. The brief reference to “the hair and skin of an Indian” are but a hint to his non-whiteness but are not indicative of his right to inclusion among high society (Hopkins 80). His earning of millions of dollars bade him passage into the society in which he brings his wife, who may be passing as well. And yet, Hopkins's text is one which complicates this seemingly simple passing plotline due to the fact that readers cannot be sure of whether Hagar's behavior in the novel constitutes passing.

Neither iteration of Hagar desired to shed herself of her black identity. In fact, while we know her to be unceremoniously exposed in the emerging mystery of the novel, her later revelation is somewhat anticlimactic for it did not disrupt her identity. When her character's racial identity is revealed at the trial in which all characters are unmasked to reveal their true selves, Hagar not only sheds the mask of Estelle Bowen but also discards her apparent whiteness. It is at this juncture that Hopkins deviates from the trend that was so popular in racial discovery texts and would come to dominate the moment of

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<sup>22</sup> Priscilla Ramsey's “A Study of Black Identity in ‘Passing’ Novels of the Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries” provides an analysis of the patterned strategies of passing literature.

discovery in passing novels. It is necessary to revisit the previously discussed courtroom scene in which Hagar reveals herself to understand how it disrupts the very notion of passing. In yelling “It is I, Hagar,” at the scene of reunion between Hagar and her first husband Ellis Enson, heretofore known as Detective Henson, Hagar reveals not only her true character identity but also her identity as a black woman (59). The weight of this revelation lies in its suggestion that perhaps Hagar was never passing as the chronology of the narrative would suggest.

Though Hagar had taken on the identity of Estelle Bowen as the wife of Senator Bowen, the scarce details about their early marriage leave open the possibility that Senator Bowen in fact, knew his wife’s identity. Given that he is a man with “Indian skin,” from the West, it may be determined that he maintained less of the racial prejudices and preoccupations which governed Northern white society. Perhaps a clearer indicator of Senator Bowen’s presumed lack of racial prejudice is demonstrated in one of the earliest conversations between the still maiden Estelle Marks and Zenas Bowen at the start of their engagement. In deciding where the young couple will make a home together, Zenas soothes his new fiancé by “assur[ing] her that the North Pole, Egypt, Africa – all were one to him, with her and his little daughter” (81). Under the veneer of the promise of a happy family regardless of settlement lies the impression that Zenas may be remarking upon racial origin. Neither the North Pole, a region associated with the icy pure whiteness of snow, or the African continent, a region associated with those of the darkest brown hues, will deter Zenas from marriage. This tacit acceptance of Hagar’s racial identity then removes her from the perceived duplicity of total racial passing. While Hagar did simply live among white society without announcing herself racially she

may not have been living in keeping with the trope of passing literature in which no one in proximity to the protagonist has knowledge of the character's racial roots. This ambiguity is important to note, for if Hagar was not concealing her African ancestry from her husband, then this declarative scene acts as one of requested recognition rather than one of revelation of black identity.

Secondarily, when Estelle's identity as Hagar is exposed, her response is cataclysmically different than the first revelation of her blackness at the beginning of the novel. This calm acceptance – no, deliberate declaration – speaks to a coming to terms with oneself and a pride in identity. In the singular phrase, Hagar at once allies herself to a history of enslavement and blackness. Hopkins rewrites the onset of this tragic moment by removing the element of tragedy all together. Unlike similar revelatory moments in future passing or previous racial discovery novels, Hagar's announcement does not carry grief and dismay. It is starkly different than her own moment of racial discovery at the beginning of the novel, in which she faints after her African origins are exposed by Walker, the slave trader.

In her study of the tragic mulatta – often the prescribed identity of the female heroine in passing novels – Eve Raimon described this character as “an educated light-skinned heroine whose white benefactor and paramour (sometimes also the young woman's father) dies, leaving her to the auction block and/or the sexual designs of a malevolent creditor. The protagonist, sheltered from the outside world, is driven to desperation by her predicament and perhaps to an early death” (7). Indeed, this is the fate which Hagar initially meets. Her benefactors are the white family to whom she became adopted daughter (although her purchase as an enslaved child had been long forgotten).

Seemingly cementing her into the prototype, Hagar's paramour's death strips her of white protection and now she has been identified as black and thus, as blackness symbolizes, accursed. Mr. Walker, enacting the role of the malevolent creditor readies Hagar for the auction block but is thwarted by her escape. So should end Hagar's tragedy with her river death, but it does not. Hopkins's reclamation of this narrative, like her early claim to the emerging genre of the passing novel, is embodied by Hagar's survival.

Hopkins continues to challenge the dynamics of what is known and unknown in relationship to identity beyond Hagar. Since passing relied on, in part, the absolute or near absolute secrecy around racial heritage, Hopkins thwarts this by creating allusions to knowledge throughout the novel for the most important female characters. Repeatedly, the text offers instances of an almost intuitive knowledge of race that makes the occurrence of passing partly inconclusive. As Augusta Rohrbach writes, "In Hopkins' fictional world, what we see is *not* what we get. Her narratives obfuscate the boundaries between the knower and the known, subject and object through the use of double and revealed identities...her method...more in the fashion of a riddle" (84). This riddle is embodied in the unconscious moments of racial discovery between characters. This is especially true of Jewel and Aurelia's dynamic at their first meeting where upon sighting Aurelia for the first time, Jewel thinks "I know that face" (90). Although the ensuing chapters later reveal that Jewel and Aurelia had indeed been schoolmates and thus previously acquainted, the hint of the recognition of one like herself (although Jewel is yet unaware for her African ancestry) should not be easily dismissed.

Though Jewel and Aurelia are ultimately revealed to be of African descent, they are altogether quite different characters. The lesson here is not in the details of the fates



of these two women, but in the lack of blame attributed to them, and the significance of their doubling. Throughout the narrative, Jewel is cloaked in the aura of whiteness, from her clothing to descriptions of her purity and virtue that are only embellished by her engagement to the most upstanding of white suitors. Aurelia on the other hand, embodies all the ills associated with blackness, adopting an almost masculine identity through socialization with men and using her magnetic powers of allurement (read blackness) as a tool of seduction. Both women appear white and are often introduced to the reader through variations of mention of their creamy hue, paleness, and other attributes of whiteness. As a white woman until her revelation in the final eighth of the novel, Jewel is the perfect image of purity. She has many would-be suitors but is determined to remain loyal to her beloved, Cuthbert Sumner. Even when she is manipulated into accepting the hand of the dubious General Benson her loyalty to Cuthbert is palpable. Aurelia on the other hand, though apparently white, is all sex, from her aura to her behavior. She appears the seductress at nearly every turn, using coded language such as when she remarks to General Benson that “No one knows better than you how to make love to a young girl” (100). While this is intended to be the language of verbal wooing, it quite suggests the knowledge of deep sexual acquaintance between two ex-lovers. In fact, Aurelia’s penchant for keeping mixed company with men in the intimate space of parlors whilst drinking and smoking alongside men, is suggestive of sexual intimacy. These close quarters represent the intimate congregation of bodies between one woman and many men, a subtle yet undeniable allusion to Aurelia’s promiscuity.

The novel presents yet another young white woman, who, whilst she does not keep society with either of the novel’s young protagonists, has an adjacent and relevant

storyline as it relates to the race-sex plotline. Elise Bradford functions as the secretary and (as is later revealed) lover to General Benson. A victim of General Benson's seduction, Elise births Benson's illegitimate child and is forced to conceal her secret and live in shame. Ultimately, Elise is murdered, and while her death actually occurs to prevent her from revealing any further truths regarding General Benson's schemes, her death embodies the trend of "fallen women" being irredeemable in the era's fiction. And this is where Hopkins's games begin. As is evidenced in her treatment of Sappho in her debut novel *Contending Forces*, Hopkins rails against the trend of condemning black women to an irredemptive fate. In fact, what is novel about Hopkins approach is that it is a white woman whose sexual impropriety cannot be undone. Elise Bradford must suffer the consequences of her misdeeds with the punishment of death that even whiteness cannot evade. Still, this is different for other characters in the novel and this difference need not go unnoticed.

Somehow, both Jewel and Aurelia are alternately put forth as Hagar's daughters throughout the text, suggesting that somehow, they both *are* Hagar's daughters. In her clever substitution of one for the other, Hopkins bids her reader entertain that there exist multiple possibilities for black women, full of virtue or vice, masculine or feminine, promiscuous or chaste, but none of which are condemnable. In fact, the only woman beyond redemption in the novel ends up being a white woman, Elise Bradford. In the end, Jewel dies of heartache, but the true cause of her death is the law which fails to legitimize her and recognize her humanity, not despite her blackness, but because of it. Aurelia, the other woman in the novel who readers learn was the professed lover of Sumner and perhaps lover to others, is revealed to be black. And yet, Aurelia does not go the way of

other black heroines who found themselves along a similarly “misguided” path (as early twentieth century conventions would have it). Aurelia’s sudden absence from the novel, though glaring, is overshadowed by the lack of true rebuke for her transgressions. Her condition and the many manipulations she endured are met with sympathy, a feeling of common understanding and identification that is evidence of the recognition of shared humanity.

### **The Colored American Magazine (CAM)**

In the previous sections I discuss how Hopkins unsettles certain types of genre – those being the passing and racial discovery genres and biblical genre. In this section, however, I focus on how Hopkins unsettles the traditional novelistic form altogether by substituting it with the episodic formula of serialization. Accordingly, this unbounded narrative refuses ideological limitations thus “turning...away from monolithic (and hegemonic) conceptions of race promoted by generic conventions of the novel” (Rohrbach 483). Thus, Hopkins opens up a host of reflexive possibilities between the narrative itself and its form. For example, the very nature of *Hagar’s Daughter* as a racial discovery novel is buttressed by the episodic release of critical plot details. The revelation of racial identity at cliffhanger moments is embedded in the very nature of anticipated release that was characteristic of the serial. For example, Hagar’s racial discovery that serves at the cliffhanger moment occurs in the April 1901 issue of *CAM* where she gives a “heartrending shriek” and falls to the floor. Her moment of revelation of her racial identity to an audience occurs nearer to the close of the novel at another cliffhanger when she proclaims that she is Hagar in the February 1902 issue of the magazine. Most certainly, Hopkins did not invent serial novels, nor was she the only black woman writer

to serialize multiple novels within one magazine. Yet Hopkins's influence on the magazine (later denoted by her editorship) did create a unique space for her novel within the periodical.

In the issue of *CAM* that would inaugurate the publication of *Hagar's Daughter*, readers were presented with many precursors to themes that would prove themselves directly relevant to Hopkins's serialized novel. This is most certainly no accident, as it was in 1902 that Hopkins began to exhibit some mode of editorial control over the magazine<sup>23</sup>. In the 1901 inaugural issue of *The Colored American Magazine*, the magazine endeavored to formally introduce its readers to novelist, Pauline Hopkins. By then, readers had read several of Hopkins's pieces already featured in the magazine – chief among them being her short stories, “Tamla Gordon” and “General Washington”. Readers would also have recognized Hopkins's name from her much advertised first novel, *Contending Forces*. Why then this formal introduction sketching the woman herself? At the close of 1900, the magazine advertised that the new year would bring a new serial novel to the magazine's pages, *Hagar's Daughter*. While the author of this new novel was introduced as Sarah A. Allen, editorial announcements at the close of the serial (March 1902) revealed that it was really Hopkins who penned *Hagar's Daughter*, but under her mother's maiden name. Though no reason is outlined here, one can assume that it was perhaps, Hopkins's oversaturation in the magazine, as she began to write series features, that led her to conceal her identity. Or perhaps, as Lois Brown argues, readers interested in the writer would have already divined the truth, for an earlier

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<sup>23</sup> See Sigrid Anderson Cordell's “‘The Case Was Very Black against’ Her: Pauline Hopkins and the Politics of Racial Ambiguity at the ‘Colored American Magazine.’”

biography of Hopkins life in *CAM* mentioned her mother as being the one Sarah A. Allen. Whatever the reason for such concealment, what is clear is that Hopkins had an agenda for this publication's impact on her readers as she did with her debut novel.

The January 1901 *CAM*'s sketch on Hopkins reveals that her "ambition is to become a writer of fiction, in which the wrongs of her race shall be so handled as to enlist the sympathy of all classes of citizens, in this way reaching those who never read history or biography" (219). Here, indeed, is Hopkins's articulation of her fiction into a realm that extends beyond the literary. To equate her fiction with the fields of history or the genre of biography requires a medium that will permit readers to view it as such. Enter the serial which Hopkins employs for the transformative purpose of transforming her fiction into history. A history of what then, is the next logical question? As outlined thus far in the chapter, Hopkins has rescripted biblical history. To further concretize a kind of historical veracity to her work, Hopkins utilizes a form which allows it to emerge from the purely literary to trouble the historical. Hopkins unsettles the novel by breaking free from it by breaking apart her book into its thirty-seven episodes. I am surely not arguing that Hopkins was the first to writer serialize fiction. Certainly her recognition of Harper's career as serial novelist evidences that she does not claim to be a pioneer. What is evident is that Hopkins may have marked her fiction as distinctly different than that of her serial forbearers.

Hopkins articulates her fiction in a form that its publication venue supports given its propensity to publish historical features, profiles, and short stories. Thus, *CAM* comes together as both a periodical and a part of Hopkins's novel as much as her novel is a part of the history it profiles. Like the historical features: Famous Men (and Women) of the

Negro Race, Hopkins's Hagar story is the Famous Woman of the Negro Race told through Hopkins's eyes as the other profiles which she composes for the magazine. As Hopkins biographer notes, Hopkins "was a pioneering lay historian...[who] aspired to honor the liberation historiography work of early African American historians who had dedicated themselves to assembling and reconstructing the African American past" (Brown 289; 287). Further, Augusta Rohrbach's assertion that "Hopkins's use of the serial format creates opposition to white notions of racial supremacy embedded in the novel form," becomes all the more poignant because it allows Hopkins to simultaneously imagine (as its presentation as fiction predetermines, as well as tell its presence in the serial) the story of Hagar (483). Hopkins becomes as much creative writer as she does biographer of Hagar and her descendants.

And while episodic release at cliffhanger portions of novels are pretty standard, the significance of it here in Hopkins's work helps to support it as a novel of racial discovery in which these moments become crucial points of transition between issues – the first of which occurs in the April 1901 issue. Hopkins's cliffhanger is midway through Chapter V where Hagar's African ancestry is not only revealed to her husband by her brother-in-law, but also to herself. Her later confounding over being one of "the accursed lot" highlights that she was not concealing her racial identity but simply, had not discovered it. At the same time Hopkins is not only deconstructing the novel form as others who have written serials have done, but through the particular shaping of *CAM*, is also making novel of the magazine. What makes *CAM* especially ripe for this transformation is the structure of the magazine. From the short stories and feature pieces

to the dominance and repetition of certain contributors, *CAM* becomes more than the disparate parts of a periodical with the presence of *Hagar's Daughter*.

Let us first examine how the structure of the magazine alters to support the incoming serial. Features such as “Fascinating Bible Stories” and “Famous Men of the Negro Race” scaffold in different ways, the arrival of Hopkins’s novel. Charles Winslow Hall’s “Fascinating Bible Series” is an important primer for *Hagar's Daughter* in a poignantly thematic way. Hall begins his narrative stories at the beginning with the story of Adam and Eve. By the time Hall arrives at his fourth installment of bible stories, he positions himself perfectly for the biblical historical refresher that readers will need to contextualize and anticipate Hopkins’s novel. In the February 1901 issue of *CAM* (just one month before the release of the first installment of *Hagar's Daughter*) readers encounter a masculinist vision of Hagar which reinforces biblical interpretations as well as nineteenth century fashioning of Hagar. She is seductress set with the ambition of ascension to heights of wealth and position, according to Hall’s vision. He also aligns Hagar with her Egyptian counterpart, Cleopatra. As earlier proposed, he sees Hagar through the same lines that Cleopatra has been portrayed. Hagar is Cleopatra’s prototype in women’s schemes and artful designs upon men. This suggestion frames Hagar for Hopkins’s would-be readers as other nineteenth century Hagar narratives had presented her. And in this way, the future publication of the novel in the same medium as this Hagar retelling ensures the same audience will encounter both these Hagar narratives.

While Hall does set readers up with a view of Hagar that is consistent with nineteenth century portrayals of her character, he does set himself apart in an important way. For Hall, there is no dispute over Hagar blackness. Her Egyptianness does not serve

as a racially ambiguous identity which puts blackness in question. Instead, Hall uses Hagar's Egyptianness as a continental declaration but labels her black in several clear ways. First, in describing Hagar's return after fleeing to the wilderness in the face of Sarai's resentment and jealousy, he writes "So Hagar returned unto Sar-ai and promised obedience, and in due time Ishmael was born, the son of a Caucasian father and African Mother" (*CAM* 204). Thus Hall posits that Hagar's Africanness is more than a continental moniker but rather, that it lies in direct opposition to the whiteness or Caucasian heritage of Abram. Later, Hall again certifies Hagar's blackness when Hagar is cast out into the wilderness. The "simple folk" who provide shelter and provision to Hagar and her suffering son are said to welcome "the dark beauty" (305). This suggestion of not just dark features (hair or eyes) but complexion aside the previous mention of her Africanness furthers Hall's representation of a black Hagar.

Thus, Hall's profile not only gives readers context for Hopkins's upcoming book but also sheds light on an important question posed here that readers may have asked once they encountered the narrative with Hall's refresher. Why Hagar's Daughter? Rather than the biblical assemblage of Hagar and Ishmael's origins and fates that require reading across the Old and New Testaments, Hall puts together these disparate parts in his fascinating Bible story so that readers can plainly see how Hagar and Ishmael's fates play out. Of Ishmael, Hall writes, that "never had he borne offences unavenged or failed to not reward kindness. Hospitable and generous...Ishmael had founded a nation" (305-06). This highlights the seeming injustice done Hagar. Hall aptly notes Hagar's dis-fulfillment stating that "so he [Ishmael] held by sword and bow the wilderness heritage left to him, in place of the greater prize for which Hagar had longed and suffered" (306).



This leaves the unanswered question of, so what about Hagar? Hopkins is left to answer this question in the March 1901 issues of *CAM* in which *Hagar's Daughter* will debut.

Incidentally, this is the first break in Hall's biblical feature for he does not publish in the following issue, as if to acknowledge Hopkins as biblical author who can stand in to rewrite or correct his and other masculinist visions of Hagar. Together, Hall's feature and Hopkins's narrative act as composite histories rather than biblical analyses or interpretations alongside fiction. The absence of Hall's feature in that first issue where *Hagar's Daughter* appears cements this idea. This is but one example of how Hopkins's publication of *Hagar's Daughter* helps to historicize her novel, hybridizing it. *Hagar's Daughter* is further hybridized, although subtly so, as history, through Hopkins's own features on fascinating men and women of the Negro race. Hagar's prior historicization as well as Hopkins's decree that her work function as a kind of history or biography suggests that her novel is in some ways, the first in what in 1902 will become, a series of profiles of fascinating women.

The fiction in the magazine is but another way in which the content seems to serve as somehow in concert with *Hagar's Daughter*. I also regard the way in which other pieces in the magazine, in addition to Hall's feature, prove complimentary to *Hagar's Daughter*. For example, in the May 1901 issue in which *Hagar's Daughter* is in its third episode, the magazine opens with a short story entitled, "A Georgia Episode." While the events of this story may at first seem unrelated to the developing plotlines of Hopkins's novel, there is, I argue, an important link between the two imaginative works.

Noted somewhat ambiguously by author, A. Gude Deekun,<sup>24</sup> “A Georgia Episode” is a brief tale of black casualty at the hands of white lust and consumption. A young laundress, Emma Smith falls victim to the son of her white employer, Johnson Smith, who has evil designs upon her virtue and purity. Though her final end is attributed to a scheme of morphine overdose, the reader is left to rightfully assume that before the drug inducement was complete, Johnson had fulfilled his promises of sexual violation made earlier through repeated innuendo throughout the novella. Emma’s betrothed, Russell Woodleigh exacts revenge upon her assailant at the end of the tale, committing both himself and Johnson to a great factory explosion that kills them and concludes the story.

Smith’s loosely veiled threats of sexual assault first appear at the beginning of the story when he says she will have to “take what comes” if she doesn’t have sense to “be friendly” and that she “is mine anyway it goes” (*CAM 4*). Johnson Smith will have Ms. Smith by acquiescence or by force. After being wounded by Smith’s fiancé Woodleigh, Smith threatens to “make her pay for it” in ways that harken to threats made against women that are sexually violent first, and then lethal, second. Although Ms. Smith is eventually avenged by the death of her assailant by her fiancé Russell Woodleigh, what of the all too common assault upon black women’s sexuality that befell Ms. Smith before her untimely death? It can be argued that Hopkins’s narrative achieves two things in being published alongside this short story: one is that it posits that Ms. Smith is but another profile of Hagar’s many female descendants of the biblical Hagar who will be later redeemed by Hopkins in the magazine. This suggests somehow that the title Hagar

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<sup>24</sup> Hanna Wallinger in *Pauline Hopkins: A Literary Biography* theorizes the potential of this to be one of Hopkins’s many pseudonyms given that she is already penning *Hagar’s Daughter* under one.

herself, as well as her textual descendants, are descendants of the original biblical Hagar so that the story of Hagar is both revisionist and redeemed by Hopkins's pen. Readers get the fate of Ishmael but what happened to her daughters and what is their legacy? How are Hagar and Jewel but also Aurelia all laying claim to their "mother's ancestry"?

The subversive claim that Hopkins is making in the novel is that all black women are descendants of Hagar. "A Georgia Episode's" opening in that May 1901 issue shows us the state of the world in which Hagar's Daughters, like Ms. Smith, find themselves. Ultimately, black women are still at the whim of men's fancy, a fate which leaves them without due protection and results in their untimely death and almost imminent assault or sexual manipulation. Their vulnerability from the threat of white men, which results in Ms. Smith's rape and death in the short story or within Hopkins's novel itself, can also be found in the many misfortunes which befell Hagar, Jewel, and Aurelia. As is the case in "A Georgia Episode" where Ms. Smith simply expires, Hopkins presents a self-sustaining community of women in which women become the protectors against male and state violence (roughly interchangeable). An early example of this in the novel occurs in the scene on the long bridge which appears in the very same issue. In a departure from William Wells Brown's representation of this scene in *Clotel* where Clotel looks to the heavens and begs God's mercy before jumping into the Potomac River, Hagar takes her fateful leap with a different plea:

Her resolution was taken. She kissed her babe, clasped it convulsively in her arms, saying:  
"Alas, poor innocent, there is one gift for thee yet left for your unfortunate mother to bestow, –It is death. Better so than the fate reserved for us both."  
Then she raised her tearful, imploring eyes to heaven as if seeking for mercy and compassion, and with one bound sprang over the railing of the bridge, and sank beneath the waters of the Potomac river.

Though she too looks for mercy before succumbing to the river waters, Hopkins adds a conversation with Hagar's infant daughter to her version. Hagar seeks a last ditch effort for heaven's mercy yet she resolutely endeavors to be the saving grace for herself and her daughter when God's grace and mercy seem not at hand. In fact, it is this very image which precedes "A Georgia Episode" in the May 1901 issue. This representation of Hagar's slow and gliding descent into the Potomac are in perfect sequence with the monthly issue. This issue will also contain chapter V of *Hagar's Daughter* which ends with this cliffhanger drop into the Potomac. The sequencing of these various scenes adjoins the magazine as an almost complete narrative. "A Georgia Episode" is both literally and figuratively bookended by the aura of *Hagar's Daughter* and thus, is fitting evidence for the coherence created between Hopkins's serial and the magazine as a whole.

The power of Hopkins's Hagar story lies in its petition that black women be liberated from the one-dimensional narratives that they have come to represent, and be reimagined to embody the full range of their humanity. Hopkins's early black theology was radical because it injected the taboo of black women's sexuality into the politics of liberation and in her unique way, asserted her place as successor to recount this biblical origin story. Hopkins's revision of the racial discovery novel also complicated many of the popular themes around race and color that were so common to narratives of mixed race characters. The lore around black women's hypersexuality did not escape those who were "tainted" with the residue of Negro blood. So powerful was the ink of the blackness that it stained the purity of whiteness, despite its preponderance - or so it was framed in the white imagination. However, in the black imagination of writers like Hopkins,

notions of sexuality and its relationship to race were extensively troubled. Herein, lies the significance of *Hagar's Daughter*.

## CONCLUSION

### LOOKING FORWARD, LOOKING BACK

Kara Walker's 2014 installation *A Subtlety or the Marvelous Sugar Baby*: an homage to the unpaid and overworked Artisans who have refined our Sweet tastes from the cane fields to the Kitchens of the New World on the Occasion of the demolition of the Domino Sugar Refining Plant, speaks to the ever-present significance of work on representations of black female sexuality and womanhood. Centuries after the inception of ideologies which promoted black women as lascivious and sexually degenerate and their bodies as monstrous, savage, yet exotic, Walker's more recent exhibition revives the critical import of this discussion in a new era.

Placed strikingly against the darkened warehouse that was once the bustling Domino Sugar Factory of the early twentieth century, Walker's Sugar Baby sits bereft of light save the rays of sun careening in through the ceiling, laying few spotlights at her feet. She is awe-inspiring, sitting proud in her Sphinx-like posture, clearly alluding to a noble and royal African past. So many subtleties characterize Walker's Sugar Baby and the first of note lies in the very posture of Walker's white-black confectionary goddess. She is an homage to an African past denied, one diluted by a whiteness ideology not so subtly bespoken in the stark whiteness of the Sugar Baby herself. The fullness of her lips, the wide expanse of her nose, the full roundness of her bosom, the rotundness of her *derriere* and the kerchief tied atop her head all signal a decidedly African embodiment. It

is this embodiment that Walker equates with an Egyptian period of prosperity and regality, troubling notions of an uncivilized, unremarkable black African heritage.

Brought to the fore once again, in her presence, is the stark sound of her absence - the absence of black women writ large in celebratory narratives of body, sexuality, womanhood, and dignity. For twenty-first century black women and women of color for whom these legacies remain pertinent, Walker's *Sugar Baby* is voice. She speaks to the representations of black womanhood, black female sexuality, black women's desire, and the wider expanse of black women's body politics. Walker's work seeks to remind its viewers of both the legacies of black women's representation while embodying self-determination and liberation from these very legacies. What makes Walker's *Sugar Baby* so stunning is her ability to embody and disembody simultaneously. Walker's work is in distinct conversation with the earlier traditions of the literary artistry of Pauline Hopkins and Frances Harper who also presented conventional representations of black women characters though all the while subverting many commonly held associations. Like Walker, Hopkins looked to Egypt to restore black women to the posture of the dignified and revered.

Pauline Hopkins's *Hagar's Daughter* and Frances Harper's *Trial and Triumph* were published during a time now described as The Black Woman's Era (1890-1910). It is so called because this was quite a prolific period of literary production for black women writers. In fact, within this period, black women writers published more in these two decades than black men writers had published in the last half century (Gates, *Magazine Novels* xvi). The first half of the nineteenth century had not been nearly as rich regarding the volume of black women's publications. Although Phillis Wheatley's first

book of poetry was published in the late eighteenth century, it was not met by another black woman's imaginative writing until the publication of Lucy Terry's ballad which, although composed in 1746 was only published in 1855. Yet, this did not mean that black women were not writing. Maria Stewart's 1835 "Religion and the Pure Principles of Morality" serves as evidence of the non-imaginative works of poetry and fiction that black women contributed to the early and mid-century period.

The works which are the focus of this dissertation were "buried in obscurity" until rediscovered, reprinted, and redistributed in the late 1980s. The significance of their reintroduction is that they legitimize the African American women's literary tradition which heretofore had been marked by absence. *Woman thou art loosed* asks that we move beyond the mere credit of these workers as having made more robust the black women's literary canon of the nineteenth century. I chose a dual study of Frances Harper and Pauline Hopkins fiction because I see the distinction in their literature.

As the foreword to *The Magazine Novels of Pauline Hopkins* tells us, African American writers engaged in a process of "demonstrat[ing] that black women writers, read, and revised, other black women writers." These "formal echoes" are an important aspect of the African American literary tradition and are most certainly evident in the relationship between Frances Harper and Pauline Hopkins. As a regular contributor to *The Colored American Magazine*, in which *Hagar's Daughter* would come to be published, Hopkins also writes a feature series, *Famous Women of the Negro Race* in which she praises writer, Frances Harper's literary career. It is a much lengthier feature than Hopkins's other profiles in the series. Thus, it is from her own pen, that we know Hopkins was reading Harper and we can surmise that she studied Harper quite closely.



Frances Harper and Pauline Hopkins are the only black women writers to have written exactly one standalone a novel and to have serialized three novels in African American periodicals from emancipation through the Nadir. Taken together, these women writes give us a looking glass into the challenges that black women faced in the much “disputed dignity of [their] womanhood” (Cooper 31).

This project closes on the declaration that Frances Harper and Pauline Hopkins, were radical race women of their time but not for all the reasons for which they are commonly lauded. Harper’s radicalism was not simply because she was an illustrious activist for the entirety of the nineteenth century through three social movements: abolition, temperance, and women’s suffrage. Her radicalism also cannot solely be attributed to having given lectures in dangerous places and speaking bravely against those with whom she had once allied. Pauline Hopkins’s radicalism is not entrenched in her work as a dramatist, playwright, and editor alone. Nor is her status as a radical race woman because she stood up as woman in an editorial world run by men through her work with *The Colored American Magazine*. Although these factors are certainly a large part of what made Harper and Hopkins radical women what this project really illuminates is that the radical sexual politics espoused in their literature set them apart as race women of their era. Harper and Hopkins’s fiction were deliberate landscapes of experimentation. They took from their worlds, from history, from society and culture, and mostly importantly, from their imaginations, and married these influences to their skill. The skill of these writers is important to note because for some many people who read these novels, they are but a repetition of the some of the politics of nineteenth century respectability rather than only push back against it to say that black women are also

virtuous. Certainly, Frances Harper does do much of this but as demonstrated, her vision of black womanhood and sexuality goes further than arguing for mere recognition of virtue. This project suggests that Frances Harper and Pauline Hopkins created a blueprint for a radical sexual politics that was not always in line with what they may have voiced on the public circuit or even with their more apparent social values. Their explorations on the printed page allowed these writers to imagine black womanhood, sexuality, desire, and identity on their own terms.

Kara Walker's *A Subtlety* and larger portfolio of work which remembers the often muted history of black women's experience in America, is a part of the African American woman's tradition of representation and self-determination. Although itself not a written work, which would exclude her from the literary tradition, *A Subtlety* and much of Walker's work embodies both the formal and informal echoes which characterize the African American woman's literary tradition. Thus, Walker's contemporary work is as much a testament to the memory of black women's representation as it is to the long line of women who intervened throughout history to present new and fresh narratives that would reflect the spirit of black women's self-determination and liberation.

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