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**BEYOND THE PALE: UNSETTLING "RACE"  
AND WOMANHOOD IN THE NOVELS OF  
HARPER, HOPKINS, FAUSET AND LARSEN**

**By**

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**Race and Womanhood in the Novels of  
Harper, Hopkins, Fauset and Larsen**

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## ABSTRACT

This dissertation proposes that writers like Frances Harper, Pauline Hopkins, Jessie Fauset, and Nella Larsen “talk out both sides” of their mouths, parodying the values of the black bourgeoisie, racialized notions of womanhood, and understandings of racial difference popular at the turn into the twentieth century. Using complex modes of address, these authors have written novels that in all likelihood were read in different directions by their white and African American readerships. I contend that these narratives would have placated their white readerships with familiar forms, while simultaneously forging a sense of community with their African American readers in novels of a highly political nature which questioned and subverted definitions of womanhood and “race.” These “tragic mulatta” and “passing” novels, published from 1892 to 1931, are contextualized with an analysis of three cultural efforts to consolidate turn-of-the-century American beliefs regarding race and gender: legal statutes codifying racial identities, theories of racial difference, and notions of gender identity disseminated through the cult of domesticity. Because the mulatto is neither white nor black, her ambivalent identity and experience make parody a significant trope with which these authors interrogate identity. In order to “pass” for “true women” or for white, these mulatto characters utilize and parody the very qualities designed to ensure the “purity” of whiteness and womanhood. This study argues that such parodies access an African American tradition of parodic performance that played to and on white notions of “blackness” and constructions of white identity. Moving from a consideration of such “signifyin(g)” acts as a challenge to gender and racial identities represented

by heroines who pass for "true women," the study concludes with a consideration of how race, as a political category of description, is destabilized through the representation of heroines who choose to pass for white.

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Let's face it. I am a marked woman, but not everybody knows my name. "Peaches" and "Brown Sugar," "Sapphire" and "Earth Mother," "Aunty," "Granny," God's "Holy Fool," a "Miss Ebony First," or "Black Woman at the Podium": I describe a locus of confounded identities, a meeting ground of investments and privations in the national treasury of rhetorical wealth. My country needs me, and if I were not here, I would have to be invented.

-Hortense J. Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book"

I think: my raciality is socially constructed, and I experience it as such. I feel my blackself as an eddy of conflicted meanings -- and meaninglessness -- in which my self can get lost, in which agency and consent are tumbled in constant motion. This sense of motion, the constant windy sound of manipulation whistling in my ears, is a reminder of society's constant construction of my blackness.

Somewhere at the center, my heart gets lost. I transfigure the undesirability of my racial ambiguity into the necessity of deference, the accommodation of condescension. It is very painful when I permit myself to see all this. I shield myself from it wherever possible.

-Patricia J. Williams, *The Alchemy of Race and Rights*

In a 1989 review of Susan Willis's *Specifying: Black Women Writing the American Experience*, Deborah McDowell noted the overwhelming tendency of many studies of African American women's literature to trace a tradition that begins with Zora Neale Hurston and culminates in the current renaissance of black women novelists: "[E]verything looks back to Zora Neale Hurston, who is the precursor of Toni Morrison, Paule Marshall, and Alice Walker." McDowell further argues that not only does such a tradition of African American women's writing, predicated on representations of and from "the folk," marginalize those texts written from and centering on the black middle class and the urban North, it also "gives *Their Eyes Were Watching God* too great a weight to carry, however pivotal and salient a text it is in the Afro-American literary tradition" (Review 952).<sup>1</sup> While African American literary theory has attended to the folk, the rural

South, the vernacular, and the blues as central signifiers of the tradition, black feminist critics like McDowell, Hazel Carby, Cheryl Wall, Thadious Davis, Jacquelyn McLendon, and Ann duCille have worked to open the field to considerations of authors like Jessie Redmon Fauset and Nella Larsen, who have historically been marginalized for their attention to the black bourgeoisie, and Northern urban settings and situations.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, Hazel Carby, Claudia Tate and Carla Peterson have largely revised our understanding of nineteenth-century African American women writers like Frances Harper and Pauline Hopkins, whose domestic fiction has long been perceived as assimilationist in content and intent.<sup>3</sup> Such work has informed and enabled this study which centers on the mulatto figure in Frances Harper's *Iola Leroy* (1892), Pauline Hopkins's *Contending Forces* (1899), Jessie Redmon Fauset's *The Chinaberry Tree* (1931) and *Plum Bun* (1929), and Nella Larsen's *Quicksand* (1928) and *Passing* (1929). In a broad sense I have tried to pursue a question Jacquelyn McLendon poses early in her study of Fauset and Larsen: "Is it possible, through theorizing, to situate these texts within a specific set of black intertextual relations even though the tragic mulatto is a figure of white creation?" (12). I believe the answer is yes, and that the ways in which such a positioning of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century African American women's novels might be theorized are multiple. This study offers one such reading, theorizing the mulatto as an intertextual figure common to novels that parody and critique constructions of race and gender.<sup>4</sup> Both Jacquelyn McLendon and Ann duCille have noted the parodic nature of Fauset's and Larsen's work, and this study responds, in part, to their call for further exploration of such a reading of these texts.<sup>5</sup>

The trajectory of an African American women's literary tradition drawn from early women's slave narratives, through Hurston, and on to current novelists like Toni

Morrison, Alice Walker, Gloria Naylor, and Paule Marshall has been both furthered by and worked to undergird the concentration of African American literary theory on vernacular expressive forms that derive from the Southern, rural folk. The leading figures in the field, Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and Houston A. Baker, Jr., theorize the roots of African American literature in vernacular forms like signifying, call and response, and the blues.<sup>6</sup> While these vernacular forms are the basis of an African American literary intertextuality that spans the history of this tradition, there are, as in any tradition, sites of both commonality and difference where texts participate in and/or dissent from established patterns and forms. Current vernacular theories of African American literature have productively attended to the vernacular soundings of the tradition, but perhaps done so, it seems to me, at the expense of other narrative strategies that either do not access these forms or do so in ways that have gone unrecognized. Again, I turn to black feminist critics who have scrutinized the current vernacular vogue. Hazel Carby has argued in "Reinventing History/Imagining the Future" that African American theory is currently "recreating a romantic discourse of a rural black folk in which to situate the source of an Afro-American culture" (384). Ann duCille contends that viewing "African American expressive culture . . . through the lens of vernacular theories of cultural production and the master narrative of the blues" has problematic and totalizing results:

. . . such evaluations often erase the contexts and complexities of a wide range of African American historical experiences and replace them with a single, monolithic, if valorized, construction: authentic blacks are southern, rural, and sexually uninhibited. Middle-class, when applied to black artists and their subjects becomes a pejorative, a sign of having mortgaged one's black aesthetic to the alien conventions of the dominant culture. ("Blues Notes" 423)

duCille further argues that the dismissal of African American fiction focusing on the black middle class results in "the construction of 'black' as a unified category and the

erasure of class as a cultural marker" (*Coupling* 8).

In this study I propose that writers like Harper, Hopkins, Fauset and Larsen -- writers marginalized in the African American literary tradition for adopting white values and a bourgeois ethos -- "talk out both sides" of their mouths, parodying the very values they have been accused of colluding with and accessing both "mainstream" and African American narrative strategies to challenge their era's constructions of womanhood and "race."<sup>7</sup> These novelists engage in complex forms of address that at times evoke certain audience responses only to parody them, that forge a sense of community with an African American audience while appearing to appease a white audience, that invoke certain stereotypes and conventions in order to play on them in ways that have often gone undetected. In other words, these writers negotiate two very different American readerships in novels that are arguably ambivalent and certainly multivalent. I would further qualify the nature of the negotiation which I believe these writers undertake, for unlike Mary Dearborn who argues that "[t]he tradition of ethnic female authorship is a tradition of mediation" (33), I read these texts as in fact challenging rather than appeasing audiences, as contesting rather than mediating between the bounds of racial and gender identities.<sup>8</sup> These writers trespass on territory that was fiercely protected and policed in their day and continues to be in our own; they insist upon occupying a certain borderland in between white and black audiences, just as they represent their mulatto characters as passing for and between white and black races, as well as between true and fallen womanhood.

Harper, Hopkins, Fauset and Larsen employ the mulatto figure not as a "whitened" ideal, but as a liminal figure who transgresses racial distinctions and racialized notions of womanhood in order to transform our understanding of them. My

choice of the terms "transgress" and "trespass" are deliberate, and I have in mind Mae Henderson's recent consideration of the productive potential of crossing boundaries:

. . . although "to transgress" literally translates as "to step across," it also carries with it legal and moral connotations -- as in "trespass" -- which are essentially negative. Therefore, breaking down structures of resistance not only speaks to breaching the ramparts that bolster the systems of containment and categorization . . . it also concerns the modifying of limits in order to transform the unknown or forbidden (metaphorical borderlands) into habitable, productive spaces for living. . . . (2)<sup>9</sup>

Harper, Hopkins, Fauset and Larsen, writing at the turn into the twentieth century when African American women continued to be considered "unwomanly" and wantonly sexual, trespass on "true womanhood" by creating mulatto heroines who are often more "pure" and "womanly" than their white counterparts. In their "passing" novels of the late 1920s, Fauset and Larsen also transgress the color line by representing their mulatto heroines as choosing to "pass" for both white and black, moving between racial identities and thereby unsettling "race" as a natural, stable, and self-contained binary.

These writers dramatize the "passing" in which their heroines engage -- be it passing across race or gender lines -- as parodic performances of alternative identities that access and share an affinity with what they seek to contest. I read these texts through Mikhail Bakhtin's and Linda Hutcheon's theories of parody as an ambivalent narrative strategy that is a "double-voiced" and multi-levelled hybrid composed of two orders or voices that are both opposed to, and mutually reinforce, one another. The parody resembles the parodied text, thereby reinscribing its value at the same time it contests that value or hegemony; by the same token, the parodied text lends the parody that seeks to subvert it a certain currency it would otherwise lack. Parody is both destructive and reconstructive, opposes what it resembles, is both critical of and sympathetic to its target. While these African American women's novels lend themselves to the methodologies of

their "distant relations," like Russian formalism and theories of postmodern aesthetic practice. I also read them through their "close kin" in the form of African American vernacular literary theory in order to investigate the ways in which African American cultural forms of expression might "sound" differently in texts that have not readily been considered part of a vernacular tradition.<sup>10</sup> I argue throughout that these parodic performances of true womanhood and whiteness can be read in the context of an African American cultural practice of dissemblance that works to challenge racial hegemony. Moreover, while Henry Louis Gates would confine the African American trope of signifyin(g) to a largely rhetorical strategy, I contend that the heroines of these novels are represented as *enacting* a form of signifying that I call a parodic performance of "true" white womanhood, while the authors also employ signifying as a rhetorical strategy that plays on, contests, and works to revise notions of "blackness" and "whiteness," existing narrative forms, and the reception of their texts. Finally, even though Baker omits Fauset and Larsen from his study of the Harlem Renaissance and refers to Harper, Hopkins, Fauset and Larsen as "departed daughters" in his tracing of an African American women's literary tradition that is rooted in "a Southern vernacular ancestry" (*Workings* 23), I have read Fauset's and Larsen's novels of passing through his theory of an African American "expressive modernity" (*Modernism* 91). Baker details representational strategies he calls "mastery of form" and "deformation of mastery" that have developed in African American literature from Paul Laurence Dunbar and Charles Chesnutt to the "New Negro" writers of the Harlem Renaissance. It is my contention that passing for a true woman can be read as a mastery of form, while passing for white is a combination of both mastery and deformation.

Stuart Hall argues that naturalizing and fixing categories of identity like

"blackness" also entails a policing of its bounds:

. . . . as always happens when we naturalize historical categories, we fix that signifier ["black"] outside of history, outside of change, outside of political intervention. . . . We are tempted to display that signifier as a device which can purify the impure, bring the straying brothers and sisters . . . into line, and police the boundaries -- which are of course political, symbolic, and positional boundaries -- as if they were genetic. (30)

Such policing takes place on both sides of the color line: whites have worked historically to "blacken" biracial individuals in order to ensure white "purity" by assigning everything "other" to "blackness," but African Americans also have a history of at times regarding people of white American and African American descent as "not black enough." In *Negotiating Difference*, Michael Awkward has noted that such border patrol, or acts of policing what is "black" and what might not be "black enough," entails both "border disputes" with the "adversarial racial other," and "intraterritorial responses to the adoption of behaviors, world views, and methods of interrogation which those who seek to determine racial meaning assume are not endemic to their specific cultural place" (3). It is my contention that these novels critique the policing of racial lines by white Americans and African Americans alike. Moreover, I read these writers as foregrounding and interrogating the theories of "race" popular at the turn of the century, theories perpetuating the ideology of racial difference as visible and corporeal.

Chapter 1 traces the codification of "race" in legal decisions as well as "scientific" and popular theories during the period this study spans from the late nineteenth through the early twentieth century. Through legal statutes, individual case rulings, and a variety of theories, white Americans sought to ensure not only a fixed distinction between themselves and African Americans, but also carefully inscribed



African Americans as racially marked and themselves as "unmarked" by implied, though never named, contrast. This chapter provides a historical context for these African American women's novels, detailing not only the naturalization of "race," but also the various conceptions of race as a bodily essence against which these writers theorized race as a construct and an identity or subject position. Further, this chapter, and the study as a whole, also attends to the consequences of racial hegemony in America, for to argue that race is an ideological construct is not to argue that it has no material effects on people's lives -- African Americans fought for their freedom, security, and lives in the face of white Americans' ideological and physical efforts to consolidate a position of power in America. Far from eliding the racial violence and discrimination that accompanied the construction of "race" to further white power, Harper, Hopkins, Fauset and Larsen foreground the material realities of being a black woman in America during the times in which they lived and wrote.

This study proceeds in two distinct and connected movements from the mulatto figure "passing" as a true woman -- which in turn unsettles racial distinctions between black ("fallen woman") and white ("true woman") -- to the mulatto figure passing for white. The ways in which Fauset and Larsen problematize the early twentieth century's conception of "race" and womanhood at the site of their intersection in the mulatto figure develops out of the challenges Harper and Hopkins posed to racialized womanhood in the late nineteenth century. These author's theorizations of "race" as a constructed subject position are inextricably tied to their exposure of gender as a mediated and produced identity. In a culture that continued to conceive of gender in a racialized dialectic that opposed black womanhood as wholly impure to white womanhood as wholly virtuous, Harper, Hopkins, Fauset and Larsen parodied constructions of the "true" and "fallen"

woman.

It is important to note here that while "true womanhood" was a gender identity disseminated through the cult of domesticity during the nineteenth century, its distinctions between white women as physically fragile and morally virtuous, and black women as morally impure and strong enough to withstand menial labor were carried into the twentieth century. While white women were speaking up for the vote and a public voice in the late nineteenth century as "New Women," black clubwomen were both joining the suffrage movement and embarking on a campaign to teach the women of their communities the decorum that whites had effectively yoked to social and political equality. More than this, the lynching of blacks in the South had been "excused" by whites as "just punishment" for the "animalistic" sexuality of the black man that the black woman had failed to correct, and the rape of African American women was similarly explained away as the consequence of the inability of white men to resist the sexual advances of black women. To behave in a quiet and decorous manner might prove that African Americans were as "civilized" as whites, and enable African American men and women to escape the attention of whites who were lynching African American men and raping African American women in the 1890s.

There occurred a resurgence of white on black violence in the lynchings and riots of the "Red Summer" of 1919. While white American women were embarking on an era of "free love" as liberated flappers, African American women were again both fighting ideological battles against dehumanizing stereotypes, and fighting to literally protect themselves and their families from racial violence. The education African American women received in post-secondary institutions is evidence of a continuing belief in stereotypes of African Americans as "uncivilized" and immoral. Karla Holloway

documents the education in propriety young African American women received at Shaw University in the 1940s: "They . . . were taught to speak quietly. Women 'were expected to be ladies . . . . You knew a Shaw girl when you saw one. . . . If there were two or ten of them, you never heard them on the street'" (133). Holloway goes on to recall her own education at Talladega College in the late 60s: "I too was carefully instructed in proper decorum. . . . We were taught how to receive male callers, how to wear proper attire when we went into town, and, especially, how to speak. Our near-silence, 'talking low,' was a value assiduously imparted to . . . us" (133-34). While schools like Vassar were educating young white American women in decorous standards of behavior during this period as well, I would argue that the aims behind these apparently similar educations differed. African American women continued to be confronted with stereotypes of their "lascivity" into the mid-twentieth century, and the lessons Holloway speaks of were directed at refuting such stereotypes. White America certainly had conservative notions of female behavior at this time that were reflected in women's education, but the education young white women received was an indoctrination into stereotypical notions of femininity, not an effort to combat stereotypes. This is an important difference in motivation to keep in mind when considering what on the surface appears to be similar tutoring at white and black colleges in how to behave like a "lady."

For Harper, Hopkins, Fauset and Larsen to represent their mulatto heroines as "true women" during a time in which African American women were believed by white Americans to be the antithesis of the virtuous and pure lady is arguably a political act in itself. Traditionally these authors have been read as undertaking to present "positive images" of African Americans, what Cornel West characterizes as a first-stage response to the stereotypes constructed by white supremacist ideology:

The initial Black diaspora response was a mode of resistance that was *moralistic in content* and *communal in character*. . . . [T]hey proceeded in an *assimilationist manner* that set out to show that Black people were really like White people -- thereby eliding differences (in history, culture) between Whites and Blacks. . . . Second, these Black responses rested upon a *homogenizing impulse* that assumed that all Black people were really alike -- hence obliterating differences (class, gender, region, sexual orientation) between Black peoples. (27, emphasis in original)

I argue that rather than engaging in an assimilationist politics, these African American women writers were in fact inscribing the differences, not arguing for similarities, between the lived experience of black and white American women. While these authors did work to forge a connection with an African American readership, they did so without homogenizing "the" black community in both their representations and forms of address. Harper's *Iola Leroy* and Hopkins's *Contending Forces* depict both a black middle and working class, both Northern urban and rural Southern African Americans. Moreover, as I argue in Chapter 2, they frequently represent African American women of working class and Southern backgrounds as either the equals of their middle-class Northern heroines; or, as is more often the case, as the ideals that surpass their mulatto heroines in character and potential to benefit their communities. In doing so, Harper and Hopkins parody "true womanhood," parodies which I read as foregrounding the extent to which racialized behaviors -- like the propriety associated with whiteness and the "primitivism" associated with blackness -- were hardly "natural" indices of character, but could be adopted by anyone regardless of their class or race.

Representing their fair-skinned mulatto heroines as true women, Harper and Hopkins seem to be extolling and ascribing to white values and ideals. However, the very fact that their heroines are African American and that their most moral and virtuous characters are often working-class, dark-skinned African American women violates those

ideals and challenges the racist ideology upon which they rest. Such a strategy of representation is an act of signifying as Gates defines this trope: "Signifyin(g) presupposes an 'encoded' intention to say one thing but to mean quite another" (*Signifying* 82). Signifying is a trope of indirection and a figure of repetition and reversal: "[Signifying is] a uniquely black rhetorical concept . . . by which a second statement or figure repeats, or tropes, or reverses the first" (*Figures* 49). As I argue throughout this study, Harper, Hopkins, Fauset and Larsen not only signify on or parody constructions of womanhood and notions of racial difference, but also play on stereotypes of the mulatto and the expectations their narratives evoke in both their white and black American readerships.

Most important, perhaps, is an understanding of signifying as a trope that produces meaning through indirection or reversal, but also as a trope of "repetition and revision, or repetition with a signal difference" (Gates, *Signifying* xxiv). These writers signify on their era's notion of womanhood and race in order to revise our understanding of them, but this act of signifying also "functions to redress an imbalance of power, to clear a space. . . . To achieve occupancy in this desired space" (Gates, *Signifying* 124). Harper, Hopkins, Fauset and Larsen consistently inscribe African American women's lived experience in their narratives and in the representation of their heroines who pass for true women; consequently, they clear a space in this gender identity through which black women might assert themselves as subjects over and against the dehumanizing stereotypes they encountered daily. In representing their African American female characters as true and noble women, these authors participate in a black feminist project conceived in the black women's club movement of the nineteenth century. The purpose

of "noble black womanhood" as black clubwomen called it, was not to claim that African American women were no different from white women. Rather, the black women's club movement sought to expose constructions of the wanton black female as the result of a white will to power, and to give African American women an identity in community where their experiences of menial labor, rape at the hands of white men, and necessary self-sufficiency -- experiences that had been judged to be "unwomanly" and the "natural" consequence of their "racial character" -- would not disbar them from womanhood, but would be incorporated into a new "noble" womanhood. The writers on whom I focus in this study access a gender identity reserved for white women not to claim an affinity with a people and their values that had enslaved, dispossessed, and denigrated African Americans, but rather to expose the constructedness of an identity that circulated as "natural." and to refigure it to suit the needs and lived experience of African American women.

Harper's and Hopkins's female African American characters effectively "pass" as true women regardless of their class positions in narratives that represent late nineteenth-century economic individualism and participation in a capitalist economy as routes to African American political, economic, and social equality. However, by the late 1920s and early 1930s Fauset and Larsen were critiquing both white America and the black bourgeoisie through the heroines of *The Chinaberry Tree* and *Quicksand* respectively. In Chapter 3 I argue that Fauset and Larsen parody both primitivism's fetishization of the erotic black female and the bourgeois reification of the lady. Whereas Harper and Hopkins invoked the racial hybridity of the mulatto to inscribe hybridity of another order -- noble black womanhood as a revisioning of true womanhood incorporating African American women's lived experiences and values -- Fauset and Larsen represent the

mulatto figure in their novels as a hybrid of stereotyped womanhood. Both Fauset's and Larsen's heroines "pass" as ladies and vamps often at one and the same time in critiques of the 20s and 30s commodification of black women at the hands of both the black bourgeoisie and the cult of primitivism. Fauset and Larsen parody the idea that their mulatto heroines could be "naturally" ladies or "Jezebels," and simultaneously parody their audiences' expectations based on packaged "blackness" and stereotypes of the mulatto. However, their heroines are unable to see beyond constructions of their racial and gender identities to a view of identity as provisional. Nor are they able to see acts of performing to and against preconceived notions of "character" as potentially liberating and possible avenues to self-definition. I argue that it is this very foreclosure in their heroines' recognition of themselves as disruptive figures that heightens Fauset's and Larsen's critique of their cultural moment. Laurentine Strange and Helga Crane are characterized as liminal figures who clearly unsettle the communities in which they live and between which they travel; however, their own socially imposed belief in stereotypes of "blackness" and womanhood work to self-police both their behavior and the disruptions they pose.

In Chapter 4 I contend that with *Plum Bun* and *Passing*, Fauset and Larsen go on to revise the mulatto figure from a definer of racial boundaries to a figure that crosses borders between white and black and, in doing so, unsettles their fixity. In these novels of passing, Fauset and Larsen foreground the power of "the mulatto" as lying in the impossibility of fully neutralizing or "legitimizing" her racial liminality. This impossibility is built into the definition of "race" at its inception: by defining "blackness" through the one-drop rule and whiteness as an absolute purity, white Americans established a "safeguard" that guaranteed the very "danger" they sought to forestall.

Thomas Otten argues that white Americans effectively constructed "blackness" so that its flexibility was guaranteed: "To construct racial identity so that it can escape detection is to construct it so that it must constantly be worried about" (231). *Plum Bun* and *Passing* represent Fauset's and Larsen's most fully developed explorations of the mulatto figure's flexibility and subversive potential.

From the late nineteenth through the mid-twentieth century, I believe we can trace in African American women's fiction a development of the mulatto as a figure of hybridity that confounds the fixity of "race." The trajectory I propose begins with mulatto heroines who "pass" for true women and culminates in novels of racial "passing." By way of concluding this study, I look briefly at two additional texts written by African American women and published in the 1950s: Dorothy Lee Dickens's *Black on the Rainbow* (1952), and Reba Lee's *I Passed For White* (1955). These works build on and continue some of the representational strategies found in *Iola Leroy*, *Contending Forces*, *The Chinaberry Tree*, *Quicksand*, *Plum Bun* and *Passing*. Perhaps more interesting are the ways in which these texts differ from their predecessors, returning the "passer" to the family and communities they left, and returning to an inscription of the South as a site of discrete value and future possibility that Harper and Hopkins stressed, but Fauset and Larsen moved away from and at times critiqued. These differences from Fauset and Larsen as foremothers are also the similarities these authors share with contemporary African American women writers like Alice Walker, Gloria Naylor and Toni Morrison. It seems to me the line of descent from the domestic novels of the nineteenth century, through the central female novelists of the Harlem Renaissance, to the current renaissance of black women writers is a fruitful one that we have begun to explore and that holds out



further possibilities.

In a study that argues for a politics of positionality when considering "race," I must address my own position as a white woman; to do so I return to the two epigraphs that open this introduction. Hortense Spillers and Patricia Williams speak to the overdetermination and myriad constructions of "blackness" in America. However, regardless of the overdetermination or "invention" of blackness, there is no denying the reality of the daily injustices, inequities, and continued threat of violence that African Americans confront, nor the privilege of safety, access, and constant self-validation that accompany a white skin, my white skin. While keeping in mind such realities, I want also to avoid participating in and perpetuating a discourse of victimage and black anti-will that situates African Americans as objects acted upon by whites as subjects. In contextualizing these works in order to elucidate the radical and revolutionary conceptualization of identities as performative, I have also run the risk of creating a "history" of sorts in which African Americans react against the will to power of white Americans rather than determine their own values and identity. However much these texts confront and challenge stereotypes of "blackness," there remains a significant difference between what Karla Holloway calls "publicly constructed" and "privately authored" identities -- between the manipulations, condescension, and deference Patricia Williams speaks of as so painful to acknowledge, and the agency or will to self-definition that encompasses both communal African American traditions and individual determinations of self. In *Codes of Conduct*, Holloway maintains that "[i]n American culture, and in the imaginative representations of that culture in literature, our compromised environments valorize publicly constructed racial and sexual identities, but they do not support privately authored identities that may be at odds with public

representations" (60). The opposition to "privately authored" identities does not result in their absence, however. Rather, self-determined identities have been built on a rich history of confronting and manipulating constructions of "blackness," as well as preserving both individual and communal identity in African-inflected cultural forms and their new world adaptations. In this study I try to attend to the ways in which these African American writers interrogate constructed identities, as well as explore self-authored ones that defy categories serving the interests of a racialized and gendered imbalance of power.

This study examines white definitions of "blackness" as codified in the rhetoric of legal decisions and "scientific" findings that enabled and sought to justify hegemonic white power and privilege in America, as well as the consistent refusal by African Americans of such attempts to define "blackness" and restrict their lives. I have worked to ground this study in the historical and material realities of how "race" operates in America, while at the same time avoiding a reading of these literary texts as ethnography: however, I am aware that the very fact of my whiteness and my very different experience of "race" colors my reading of these works. I have come to this literature and this field of study, and remained interested in its possibilities simply because I have found both African American literary and critical texts challenging and rich. I neither offer myself as an authority, nor in acknowledging my own positionality claim a degree of objectivity or make apology for my interpretation of these texts. In this study, I have tried to keep alive the issue of who reads, or makes meaning, and from what position. To this end, I foreground constructions of "whiteness" as racially unmarked and "blackness" as marked, and investigate the ways in which these authors may have negotiated the different audiences they necessarily addressed. Crossing borders to pursue readings of these

African American women's novels may be either productive or an instance of what Ann duCille calls "intellectual passing," in which "black culture is more easily intellectualized when transferred from the danger of lived black experience to the safety of white metaphor, when you can have that 'signifying black difference' without the difference of significant blackness" ("Occult" 600). I believe that in some ways it is very likely both, and in taking pleasure in the education this study has afforded me I also take responsibility for its results.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> For other examples of "looking back from Zora" see also: Cheryl A. Wall, "Zora Neale Hurston: Changing Her Own Words," *American Novelists Revisited: Essays in Feminist Criticism*, ed. Fritz Fleischmann (Boston: G.K. Hall, 1982); Marjorie Pryse's introduction to *Conjuring: Black Women, Fiction, and Literary Tradition* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1985); Michael Awkward, *Inspiriting Influences: Tradition, Revision, and Afro-American Women's Novels* (New York: Columbia UP, 1989); Elliot Butler-Evans, *Race, Gender, and Desire: Narrative Strategies in the Fiction of Toni Cade Bambara, Toni Morrison, and Alice Walker* (Philadelphia: Temple UP, 1989); and Houston A. Baker, Jr. *Workings of the Spirit: The Poetics of Afro-American Women's Writing* (Chicago: University of Chicago P, 1991). For studies that work to unsettle such a view of African American women's literary tradition see also: Dianne Sadoff, "Black Matrilineage: The Case of Alice Walker and Zora Neale Hurston," *Signs* 11(1985): 4-26; Hazel V. Carby, *Reconstructing Womanhood: The Emergence of the Afro-American Woman Novelist* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1987); Gabrielle P. Foreman, "Looking Back from Zora. or Talking Out Both Sides My Mouth for Those Who Have Two Ears." *Black American Literature Forum* 24(1990): 649-666; and Ann duCille, *The Coupling Convention: Sex, Text, and Tradition in Black Women's Fiction* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1993).

<sup>2</sup> See: Deborah E. McDowell, "The Neglected Dimension of Jessie Redmon Fauset," *Conjuring: Black Women, Fiction, and Literary Tradition*, eds. Marjorie Pryse and Hortense J. Spillers (Bloomington Indiana UP, 1985) 86-104, and "'That nameless . . . shameful impulse': Sexuality in Nella Larsen's *Quicksand* and *Passing*," *Black Feminist Criticism and Critical Theory*, eds. Joe Weixlmann and Houston A. Baker, Jr. (Greenwood: Penkevill, 1988) 139-67; Cheryl A. Wall, "Passing for What? Aspects of Identity in Nella Larsen's Novels," *Black American Literature Forum* 20(1986): 97-111; Hazel V. Carby, *Reconstructing Womanhood: The Emergence of the Afro-American Woman Novelist* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1987) 163-75; Ann duCille, *The Coupling Convention: Sex, Text, and Tradition in Black Women's Fiction* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1993) 66-109; Thadious M. Davis, *Nella Larsen, Novelist of the Harlem Renaissance: A Woman's Life Unveiled* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana UP, 1994); and Jacquelyn Y. McLendon, *The Politics of Color in the Fiction of Jessie Fauset and Nella Larsen* (Charlottesville: UP of Virginia, 1995).

<sup>3</sup> Hazel V. Carby, "'On the Threshold of Woman's Era': Lynching, Empire, and Sexuality

in Black Feminist Theory," *"Race," Writing, and Difference*, ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1985) 301-16, and *Reconstructing Womanhood: The Emergence of the Afro-American Woman Novelist* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1987) 62-94 and 121-62; Claudia Tate, *Domestic Allegories of Political Desire: The Black Heroine's Text at the Turn of the Century* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1992); Carla L. Peterson, "Unsettled Frontiers: Race, History, and Romance in Pauline Hopkins's *Contending Forces*," *Famous Last Words: Changes in Gender and Narrative Closure*, ed. Alison Booth (Charlottesville: UP of Virginia, 1993) 177-96. "Further Liftings of the Veil: Gender, Class and Labor in *Iola Leroy*." *Listening to Silences: New Essays in Feminist Criticism*, ed. Elaine Hedges (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1994) 97-122, and *"Doers of the Word": African-American Women Speakers and Writers in the North (1830-1880)* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1995) 119-74.

<sup>4</sup> White Southerners used an elaborate naming scheme to indicate fractional quantities of "blackness" and differentiate those with black blood from "pure" whites. "Mulatto" in this grammar denotes an individual with one white and one African American parent. I am, however, using "mulatto" throughout this study not "phenotypically," but in reference to the mulatto figure, a figure of "mixed blood," which was popular in both black and white authored American fiction from the nineteenth through the mid-twentieth century. It is important to make such a distinction in a reading that argues these African American women's novels challenge beliefs that "race" is a quantifiable, biological entity.

<sup>5</sup> See duCille's *The Coupling Convention*, and McLendon's *The Politics of Color in the Fiction of Jessie Fauset and Nella Larsen*.

<sup>6</sup> See Houston A. Baker, Jr. *The Journey Back: Issues in Black Literature and Criticism* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1980), *Blues, Ideology, and Afro-American Literature: A Vernacular Theory* (Chicago: University of Chicago P, 1984); and Henry Louis Gates, Jr. *Figures in Black: Words, Signs, and the "Racial" Self* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1987), *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1988).

<sup>7</sup> I first became aware of this vernacular expression when reading Gabrielle Foreman's essay, "Looking Back from Zora, or Talking Out Both Sides My Mouth for Those Who Have Two Ears," *Black American Literature Forum* 24(1990): 649-66.

<sup>8</sup> Dearborn reads "ethnic" women's texts as both mediated by authenticating prefaces written by whites that work to turn the text into "an historical event" (37), and as texts which work to mediate between dominant and "ethnic" cultures and communities. She argues that this work of mediation is one actively taken up by American "ethnic" writers, and investigates "the author's perception of *herself* as a mediator, working between two cultures" (38, emphasis in original). It is this latter sense of textual mediation that I contest.

<sup>9</sup> On interpretive border crossing see also Henry Giroux, *Border Crossings: Cultural Workers and the Politics of Education* (New York: Routledge, 1992); Michael Awkward, *Negotiating Difference: Race, Gender, and the Politics of Positionality* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1995).

<sup>10</sup> I am borrowing Deborah McDowell's metaphors for Western and African American critical theory in her consideration of future directions African American literary study might take in "Boundaries: Or Distant Relations and Close Kin": "...we must enter the 1990s recognizing that black women's lives are not uniform. More important, they have not developed in a vacuum, but, rather in a complex social framework that includes interaction with black men, white men, and white women, among diverse social groups and subgroups. And our relationships and loyalties to each group are complex and shifting. It follows, then, that we need not fend off 'foreign' methodologies and distance ourselves from different interpretive communities. . . . As members of a wider discursive fellowship that extends beyond ourselves, we are free to have serious dialogue and interaction with any literary theory or critical methodology that has clear rather than contrived implications for a thoroughgoing consideration of black women writers" (54).

## **Codifying and Quantifying "Race" in Turn-of-the-Century America**

The word of law, whether statutory or judge-made, is a sub-category of the underlying social motives and beliefs from which it is born. It is the technical embodiment of attempts to order society according to a consensus of ideals.

Patricia J. Williams, *The Alchemy of Race and Rights*

In July 1857 Abby Guy sued for her freedom and that of her four children in an Arkansas court. The court records state that Abby Guy had been supporting herself and her children by farming and selling her own crops. The Guy family "passed as free persons": Abby's oldest daughter "boarded out" so that she could attend school; and the family "visited among white folks, and went to church, parties, etc., -- [such that one] should suppose they were white" (Catterall 5: 252). Following these accounts of where and how the Guys lived, the court required that the family be presented for physical inspection by the jury, which was to base its decision of whether Abby Guy and her children were black or white, slave or free, on their appearance as well as any testimony offered: "Here the plaintiffs were personally presented in Court, and the judge informed the jury that they . . . should treat their . . . inspection of plaintiffs' persons as evidence" (Catterall 5: 252). Following their "inspection" of the Guy family the jury was told that the Guys, after having lived as "free persons" since 1844 in Arkansas, moved to Louisiana in 1855 where a Mr. Daniel "took possession of them as slaves" roughly two years later, claiming that Abby Guy "came with . . . [him] from Alabama to Arkansas" (Catterall 5: 253). Witnesses for Daniel testified that Abby's mother, Polly, was said to have been "a shade darker than Abby," such that they "could not say whether Polly was of African or Indian extraction" (Catterall 5: 253).

Determining Abby Guy's status and race solely according to her complexion and that of her mother was complicated by the fact that neither woman's complexion was considered white, nor could they be said to be of either African or Native American descent. Consequently, the nature and degree of Abby Guy's "otherness" became the issue in this case. A Dr. Newton was then called to testify on Abby Guy's behalf and, in an attempt to clarify racial distinctions, he cited additional bodily evidence: "the hair never becomes straight until after the third descent from the negro, . . . The flat nose also remains observable for several descents." Daniel countered this testimony by introducing his father's will which "devised Abby as a 'negro girl slave' to his daughter . . . bill of sale . . . 1825, conveying to him, for . . . \$400, . . . ' one negro girl named Abby, thirteen years old'" (Catterall 5: 253). Testimony apparently ended here and the judge then gave the jury the following instructions:

If the jury find . . . that the plaintiffs had less than one-fourth of negro blood in their veins, the jury should find them to be free persons upon that fact alone -- it being prima facie evidence of freedom -- unless defendant . . . had proven them to be slaves. . . . If . . . less than one-fourth negro, . . . defendant can only prove them to be slaves, by proving . . . that . . . plaintiffs are descended from a slave on the mother's side, who was one-fourth negro or more. (Catterall 5: 253)

The jury found in Abby Guy's favor, and the judge ordered that she and her children "be liberated." However, Abby Guy's freedom did not go uncontested by Daniel: he appealed the verdict, and upon appeal Justice C.J. English reversed the initial decision. The basis for Justice English's reversal was the legislature's interpretation of the term mulatto in the Arkansas act regulating suits for freedom. He argued that rather than adhering to the act's definition of a mulatto as "a person . . . not full negro, but one who is one-fourth or more negro," the legislature had "manifestly used the word in a more latitudinous sense, . . . they meant to embrace . . . persons belonging to the negro race, . . . of



an intermixture of white and negro blood, without regard to grades" (Catterall 5: 253). Four years later, in January of 1861, Abby Guy again sued Daniel for her freedom, and again the court required that she and her children be physically examined in order to decide their race. Abby and her children were "permitted" to remove their shoes and stockings, and to "exhibit their feet to the jury" (Catterall 5: 262). Apparently this "evidence" satisfied the jury who ruled in Abby Guy's favor; Daniel's motion for a new trial was overruled. When Daniel filed for appeal, the judgement was affirmed by the court of appeals with the following reason given: "Physicians, whose testimony was introduced, . . . state that the color, hair, feet, nose and form of the scull [sic] and bones, furnish means of distinguishing negro . . . descent. . . . No one, who is familiar with the peculiar formation of the negro foot, can doubt, that an inspection of that member would ordinarily afford some indication of the race" (Catterall 5: 262).

The court records that chronicle Abby Guy's tenuous liberty also reveal that nineteenth-century white Americans' notions of race were at best varied and at worst contradictory. How race was defined, and the race of individuals determined, in American courts has varied not only between colonies and later between states; it has also varied according to the judicial contexts in which race and racial identities were defined and determined, and according to the individual empowered to interpret and apply those laws. In Abby Guy's suit for freedom, race was biological, transmitted by blood, diluted by its mixture to quantifiable fractions, and expressed by such physical characteristics as kinky hair, flat noses, and the distinctive "negro foot." However, in this same case race was also social -- a matter of reputation, personal conduct, and association. Moreover, race was simultaneously a matter of fractional degree as legislated by the state, and interpreted by Justice English as an absolute distinction between "pure" whiteness and the

one drop of "negro blood" that signified blackness. For years, amidst all these contradictions and interpretations, both literal and latitudinous, the Guys' liberty was never secure.

Abby Guy's suit for liberty and similar cases heard in American courts in which racial identities and commensurate social status were decided are instructive in tracing the development of "race" in America. Although the Guy family lived and behaved in their community in a manner that caused their white neighbors and acquaintances to "suppose they were white," a single man's claim that they were his property immediately altered their status and identity from white to "other." And while Abby Guy was clearly neither white nor black but both, the challenge she posed corporeally to a social system built upon the binaries of black and white was silenced and subsumed under the mantle of "otherness." Contained within this "otherness" was a reaffirmation of whiteness as an "original," "natural" state of being against which difference was repeatedly asserted as degrees of "deviance." The courts never codified whiteness directly, but as white Americans debated the boundaries of what they considered to be blackness, they implicitly policed and enforced the limits of whiteness. The courts consistently grounded and "naturalized" definitions of blackness in the body, be it through morphological differences or the attempt to discern fractional quantities of "black blood" by tracing lines of descent. In its efforts to define "race," the American legal system frequently cited "expert" testimony readily available from both academic and popular sources in an era obsessed with classification and the question of racial difference. This nineteenth-century interest in pursuing the nature of what were then considered fundamental and inherent differences between the races lent credence to early "sciences" like phrenology and gave rise to the new American schools of sociology, anthropology, and psychology. These

sciences defined "race" through a biologizing of culture, character, intellect and ability. Physical differences between black and white Americans were extrapolated to differences in civilization, individual and group behavior, adaptability, morality, intellectual ability, personality, and psychology. A legal system seeking to both justify and naturalize the denial of equal rights, freedoms, and opportunities to African Americans based its decisions on racial theories forwarded by sciences that themselves came into being largely because the courts and American society at large needed to legitimate a white supremacist social hierarchy. Legal definitions and scientific theories of race were mutually reinforcing, as they worked to "explain," naturalize, and legitimate the dispossession of African Americans.

## I

The first legal records that specifically deal with race are the colonial laws in which the term mulatto, so open to contestation in Abby Guy's suit, first appears. The first documented written use of this term dates from 1595 (*OED* 10: 68), but as Joel Williamson notes in *New People: Miscegenation and Mulattoes in the United States*, its first appearance in American colonial records occurs in a Virginian ruling of 1644 decreeing that "'A Mulatto named Manuel' was to be a slave" (8). While this ruling indicates that people of biracial descent were living in the colonies by at least the mid-seventeenth century, there was no attempt to legally determine the status of so-called mulatto children until 1662. In that year, Virginia enacted its first anti-miscegenation law, and in the Act of 1662 colonists repealed the long-standing English law of descent which held that a child inherits the father's status: "'Whereas some doubts have arisen whether a child got by an Englishman upon a negro should be free or slave, be it therefore

enacted by this present grand assembly, that all children born in the country shall be bound or free according to the condition of the mother" (qtd in Johnston 167). This act would protect the estates of white American men from claims by their mulatto children, would effectively ensure an increased slave population independent of the European slave trade and later fuel the domestic slave trade, and was an attempt to draw a boundary between white and black.<sup>1</sup> However, it would rapidly become clear to white Virginians that this proclamation required revision in order to exclude all mulattoes from whiteness and its attendant freedoms and privileges.

Maryland recognized earlier than Virginia the threat to "order" involved in allowing mulatto children of white mothers to be free, and moved in its anti-miscegenation Act of 1663 to enslave these children: "And forasmuch as divers freeborn *English* women . . . do intermarry with negro slaves . . . all the issue of such free-born women, so married, shall be slaves as their fathers were. . . . And be it further enacted, that all issues of *English*, or other freeborn women, that have already married negroes, shall serve the master of their parents, till they be thirty years of age and no longer" (qtd in Williams 240). In 1664 Maryland became more punitive, ruling that white women bearing the children of slaves must serve "the masters of their husbands during the lifetime of the husband, and that the 'Issue of such freeborne wommen soe marryed shall be Slaues as their fathers were'" (Williamson 10). Nearly thirty years later, Virginian colonists felt it necessary to publicly denounce these children, who were already deemed the illegitimate offspring of an illegal union and bound out as punishment for their parents' transgressions. And so, in 1691, the Virginia Assembly declared these children "that abominable mixture and spurious issue" (qtd in Jordan 44), and further provided that "whatsoever *English* . . . shall intermarry with a negro, mulatto, or Indian . . . shall

within three months thereafter be banished . . . from the dominion forever" (qtd in Johnston 172-73).<sup>2</sup> Moreover, Virginia developed by far the harshest punitive laws regarding miscegenation.<sup>3</sup> The Act of 1723 not only enslaved the child of "a white woman and an Indian or a negro or mulatto" for thirty years, but also provided for control of future generations: "Where any female mulatto, or Indian, by law obliged to serve til the age of thirty or thirty-one years, shall during the time of her servitude, have any child born of her body, every such child shall serve the master . . . until it shall attain the same age the mother of such child was obliged by law to serve unto" (Catterall 1: 70). The American colonists were not only drawing a color bar that assigned "deviance" to the other side, but were also attempting to physically isolate themselves from the African Americans and Native Americans in their midst. Guarding the borders of whiteness was represented as motivated by neither political, economic, nor psychical concerns; rather, couched as it was in religious rhetoric, the protection of white "purity" was divinely ordained. In messianic form the deity, not the Virginia Assembly, called for the weeding out and punishment of all that was "abominable" and "spurious" in order that the colonists' "errand in the wilderness" be realized.<sup>4</sup>

However, as Ronald Takaki points out, the colonial psyche was indeed at stake in the way white colonists denied and shunned interracial unions and their offspring: "Far from English civilization, they had to remind themselves constantly what it meant to be civilized -- Christian, rational, sexually controlled and white" (12). White Americans reminded themselves by establishing freedom as a privilege attendant solely upon whiteness, and by the early eighteenth century Virginia and Maryland had enforced a racial distinction that would be upheld in most of America. These early acts established a binary opposition of black to white through a corresponding relegation of status -- only

whites were free, all "others" were bond.<sup>5</sup> And since in 1667 Virginia had established an act deeming "black or graduated shades thereof" as the mark of slavery (Catterall 1: 57), all subsequently enslaved mulattoes were effectively black by virtue of their status and complexion -- any middle ground between white and black was legislated out of existence. However, as James Johnston documents, by the late 1700s African Americans so light-skinned they appeared white proved the failure of these anti-miscegenation controls: "A traveller in 1788 reports, 'I saw in this school a mulatto; one eighth a negro; it is impossible to distinguish him from a white boy. . . .' In 1783 another observer reports that in Maryland, 'there were female slaves, who are now become white by their mixture'" (191). Despite repeated and complicated attempts to codify the mulatto's identity as black, biracial individuals continued to threaten the stability of "race" and undermine its authority. The mulatto's polyvalent identity as both white and black is threatening precisely because "race" has been constructed in America as a set of uniform binaries secured by the so-called inherent and absolute difference between white and black.

Since white Americans had been unsuccessful in maintaining the self-control they believed would prove them "civilized," they sought to shift responsibility for all "transgressions" resulting in this biracial "spurious issue" to the servant class. Not only were Native Americans and African Americans "savages" obeying what were believed to be the instinctual forces that white Americans attempted to deny in themselves, but to the servant class was also imputed a life of "uncontrolled desire." In a 1717 South Carolina statute entitled "'An Act for the better Governing and Regulating White Servants [sic]," children of inter-racial relationships were "condemned to servitude for the 'indiscretions' of [their] parents" (Higginbotham 159). As late as the twentieth century, bourgeois white

males were exempting themselves from any responsibility for miscegenation. It became popular among white Americans "theorizing" about the character and characteristics of "the mulatto" to argue, as Edward Reuter did in *The Mulatto in the United States* (1918), that mulattoes were the exclusive result of relationships between "the outcast classes" of "the advanced race" and "the women of the inferior race" (88-90). If the "outcast classes" could not be blamed, slave-owning white men could always be "excused" by a veritable lore detailing the "lascivious" sexuality of black women who, it was said, "everywhere seek sex relations with the men of the superior race . . . [and] feel honored by the attention of the higher class of men" (Reuter 93).

The mulatto's racial "illegitimacy" as neither white nor black, as well as the disruption that illegitimacy poses, are neutralized to a certain extent by concentrating the focus on issues of moral legitimacy. Illegitimate offspring were considered to be the result of immoral and unsanctioned relationships, and the mulatto was thereby relegated to the periphery of society with all social outcasts, banished to a mediating position delimiting the boundaries of race. Consequently, rather than a corporeal manifestation of race's constructedness which reveals, as Henry Louis Gates, Jr. asserts, that "the concepts of 'black' and 'white' . . . are mutually constitutive and socially produced" (21), the mulatto is labelled a "bastard." Any suggestion that race is not a stable and uniform entity is thereby silenced and exiled to the borders of "civilized society." Morality, then, was racialized, gendered, and believed to vary according to class such that bourgeois white women were reified as the keepers of their race's "purity" and propriety, and their husbands and sons permitted occasional indiscretions. African Americans and the working class were deemed to live a life of the body; yet while white bourgeois men might occasionally indulge the body, the mind or reason was ultimately in control. This

opposition between mind and body, between morality and immorality, was used to legitimate a social order in which a moral rationality must govern the self and, by extension, in which only whites were fit for self-government.

Historically, the attempt to define who is black and who is white has been rooted in the body, relying upon an individual's physical appearance and "blood." Significantly, what seems to be the first colonial law decreeing that one's color is evidence of one's status as free or bond arises from the contradiction baptised African slaves embodied for colonists who believed bondage was an appropriate condition for "heathen" and "savage" races. Helen Catterall notes that upon passing the Virginia Act of 1667, "baptism ceased to be the test of freedom and color became the 'sign' of slavery: black or graduated shades thereof. A negro was presumed to be a slave" (1: 57). This law documents the colonists' desire to define themselves through opposition to growing numbers of people of Native and African descent in the colonies during the seventeenth century. Winthrop Jordan locates key changes in the colonists' terminology in the late 1600s: "From the initially most common term *Christian*, at mid-century there was a marked shift toward the terms *English* and *free*. After about 1680, taking the colonies as a whole, a new term of self-identification appeared -- *white*" (52). The rationale for skin color as proof of freedom or enslavement became entrenched rather quickly; by "1709 Samuel Sewall noted in his diary that a 'Spaniard' had petitioned the Massachusetts Council for freedom but . . . 'Capt. Teat alledg'd that all of that Color were Slaves'" (qtd in Jordan 52-53).

The move by white colonists to devise color as "the sign of slavery" *after* slavery had been instituted foregrounds the rootedness of their social order in what Colette Guillaumin calls "the system of marks." Guillaumin notes that such a "system of marks"



accompanies the "social cleavages" for which it is only later called to function as cause: "the mark *followed* slavery . . . and [was] advanced as if 'being black' existed in itself, outside of any social reason to construct such a form, as if the symbolic fact asserted itself and could be a cause" (33). The body's color was used to naturalize social relations in which power was unevenly distributed and accrued to white skin. Moreover, when color was recognized to be an unreliable racial "mark" with growing numbers of fair-skinned African Americans, blood was evoked as a further natural division between white and black. As the end of the eighteenth century approached, the distance between white and black widened. In 1785 Virginia legally defined "a Negro as a person with a black parent or grandparent, a definition generally adopted at that time in the upper South" (Davis 34). Until 1785, a mulatto could possess up to one half African "blood," but with this law's enactment all persons possessing one quarter African blood or more were considered "Negroes" and presumed to be slaves. The statutes that declared one's "blackness" and caused one to be presumed a slave became the "observation" of an ostensibly natural division between whites and "others"; the law only upheld what "nature" had created. Presumption of slavery "arising from color" or "color as *prima facie* evidence of slavery," as this rational appeared in legal records, held sway into the nineteenth century. A preoccupation in the white American mind with what W.E.B. Du Bois has called "grosser physical differences," interacted with the belief that "blood will tell" fed by "scientific" racial theories and "experts," to create an atmosphere in which individuals like Abby Guy and her children could be physically inspected in order to discover tell-tale signs of African blood.<sup>6</sup> This practice of determining racial identity by means of physical inspection continued in some states into the 1920s, as Charles Mangum documents in *The Legal Status of the Negro*:

Where . . . the racial identity of a child is in question, that child may be exhibited to the jury (California 1923; Nebraska 1919). Furthermore, photographs of any one of the kinsmen of the person involved whose relationship is sufficiently close are admissible (Alabama 1928; Virginia 1914), and the same is true of a crayon portrait . . . (Federal court case 1917). Evidence that such persons have kinky hair or some other peculiar characteristic of the Negro is also competent (Alabama 1928). (14)

During the first half of the nineteenth century, however, American courts began to question whether "the African color" alone was sufficient proof of "blackness." Moreover, this uncertainty caused conflicting rulings on racial identity not only between states, but often between courts in the same state and during the same period. While in North Carolina, *Gobu v. E. Gobu* (1802) had reaffirmed the long-held assumption that a black complexion was a sign of slavery and a complexion indicating admixture was not (Catterall 2: 18-19), four years later in the District of Columbia public conduct and reputation were said to outweigh color:

Charles Cavender, a black man, was admitted to testify . . . after witnesses had testified that Charles had acted publicly for eleven years as a free man and was generally reputed as such. Duckett, Circuit Judge, said that . . . although color is *prima facie* evidence of slavery, yet the fact that the witness had, for a long time, publicly acted as free, turned the presumption the other way. (Catterall 4: 159)

The District of Columbia was by no means in agreement on this point, for in 1811 -- just five years later -- color was evoked as the sole deciding factor in an African American man's suit for "assault, battery and false imprisonment." The decision in *Bell v. Hogan* held that "if a colored man was born a slave, his being permitted to go at large . . . and to act as a free man, was no evidence of his being free. . . . The plaintiff's color . . . justified his being taken up under suspicion of being a runaway" (Catterall 4: 164).

From 1819 through the 1840s, New Jersey, Ohio, South Carolina, Delaware, and the District of Columbia held that "color was sufficient" to decide an individual's race and

status. Yet in May of 1835, a judge hearing *State v. Cantey* in South Carolina was required to rule on the race of several men who were presented as witnesses, since only whites could testify against whites in an American court of law. The genealogy of these men was submitted to the court "proving" that they had "one-sixteenth part of African blood"; however, they were also said to be "respectable . . . received into society, and recognized as white men" (Catterall 2: 358). Their testimony was deemed admissible, and the judge ruled that "if . . . the person has been received . . . as white, although there may be proof of some admixture . . . yet such a person is to be accounted white" (Catterall 2: 358). The case was appealed on the grounds that as men of color, their testimony was inadmissible. The court of appeals unanimously dismissed the motion for a new trial with Justice Harper arguing that the witnesses in this case must be regarded as white men: "We cannot say what admixture . . . will make a colored person. . . . The condition . . . is not to be determined solely by . . . visible mixture . . . but by reputation . . . and it may be . . . proper, that a man of worth . . . should have the rank of a white man, while a vagabond of the same degree of blood should be confined to the inferior caste. . . . It is hardly necessary to say that a slave cannot be a white man" (Catterall 2: 359).

Eight years later in South Carolina, a case deciding the race of Thomas, John, and Harry Johnson for taxation purposes evoked this type of reasoning. Although the Johnsons' great grandfather was "a colored man," the judge instructed the jury to give reputation at least as much weight as they would genealogy: "Color . . . ought to be compared with all the circumstances . . . and if the jury were satisfied that the color, blood, and reception in society, would justify them in rating the relators as free white men, they had a right to do so . . . [W]hen men had been acknowledged as white men, and allowed all their privileges, it was bad policy to degrade them to the condition of free

negroes" (Catterall 2: 385-86). The jury found the Johnsons to be white men and exempt from the taxes to which free persons of color were subject. These rulings reveal that considering reputation alongside genealogy at times resulted in a legal definition of race as reputation overriding popular biological notions of race ("degree of blood") and its expression ("visible mixture"). However, this construction of race holds only when the racial identity in contention is that of an individual believed to be of African descent; as Judge Harper concluded, "It is *hardly necessary* to say that a slave cannot be a white man." be that white man a "vagabond" or of rank. The practice of deciding racial identity by considering a person's reputation continued through the early 1840s in the District of Columbia and the state of Delaware; in fact, in all cases, reputation was said to override complexion and other physical features, and at times reputation even outweighed genealogy.<sup>7</sup>

The additional consideration of an individual's reputation in determining race was the result of a growing concern that color might be, in fact, a fallible test given the increasing numbers of Americans of biracial descent, slave and free. In Louisiana and South Carolina, states with an established tradition of valuing their "free colored" population and maintaining good relations between whites and free persons of color, whites agitated against "social and legal definitions of blackness that bred a class of persons visibly black but legally white" (Williamson 65). Newspapers frequently called for the exile of all free people of color from these states.<sup>8</sup> Moreover, to complicate racial definition with further qualifications was not only the result of an increasing fear of slave revolt fuelled by abolitionism, the impending Civil War, and a growing slave population that in many places outnumbered whites, but it also reflected a white Southern emphasis on "purity of blood" that underpinned a threatened social order. White Southerners

wanted to preserve their blood's "purity," and they also believed that white blood would be ultimately responsible for any mulatto-lead insurrection, as a Virginia minister wrote in 1833:

"That the high notions of liberty, the ardent feeling, and proud unbending spirit of the South should be imparted with their [white] blood to the mixed race . . . is what must be expected. Many mulattoes know that the best blood of the South runs in their veins, they feel its proud, impatient and spirit-stirring pulsations; and see themselves cast off and oppressed by those that gave them being. Such a state of things must produce characters fit for treason, stratagem, and spoil." (qtd in Johnston 298-99)

This white fear was expressed in often paradoxical ways during the 1850s and 1860s, as white Southerners attempted to enlist the loyalties of a large free black population that they hoped would intercede in, and diffuse, any slave uprisings. Yet at the same time white Southerners sought an alliance with, and appeared to trust, the free colored population. they also clearly felt threatened by the "other" among them: "between 1856 and 1859 no less than seventeen grand juries saw fit to call attention to the danger from free persons of color" (Williamson 66).

The increased polarization of racial identities continued into the late nineteenth century. Virginia Dominguez, in her study of Creole identity and racial classification in Louisiana, observes that "a near obsession with metasemantics ruled much of the 1880s and 1890s," as the state became "engulfed in the reclassification process intent on salvaging white Creole status" (143). Prior to this period both whites and blacks freely acknowledged that the Creole identity was claimed by members of both races. But during the late nineteenth century, many white Creoles, under pressure of suspected "impure blood," rejected black Louisianians who claimed a Creole identity. In order to secure their threatened social status, white Creoles insisted upon "the exclusive Caucasian composition of the category," established "a number of white Creole organizations . . . to

protect the status of the 'true' Creole," and "actively fought the publication of any book or article that referred to, or even implied," the existence of Creoles of color (Dominguez 146-148). Dominguez's account of the extremes white Creoles went to in order to "purify" their identity is a telling example of how whiteness is constructed through the suppression of "difference, heterogeneity, and multiplicity in the effort to maintain hegemonic relations of power" (Giroux 123). White "being" in this case is clearly dependent upon refining absolute distinctions between black and white.

It seems Southern whites not only feared African Americans so "white as to easily pass for a white man" (qtd in Johnston 192), but they also feared those whites who appeared to sympathize or associate with African Americans. Consequently, they applied the notion of race as reputation and behavior to decide the racial identity of certain white Americans as well. This practice reached a peak in North Carolina's white supremacy campaigns of 1898 and 1900; the result, Joel Williamson contends, was that "by about 1900 it was possible in the South for one who was biologically purely white to become behaviorally black. Blackness . . . had passed on to become a matter of inner morality and outward behavior" (108). In *Following the Color Line*, Ray Stannard Baker relates a report carried by the *Atlanta Georgian*, March 6, 1907, detailing the expulsion of a newcomer from South Carolina who was suspected of being a mulatto attempting to pass for white. The man returned with "a number of reputable white Carolinians" who attested to his "identity as a white man" (52). Neither reputation nor association, but rather this man's status as unknown, aroused the suspicion of white Georgians. White American anxiety over social distinctions was high at the turn of the century, given the influx of immigrants and the diversity they represented. White Americans saw recent immigrants as competitors for employment and as a challenge to the hegemony of whiteness. The

threat of the "white nigger," then, was used as a justification for effectively controlling those whites whose commitment to white Southern economic, political, and social interests was questionable.

Yet however much the racial identity of white Americans may have been disputed in rumors and popular accusations, Americans of African descent remained the sole focus of legal definitions of race. Historically the definition of blackness, not whiteness, has been at issue in American courts, a focus that has actively worked to obscure the historical and cultural contingency of race. If whites are marked in America, it is not by "race" but, as Guillaumin argues of all dominant groups, "by a convenient lack of interdiction" (41). Cases in which reputation or association decided the racial identity of plaintiffs said to be "black" span the years 1811 to 1938, but cluster at the turn into the twentieth century from the 1890s through the early 1900s. North Carolina considered an individual's association with "one race or the other" admissible in determining that person's race in 1892 (Mangum 15; Stephenson 17 & 262).<sup>9</sup> And in 1894, a Texas court admitted as evidence "tending to show that she is a white woman," testimony proving "a woman's first husband was a white man" (Stephenson 17). The state of Alabama also used the race of spouses as a "criterion" to decide race in 1903, and added as admissible evidence proving an individual is a "Negro," testimony "that the person has been treated by a Negro couple as their offspring" (Mangum 263). Kentucky and Oklahoma ruled in 1905 and 1912 respectively, that an individual's attendance of "white schools in their home state or in the state from which they had emigrated" could be considered proof of her or his race (Mangum 15).

The rapid change caused by increasing industrialization and urbanization, as well as an influx of immigrants and a migration of African Americans from rural and Southern

areas to urban centers in the North and South, created a fluid and highly mobile society. These shiftings of place were not only a matter of populations relocating, but also of individuals attaining class positions that had previously been inaccessible. Middle- and upper-class white Americans responded to this greater social mobility with an increased attention to and regimentation of the social. Robert Young observes that bourgeois whites used rigid standards of behavior in an attempt to consolidate their power and position:

As the defining feature of whiteness, civilization merged with its quasi-synonym "cultivation," and thus the scale of difference which separated the . . . races was quickly extended so that culture became the defining feature of the upper and middle classes. . . . These racialized class differentiations offered some consolation and fantasized intrinsic qualities of class during a period when it was patently evident that you could simply buy your way into the middle and upper classes. . . . (95-96)

By racializing class differences American society, built as it was upon individualism and "equality for all" (whites), again attempted to mask through naturalization its social divisions of power so that white Americans could believe their society was ordered around the "natural" divisions of race, not the artificial distinctions of class.

Commensurate with the development of an increasingly narrow definition of whiteness from the mid-nineteenth through the first half of the twentieth century was an expansion of "otherness." This period saw the emphasis shift from what were regarded as external expressions of race like complexion, "grosser physical differences," reputation, and association, to the question of whether "one drop" or fractional quantities of "African blood" would make a person black. White America seemed determined to firmly ground racial distinctions in ostensibly objective judgments of the blood's "purity," rather than base those judgments upon the increasing indiscernibility of how that same blood would "tell." The nation, never having been of one mind when it came to what determined race,



did not achieve a stable racial classification in this period. Both North Carolina and Louisiana vacillated between a fractional and a one-drop definition of race in the early twentieth century. North Carolina had, in 1901, adopted the "third generation inclusive" definition of blackness and extended it in 1908; yet in 1903 a statute regarding school attendance had held that "no child with Negro blood in his veins, 'however remote the strain,' shall attend a school for the white race" (Stephenson 174). And in 1910 Louisiana used the one-drop rule to define members of "the colored race within the meaning of the Jim Crow Law," but also decided that an "octoroon" was not a "colored" person when deciding anti-miscegenation cases: "the term 'Negro' does not necessarily include persons in whose veins there is only an admixture of Negro blood, and . . . it clearly would not be applicable to a person in whom the admixture is as slight that even a scientific expert could not be positive of its presence" (Mangum 5). Yet Louisiana does seem to have had confidence in the ability of its "scientific experts" to discern traces of African blood, for it had already adopted a fractional definition of blackness -- one-eighth -- in 1908 and 1910, and refined that definition to more than one-thirty-second in 1970.<sup>10</sup>

Texas and Kentucky also failed to establish a consensus on their respective definitions of racial identity as late as the 1920s and 1930s. In 1856 a Texas court had already expressed its trepidation of contradictory race and status designations that could result in an individual being considered "white enough" (removed from any African ancestor to the fourth generation) to "be a competent witness against a white person, but following the status of its mother, it would be a slave [sic]" (Catterall 5: 295). By 1925 contradictory racial definitions remained a matter of legal record in this state. Both the school law and the anti-miscegenation statute of 1925 define as black an individual with any African ancestry; however, the penal statute of 1925, in effect to enforce the anti-

miscegenation statute, lists as black those of "Negro blood to the third generation inclusive" (Mangum 8-9). It would have been possible for a Texan court to find a defendant guilty of violating the anti-miscegenation statute, but then be unable to impose any fine or jail term upon that same individual. Kentucky, after having adopted Virginia's classification of one-fourth in 1835, narrowed its definition of blackness to "one drop" in 1911. But in 1932, a Kentucky court ruled that "a person who looks white, has straight hair, is of copper color, and has other characteristics of the white man is not a mulatto within the statute prohibiting the marriage of whites and Negroes or mulattoes" (Mangum 12). While many states moved toward a "one drop" definition of blackness and a "pure blood" definition of whiteness over time, a significant number vacillated in their designations of race. Moreover, while nineteenth- and twentieth-century white Americans generally adopted notions of race as "blood" traceable through genealogy to fractional amounts, there remained states more concerned with that blood's physical "expression."

Perhaps the best example of conflicting notions of what made an individual white or black is a 1910 case deciding the race of a child and her right to attend "the Brookland School, a white institution" in Washington, D.C. (Gatewood 166). Isabel Wall was the daughter of Stephen Wall, a man "'of extraordinarily light complexion,' and his white wife" (Gatewood 166). The Washington, D.C. Board of Education ordered Isabel to "attend a Negro school," but her father petitioned the Court of Appeals to allow her to attend a white school. In order to argue that his daughter was white, Stephen Wall "denied that he himself was 'a colored man' or that he was so recognized by neighbors and friends" (Gatewood 167). The Court countered with "proof" that Mr. Wall was "colored": he had operated "'a pool room in a colored neighborhood, that was frequented

by colored people," and his grandmother was "a very light mulatto woman" (Gatewood 167). They further "estimated" that Isabel possessed "'Negro blood of one-eighth to one-sixteenth,' even though she had blue eyes, blond hair, and an 'unusually fair' complexion" (Gatewood 167). Consequently, the Court decided that Isabel Wall was "colored" and should attend a "colored school" because "complexion and physical appearance had little to do with determining one's racial status. . . . '[P]ersons of whatever complexion, who bear Negro blood in whatever degree, and who abide in the racial status of the Negro, are colored in the common estimation of the people'" (Gatewood 167). The Wall case evoked a number of contradictory notions of race: reputation may decide race, but only when the individual in question is deemed to be "colored" because he or she "abides in the racial status of the Negro"; an "estimation" of the fractional admixture of one's "blood" based on a thorough account of one's genealogy is a more reliable determinant of race than one's appearance, yet it is effectively a moot point since one drop of "black blood" makes one "colored"; and an attempt to evoke the "objectivity" of science by quantifying the racial components of one's blood is given great weight, but ultimately the deciding factor is popular opinion or "the common estimation of the people."

Despite a number of contradictory conceptions of race upheld in American courts, and despite the inability of the nation to come to a consensus regarding what constituted "blackness" and thereby "whiteness," whiteness continues to circulate as "an unrecognized and unspoken racial category" (Carby 39). The courtroom physical inspections with their disturbing echoes of slave auction blocks, the litany of characteristics taken as evidence of African blood, and the idea that blood carried even the most minute trace of a "blackness" so powerful it could not be "overcome" by the white blood that may run "alongside" it in one's veins -- all these criteria used to decide

race reveal a white American notion of race as "natural" and naturalized in the legal decisions that evoked them. Race in America was largely defined bodily, defined not by white bodies but through examining and theorizing about black bodies from "pure African" to "graduated shades thereof." And by using the "other," white America first defined itself by status as "Christian" and "free," and only later by complexion as "white"; most importantly, these self-definitions were made through distinctions of exclusion. Throughout this process of definition, white Americans carefully avoided making reference to their race as configured bodily. When white blood was mentioned, it was reified as an agent of purity, as in this judge's instructions to a North Carolina jury in 1857:

. . . the descendants of negro ancestors become free white persons, not by being removed in generation only, but by that, coupled with purification of blood. . . . [N]o person in the fifth generation from a negro ancestor becomes a free white person, unless one ancestor in each generation was a white person; that is to say, unless there shall be such a purification of negro blood by the admixture of white blood . . . and unless there is such purification it makes no difference how many generations you should have to go back to find a pure negro ancestor; even . . . a hundred, still the person is a free negro. (*State v. Chavers*, Catterall 2: 209-10)

White physical characteristics were rarely mentioned in cases deciding whether a person who "looked" white was "in fact" white; rather the focus centered on the gradual dissipation of African characteristics like the straightening of hair and lightening of complexion. And while the ancestors of a white American might commit "indiscretions," any mention of such behavior was tacitly left unspoken; yet an African American's ancestry, and the behavior and association of those ancestors, figured prominently in deciding his or her identity. When an examination of that ancestry was not possible, the Court's frequent recourse was to consider the individual's conduct and his or her physical appearance.

This repeated insistence upon the discernable presence of "blackness" and the purity of white blood was part of a concerted effort to deny the possibility of a separate racial identity that is neither white nor black, but both. Although America has had a history of recognizing such an identity in some states, it was frequently a matter of status not a matter of race; moreover, to have continued to recognize an intermediary identity, and to do so nation-wide, would have undercut the distinctions between white and black upon which the identity of white Americans had become so dependent. To permit a myriad of racial identities to exist between the binary opposition white Americans had carefully established and preserved, would erode notions of racial purity and the stability of their identity. The power associated with whiteness and seen as an inevitable result of a "natural predisposition" to intelligence, civility, and morality would be exposed as a historical contingency. When proof of its contingency upon a constructed racial binary arose in the form of people who were both white and black, white Americans naturalized the mulatto's identity as black, keeping everything "other" totally removed from whiteness.

Grounding its decisions of identity and definitions of race repeatedly in the body, quite effectively naturalized legal disputes over race. Legal decisions upheld "natural" differences: the law merely "observed" racial distinctions; it did not create them. Obvious contradictions within and between states when it came to defining race were explained as differences in interpretations of what governing bodies had intended in legislation, or as the personal views of presiding justices. Consequently, the ambivalence that foregrounds the constructedness of "whiteness" and "blackness," and the tensions involved in the process of such a construction, were also naturalized as a result of human subjectivity and error that might at times obscure the "objectivity" of upholding an order "fixed . . . by the

Creator himself." The legal system was also reinforced by the nineteenth-century mania for classification. This interest in classification and its application to differences between human beings supported the development of a number of sciences and their theories of "race." Moreover, legal and scientific pronouncements on "race" interacted to enable each other such that scientific "evidence" affirmed the courts' decisions, and the codification of ever-more refined distinctions between blackness and whiteness validated the development of new scientific schools, theories, and studies aimed at "proving" inherent racial difference.

## II

While I have detailed legal definitions of race that spanned the colonial era through the twentieth century, in the nineteenth century there also arose fields of science that were both supported by and furthered notions of "race" as a biologizing of character and culture grounded in the body and its blood. This symbiotic relationship between science and the law as tools of a white supremacist ideology was established earlier in Europe than America; however, the dissemination of a hierarchical classification of human beings according to their physical differences did not arise, as one might expect, with the inception of the slave trade. Rather, as Colette Guillaumin documents, "the process of the appropriation of slaves had *already* been going on for around a century when the first taxonomies that included somatic characteristics appeared: the mark *followed* slavery. . . . The slave system was *already* constituted when the inventing of the races was thought up" ("Race and Nature" 33). It was not until the mid-eighteenth century, with the publication of Linneaus's *Systema naturae* (1735), that human "races"

were "defined" and arguments mounted that attempted to link character with skin color (Gould 35). Only when slavery was established and proven to be a profitable system of human exploitation did Europeans make a concerted effort to "naturalize" freedom and bondage. Slavery had been in practice in the American colonies since Dutch traders first sold Africans to Jamestown planters in 1619. However, white Americans evidently did not find it necessary to use science to justify the hierarchical system of relations resulting from slavery until the nineteenth century, when the connections they had constructed between physical differences and a myriad of "inherent" differences between races began to be developed into "sciences." <sup>11</sup>

Nineteenth-century America, then, saw the influential rise of racial typology, dividing human beings into at least four races according to their differing physical appearance; and of racial determinism, an ideology holding that "the species *Homo sapiens* was composed of distinctive varieties and that the behavior of individuals and groups was to be understood as determined by their place in this natural order" (Banton and Harwood 30). Not only did this ideology explain the behavior of contemporary "individuals and groups," but "by the mid-nineteenth century, racial determinism . . . had become the central key to the interpretation and explanation of *all* human achievements and failures" (Smedley 188, my emphasis). Racial determinism continued to fix all people of African descent as a static, undeveloped race after the introduction and ascendancy of Darwinian evolutionism; moreover, it predictably emphasized the historical advancement of Europeans, and of Anglo-Saxons in particular.

As W.E.B. Du Bois has argued, racial determinism was conceived of and perpetuated in America in service of powerful economic interests, namely those of the planter class and the new industrialists:

In the nineteenth century . . . . the mind clung desperately to the idea that basic racial differences between human beings had suffered no change; and it clung to this idea not simply from inertia and unconscious action but from the fact that because of the modern African slave trade a tremendous economic structure and eventually an industrial revolution had been based upon racial differences between men . . . . (*Dusk* 556)

Indeed, as Du Bois documents in *The Negro*, the cotton trade boomed in the first half of the nineteenth century, from "8,000 bales in 1790 to . . . 4,000,000 bales in 1860" (195). And with this economic boom, the South ceased excusing slavery and began defending it. Slavery was less a moral issue during this period than an economic one; and racial theories that set out to "prove" that African Americans were "naturally" less industrious, less intelligent, less moral, even less human than white Americans proliferated as the domestic slave trade expanded. Moreover, racial determinism functioned to enable white Americans to "justify" the enslavement of black men and women. And with the spread of industrialization, white Americans had recourse to theories that would temper both an increasing labor competition between emancipated African Americans and whites, as well as their fears of a growing black urban population, with a popular and "scientific" lore of so-called African American inferiority.

As reflected in the legal statutes determining racial identity and status, these theories of "race" were insistently grounded in the black body. And when that body's morphology appeared questionable, that is to say clearly neither purely black nor purely white, blood and all it was believed to carry was evoked. Fundamental racial differences in culture and civilization, ability and intellect, morality and behavior, were all imputed to the power of blood -- physical differences were only an external sign of all that blood was believed to determine. This power imputed to blood enabled whites to maintain a belief in their own racial purity, and allowed so-called fundamental racial difference to circulate



as a mystical quality, as an essence. Nineteenth-century racialism arose at a time when the question of human origin seemed insoluble. Monogenists, buttressing their claim with appeals to Christianity and the Bible, argued for a single creation of human beings that might be physically different as a result of their environment, but who were similar in all other respects. On the other hand, polygenists believed that differences in culture and appearance between groups of peoples inhabiting various parts of the world were evidence of separate creations of distinct species. As George Fredrickson has observed, the question over whether there existed a variety of human beings or separate species "meant also . . . the difference between a black man who was inferior to the whites but akin to them, and therefore deserving of affection and a protective social status, and a black man who was more animal than human and could, for most purposes, be treated as such" (84). Consequently the "nature of difference" became the focus of debate, and it took various forms as the century progressed.

Monogenists conceived of humanity as undergoing constant change caused by physical environment, and the notion of "race" this school proposed that seemed most to captivate the white American imagination was the climatic theory of race. It designated hotter climates more suitable for "the Negro," but those whites unwilling to forfeit the Gulf States to black Americans argued that Africa was their "natural" home: "Instead of its being too hot in the South for white men, it is too cold for negroes, and we long to see the day arrive when the latter shall have entirely receded from their uncongenial homes in America, and given full and undivided place to the former" (qtd in Fredrickson 145-46). The climatic theory's claim that whites were suited to cool climates while blacks thrived in hot areas also provided a convenient answer to the dilemma of miscegenation. A popular white folk belief regarding mulattoes maintained that "they cannot stand the heat

of a summer sun" (Williamson 94). Yet many white Americans also believed that the mulatto's "black blood" would find the cold as intolerable as his "white blood" found the heat. Such assertions undoubtedly acted to allay the threat to white racial "purity" that biracial individuals represented, by proposing that "the impure of blood" constituted a temporary and physically weak threat at best.

Polygenists, mounting arguments for distinct and "pure" races, also characterized biracial individuals as "unnatural" hybrids with "weaker constitutions" who were unable to "reproduce" and inevitably fated to die out in America.<sup>12</sup> Other polygenists believed that if mulattoes managed to survive, they would "'revert' to the characteristics of the lower of their two progenitors." Paradoxically, such a "reversion" would represent an advancement for individuals of biracial descent, since most polygenists were also "convinced that mixed-bloods were generally mentally, morally, and physically inferior to either parent group" (Mencke 43-44). Finally, there were also those of this school who believed that the mulatto could survive, but only in an environment suited to his or her black blood. Louis Agassiz, a reputable Swiss biologist who had emigrated to America in 1846 and became a converted polygenist, advised Dr. Samuel Gridley Howe, then President of the American Freedmen's Inquiry Commission, in the summer of 1863 of the mulatto's future in the United States as he saw it: "'the colored people in whom the negro nature prevails will tend toward the South, while the weaker and lighter ones will remain and die out among us [in the North]" (Agassiz to Howe, 9 and 10 August 1863, qtd in Fredrickson 161).<sup>13</sup> Both monogenism and polygenism worked to keep the threat mulattoes posed to "race" and white identity at bay with their arguments of either a stable but inferior "mixed-blood," or an unviable, degenerate "hybrid" doomed to extinction. Moreover, by limiting the mulatto's ability to survive to a region amenable to his or her

black blood, white Americans added a geographical fortification to their construction of "race" that kept whiteness "pure" and at a distance from blackness.

Polygenesis became the racial theory of choice in the mid-nineteenth century with the establishment of the American school of ethnology. Dr. Samuel Morton, president of the Academy of Natural Sciences in Philadelphia and considered the founder of the school of ethnology with his publication *Crania Americana* (1839), was largely responsible for the immense American interest in phrenology -- imputing intellectual ability to skull size and shape -- during this period.<sup>14</sup> Phrenology grew out of the assumption that the brain is the seat of the mind; the size of each region, determined by the contours and size of the skull, was believed to be directly proportional to the level of its function (Stanton 35). Morton predictably "discovered" that whites possessed the largest skulls, and Africans the smallest; and from his measurements Morton concluded that not only were people of African descent far less intelligent than whites, they were also "'joyous, flexible, and indolent'" individuals (qtd in Gossett 59). The residue of polygenist notions like those forwarded by phrenology, proliferated throughout the nineteenth and into the early twentieth century, as theories connecting physical differences with innate and unchanging qualities of character, temperament, and intellect abounded. "Race" was rapidly becoming a socio-biological category. In other words, "race" operated in the nineteenth century and, as Colette Guillaumin argues, continues to operate today "with one foot in the natural sciences and one foot in the social sciences. On the one hand it is an aggregate of somatic and physiological characteristics. . . . On the other hand it is an aggregate of social characteristics that express a group -- but a social group of a special type, a group *perceived as natural*, a group of people considered as materially specific in their bodies" ("Race and Nature" 25). "Race" and all it was used

to explain and justify was expanding in the nineteenth century, while remaining an unchallenged system of relations premised on the unified binary opposition of white over black.

The white effort to mount an ideology of difference that would separate themselves from African Americans was grounded in the body: the courts and the sciences attended to morphological differences in their efforts to maintain notions of fundamental racial difference. Differences of color seemed to most interest white Americans, who believed that one's color was an index to one's character. Moreover, white Americans seemed both fascinated with the possibility that African Americans could become "white" and determined to prove that some vestige of "blackness" would always remain to secure a difference between white and black. Dr. Benjamin Rush, a close friend of Jefferson's, developed a "cure for blackness" in 1797 that involved the pressure of garments that would absorb "'the coloring matter,' friction, depletion through 'bleeding, purging, or abstinence,' fear, 'oxygenated muriatic acid,' and 'the juice of unripe peaches'" (Stanton 13). Rush's "diagnosis" was not an isolated incident, a bizarre "solution" to the American "race problem"; neither was its popular appeal bound to the eighteenth century. P. T. Barnum, knowing a profitable pursuit when he saw it, capitalized on the broad appeal of an agent that would "whiten" African Americans: "In 1850 he hired a black man who claimed to have discovered a weed that would turn Negroes white. . . . Barnum . . . trumpeted this discovery as the solution to the slavery problem, while the newspapers daily reported any changes in the black man's hue" (Lott 77).

Despite its popularity, the "whitening" of African Americans was also a possibility white Americans desired to see refuted. In 1906 Robert Bennet Bean, an

complexion and one's abilities and character. Bennet Bean's study concluded that mulattoes inherited "'all the bad of both black and white'" in personality and tendency (qtd in Mencke 59-60). While Rush and Barnum might entice the white American public with promises of a "whitened" African American population, that same culture had vested interests in studies such as Bennet Bean's that affirmed those whitened by whatever means would remain, one way or another, in their designated place. White Americans seemed fascinated with the possibility of racial transmutation; but when they were physically confronted with it in the form of biraciality, they consistently redrew the line keeping whiteness "pure" and all else other.

For white Americans, physical differences like complexion quickly became only the external signs of a myriad of more subtle racial differences, ranging widely through individual abilities, intellect, character, and behavior, to the collective characteristics of races. A proliferation of racial classifications based on comparative morphology resulted from the political climate of the mid-nineteenth century; the only agreement "scientists" seemed able to reach was that the white and black races were inherently different, and that these differences supported the racial hierarchy in place that affirmed white supremacy. Even though Darwinian evolution was revolutionizing a number of sciences in America in the late nineteenth century, there existed a prevalent tendency to pursue an insistence upon inherent and unchanging differences between races. Such disciplines as physical anthropology, for example, greatly influenced popular conceptions of "race." The major areas of interest in physical anthropology in the late nineteenth century betray a firm belief in the efficacy of polygenism, or separate creations of distinct races, as John Mencke observes:

. . . the idea that cultural differences among men were the direct product of differences in their racial physical structure; the assumption that these

. . . the idea that cultural differences among men were the direct product of differences in their racial physical structure; the assumption that these distinguishing physical differences were virtually primordial in nature; the idea that the most important of these differences involved the human skull and brain; and the notion that out of the heterogeneity of modern populations one could reconstruct "types" which were representative of the "pure races" from whose mixture these modern populations derived -- all indicated the impact of polygenist elements. (45)

This type of thinking persisted in sociology into the early twentieth century. In an article published in the *American Journal of Sociology* (1901), Charles A. Ellwood, president of the American Sociological Society, stressed "race instincts" and "innate tendencies" in the process of natural selection. In this article Ellwood argues that black children develop the "mental and moral characteristics" of their race independently of social forces, environment, and education: "'The negro child, even when reared in a white family under the most favorable conditions, fails to take on the mental and moral characteristics of the Caucasian race'" (qtd in Mencke 68). Ellwood's inability or refusal to reformulate his theory of child development to take into account the strides Darwinism had made towards acknowledging the powerful effects of environment and the changeability of species is indicative of the interdependence of racial theories. Theories devoted to racial difference frequently relied upon or extended existing theories, such that challenges to established ways of thinking were often stifled.

Belief in the fixed state of African Americans was also maintained by Social Darwinism, a movement that encompassed the late 1800s through the 1920s.<sup>15</sup> The Social Darwinists in America capitalized upon a facet of Darwinian evolutionism that ranked races along a continuum of civilization, "explaining" that so-called savage races were not inherently so, but rather occupied a "primitive" stage along the continuum of physical and cultural evolution (Banton and Harwood 45). At its extreme, Social

Darwinism claimed, counter to Darwinian evolutionary theory, that peoples of African descent were permanently unable to evolve and develop. The foremost figure among American Social Darwinists, Herbert Spencer, contended that the "primitive races" were trapped in a perpetual and permanent childhood of the mind (Gossett 149). Spencer's claims would later greatly influence sociology and child psychology; and his arguments became favored among certain political groups of his day. For example, it became commonplace amongst detractors of Reconstruction policies to claim that such "philanthropy" was wasted on a race fixed at an early evolutionary stage, and that it amounted to an interference in the great struggle for existence and "survival of the fittest."<sup>16</sup> As Audrey Smedley documents, "the latter part of the nineteenth century [erected] an elaborate edifice of social philosophy and theory . . . around the theme of white racial superiority" (251-52). Black laborers were driven out of jobs "to make room for white labor, particularly the new immigrants from Europe"; and the 1880 recession followed by the severe depression of the 1890s worsened not only economic affairs, but also race relations (Smedley 250). In a much broader sense, Social Darwinist tenets worked to help secure "race" rather than class as the determinant of one's position in American society, and sought to present white domination as the predictable outcome of a historical "competition" between races for survival. In fact, as William Toll notes, Social Darwinism created a climate in which many believed that "different races could not coexist in a single society unless the stronger dominated the weaker" (15).

Notions of racial differences in culture were pursued throughout the nineteenth century through the newly established school of anthropology. However, theories of cultural inequality rooted in physical differences did not acquire importance until the latter half of the nineteenth century, when the dominance whites had exercised over

blacks was threatened first with the abolition of slavery, and later with Reconstruction efforts to realize the political rights of African Americans. Nineteenth-century white American minds were fertile ground for the contention that biology dictated character and behavior; we see this not only in nineteenth-century notions of gender difference as disseminated through the cult of domesticity, but also in the amassing of a great number of racial differences touted by nineteenth-century white Americans, be they scientists, abolitionists, clergy, or the general public. This biologizing of character was a cornerstone of the ideology of fundamental racial difference. White Americans busily created placating images of the blackness they had come to fear as capable of reverting to "savagery" at any time: the docile, happy Sambo; the immature and indolent black child/savage; and the ever-adaptable, forgiving, effeminate, and inherently Christian African. The ideology white Americans, from abolitionists to colonizationists and proslavery spokespersons, found most appealing was a sentimental, or romantic, racialism. Developing its black stereotypes from the plantation romances of the 1820s and 30s, romantic racialism often held that African Americans were children who required the protection of whites.<sup>17</sup> These views cut across the political spectrum of white America: proslavery forces used romantic racialism to argue that paternalistic slavery "protected" African Americans; abolitionists maintained that slavery "took unfair advantage of the Negro's innocence and good nature" (Fredrickson 102); and a number of colonizationists called for the return of African Americans to their "native country" to prevent their further corruption in an "alien" culture.

Alexander Kinmont achieved international attention in the early 1840s for his *Twelve Lectures on Man*, which theorized the inherent Christian nature of "the Negro." Kinmont believed that blacks, despite their "undeveloped state," possessed characteristics



that would be desirable for whites to acquire: "'light-heartedness,' a 'natural talent for music,' and, above all, 'willingness to *serve*'" (Fredrickson 105). In fact, though he contended that the white race was currently more developed than "the Negro race," Kinmont believed it was imminently probable that people of African descent would develop a "'later but far nobler civilization . . . return[ing] the splendor of the Divine attributes of mercy and benevolence in the practice and exhibition of the milder and gentler virtues'" (qtd in Fredrickson 105). His assertions were immediately taken up by white clergy and the antislavery movement in the 1840s, and his contention that Africa would be the future home of "a peculiarly Christian and 'feminine' civilization" was capitalized upon by colonizationists in the 1850s (Fredrickson 115). This image of blacks as innately "feminine" also made its way into popular midnineteenth-century antislavery novels like Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1851), and Metta V. Victor's *Maum Guinea, and Her Plantation Children* (1861). However, it was conservative Northerners who largely supported efforts to "return" blacks to Africa where their "natural" Christianity would be fulfilled; and they did so not in the interests of African Americans, but out of a desire for national "purification" and "homogeneity." Northern colonizationists opposed slavery, but did not want blacks to be a permanent and fully participating segment of the American population, nor did they desire the competition of free black labor. <sup>18</sup>

Moreover, agencies designed to aid the freedmen in postbellum America were often composed of white men whose assessment of newly freed African Americans betrayed a biologizing of character. Reverend Horace James, Superintendent of Negro Affairs in North Carolina in 1864 argued against granting African Americans "equality of social condition," citing their inherently "servile" characters and dispositions: "'[Negroes]

always make the most faithful, pliable, obedient, devoted servants that can enter our dwellings" (qtd in Fredrickson 180). Conversely, antebellum scholars also debating the ability of the freedmen to survive, cited an "inherent inclination toward crime, debauchery, and sloth" as causes of an inevitable degeneration of African Americans (Smedley 244). Either African Americans were too effeminate and virtuous to compete with, while remaining uncorrupted by, Anglo-Saxons, or they were "naturally" immoral; regardless of whether white Americans chose to believe in a positive or negative image of blacks in the decade following the Civil War, African Americans were consistently represented as a race forever incapable of standing on an equal footing socially, politically, or economically with white Americans. A great deal of time and energy, then, was invested in "proving" the inferiority of African Americans, an inferiority that was supposedly the self-evident and fundamental distinction between whites and blacks and that, therefore, should have required no elaborate justifications.

Black nationalists agitating for social change in America during the mid- to late-nineteenth century also subscribed to the belief in a "racial character." Using a rhetoric that was undoubtedly intended to counter the white construction of African Americans as "corrupt," black nationalists invoked a number of the tenets of romantic racialism including the idea that races had specific "contributions" to make or were given discrete "missions" fuelled by racial "instinct." Alexander Crummell, a principal spokesperson for Pan-Africanism in nineteenth-century America, believed that each race was essentially unique: "[R]aces have their individuality. That individuality is subject at all times to all laws of race-life. That race-life, all over the globe, shows an invariable proclivity, and in every instance, to integration of blood and permanence of essence" (qtd in Appiah, *Father's House* 10). Crummell was committed to a "Christian civilization" of African

Americans, and viewed races as divinely ordained: "Races, like families, are the organisms and the ordinance of God, and race feeling, like family feeling, is of divine origin" (46). Despite, and perhaps because of, his involvement with the abolitionist movement which was undergirded by a romantic racialism that represented African Americans as perfect Christians with the ability to survive and forgive all, Frederick Douglass opposed the mystical, Christian rhetoric of black nationalists like Crummell. Wilson Moses documents that even though Douglass called out for African Americans to collectively act to advance themselves from the status of an "oppressed nation," he "believed in neither the sanctity nor the permanency of races, and seems to have wasted little time pondering the concept of racial genius" (90).

As did Crummell and Douglass, W.E.B. Du Bois also extolled collective goals toward which he urged African Americans to work, and in doing so he used a spiritualistic rhetoric. In his essay "The Conservation of Races" (1897), Du Bois both defines "race," and invokes the then powerful rhetorical trope of a divine racial mission in the form of each race's "particular message, its particular ideal" (819). Du Bois calls on "the Negro people" to take up their mission, one that "*must* be inspired with the Divine faith of our black mothers, that out of the blood and dust of battle will march a victorious host, a mighty nation, a peculiar people, to speak to the nations of earth a Divine truth that shall make them free" (823). Statements such as these at certain points in the development of his thoughts on "race" have caused scholars to place him in this tradition of "classic black nationalism" with its elements of "mysticism, authoritarianism, civilizationism and collectivism" (Moses 135).

Yet more than any other black intellectual of his time, Du Bois openly grappled with the meaning of race and "the problem of the color line." For Du Bois, writing in

1897, physical differences were a secondary development in the differentiation of "the great races of mankind" who began as nomads, gathered together to form "vast families" and "cities," and eventually "coalesced" into "nations." Du Bois contends that with this gathering together "minor differences" in physical appearance within the nation-families "disappeared," while the "spiritual and physical differences of race groups which constituted the nations became deep and decisive" ("Conservation" 819). Du Bois never defines exactly what these "spiritual" racial differences are, but while the "grosser physical differences of color, hair, and bone" are secondary to them, they are nevertheless usually tied to the body and carried through blood:

. . . yet there are differences -- subtle, delicate and elusive, though they may be -- which have silently but definitely separated men into groups. While these subtle forces have generally followed the natural cleavage of common blood, descent and physical peculiarities, they have at other times swept across and ignored these. At all times, however, they have divided human beings into races, which, while they perhaps transcend scientific definition, nevertheless, are clearly defined to the eye of the Historian and Sociologist. ("Conservation" 816-817)

Du Bois argues that this mysticism of "race" simultaneously transcends, and is based in, the physical: "The deeper differences are spiritual, psychical differences -- undoubtedly based on the physical, but infinitely transcending them" ("Conservation 818). By 1915, when science was just beginning to acknowledge that the physical and intellectual differences between races were neither as vast nor immutable as once thought, Du Bois was contending that there were no measurable differences between "races": "It is impossible to separate the population of the world accurately by race, since there is no scientific criterion by which to divide races" (*The Negro* 232). Instead, Du Bois held that a "race" was a group of people who shared a common history of experience and a common set of ideals. Du Bois's understanding of "race" seems to be inconsistent

through his career. However, I would argue that any apparent lack of consistency indicates Du Bois's willingness to work through his politics while engaged with his community, as well as a strategy of evoking the rhetoric of discourses that were popular and powerful at a given time to serve his own aims and what he perceived to be the common goals of African Americans.

The black nationalist movement was neither uniform in its aims, nor did its most prominent spokespeople agree as to what "race" was or whether races were inherently different. In fact, some of the nineteenth-century racial discourses black nationalists sought to access caused them to risk invoking some of the most negative stereotypes of African Americans in circulation. In *The Condition, Elevation, Emigration, and Destiny of the Colored People of the United States* (1852), Martin Delany argued that African Americans were paralyzed by their "largely developed" religious faith: "The colored races are highly susceptible of religion; it is a constituent principle of their nature, and an excellent trait in their character. But unfortunately for them, they carry it too far" (37-38). Wilson J. Moses observes that black intellectuals often used the transcendental rhetoric of the early nineteenth century in order to be heard by whites. Consequently, he observes, "Martin Delany, Alexander Crummell, Sutton Griggs, and W.E.B. Du Bois . . . all seemed to agree . . . that blacks as a race were sensual, emotional, and 'feminine,' as opposed to the hardy, aggressive and 'masculine' Anglo-Saxons" (25). Undoubtedly the most outspoken on this issue was Alexander Crummell, who saw blacks as a sensual, creative race: "The mind of our people seems to be a hot-bed of rich, precocious, gorgeous and withal genuine plants: -- and if I mistake not, I discover in it all, that permanent *tropical* element which characterizes all . . . 'children of the sun'" (375-76). Associating blacks with a "permanent tropical element" was a potentially damaging assertion for a black

intellectual to make in the nineteenth century, a period rife with stereotypes of the exotic African.

Evidence of the power of "blackness" in white minds is arguably no more apparent than in the racialization of morality in the nineteenth century: while many white Americans considered themselves and especially white women the epitome of propriety, they constructed an image of blacks as the repository of immorality and vice. White Americans sexualized mulattoes to an even greater degree than they did "pure Africans." In *Anthropology for the People* (1891), William H. Campbell referred to mulattoes as "notoriously sensual, treacherous and brutal" (qtd in Mencke 125). Frederick Hoffman, in *Race Traits and Tendencies of the American Negro* (1896), characterized mulattoes as immoral: "Morally, the mulatto cannot be said to be superior to the pure black . . . most of the illicit intercourse between whites and colored is with mulatto women and seldom with those of the pure type" (184).<sup>19</sup> And Robert Bennett Bean wrote in 1906 that mulattoes "'have the sensuality of the aboriginal African, and all the savage nature of the primitives from the wilds of Europe, without the self-control of the Caucasian or the amiability of the negro'" (qtd in Mencke 59).

The white construction of depraved "blackness" in the late nineteenth century was an attempt to somehow "legitimate" or explain away increasing white violence against African Americans. As Paula Giddings documents, many Southern white women were forced to work after the Civil War, while others were joining women's organizations like the Women's Christian Temperance Union which by 1887 supported women's suffrage. By 1890 the National American Women's Suffrage Association was recruiting white women in the South and Southern men were increasingly stressing the importance of "purity and reverence for White women." Historians have speculated that this resistance

on the part of white Southern women to remain "on their postwar pedestals undoubtedly contributed to the rise of lynching in these years" (Giddings 81). As George M. Fredrickson documents, lynching "reached a high point in the 1890s and persisted on a somewhat diminished scale into the twentieth century" (271). A "blackness" that was so powerful that it supposedly overcame the "self-control of the Caucasian" in "depraved" and "criminal" mulattoes, and that "compelled" all African American men to lust for and rape white women, was circulated as a powerful "justification" for the brutal hanging, shooting, or burning alive of black Americans. In an insidious but more physically benign form, the so-called immoral instincts of Americans of African descent "excused" public segregation as well as political and social inequality.

The stereotype of the corrupt mulatto seems to have been a resilient one in both white and black communities. In an article published in *The Journal of Negro History* (1918), Carter G. Woodson subscribed to the belief that miscegenation was largely confined "'to the weaker types of both races'" (qtd in Williamson 117). And E. Franklin Frazier, in *The Negro Family in Chicago*, concluded that the mulatto community in 1920s Chicago had concentrated itself around the "sin street" of Chicago's South Side:

It was the headquarters of the famous "policy king"; the rendezvous of the "pretty" brown-skinned boys, many of whom . . . "worked" white and colored girls in hotels and on the streets; here the mulatto queen of the underworld ran the biggest poker game on the South Side. . . . To this area were attracted the Bohemian, the disorganized, and the vicious elements in the Negro world. (103)

Indeed, the historical insistence within black middle-class communities that its biracial members be able to prove a respectable parentage attests to the power of the "high yellow" stereotype. Access to class-inflected social institutions like churches and clubs are popularly believed to have been determined by color; however, as John G. Mencke

documents, "without qualities of education, wealth, proper family background, acceptable behavior patterns, etc., color itself counted for little" (26). If one could not supply "proper" ancestors or did not behave decorously, one would be denied a place in middle-class black social life.<sup>20</sup>

Running counter to romantic racialism, then, was this equally powerful ideology of criminalized blackness. These ideologies interacted to form one of the strongest currents of thought among white Americans -- a belief in the dual nature of African Americans. Such thinking had its origins in proslavery arguments that insisted African Americans were docile and amiable only while enslaved, and would become uncontrollable and violent if free. As blatantly self-interested an argument as this was, it nevertheless persisted largely unchallenged in various forms and was put to different uses during the first half of the nineteenth century, as Ronald Takaki documents. Coupled with the belief that every black American was "Sambo" was a fear that African Americans were equally capable of reverting to a "savage" state; the two images combined to form what Takaki calls the "black child/savage image." If "Sambo" was too gentle, ignorant, lazy, and irresponsible to pose a threat in cities, factories, and politics, blacks were also potential "savages" who must not be trusted in white neighborhoods or the workplace, and did not deserve the rights of American citizens. In *Social and Mental Traits of the Negro* (1910), Howard Odum described African Americans as inheritors of both African "savagery" and "indolence":

"The tendencies of the present day Negro, his restlessness, his vagrancy and loafing, his love of excitement and sensuality, his bumptiousness, the child and savage elements in his nature, still reflect forcibly the prevalent traits of the Negro in Africa . . . the Negro inherits these chief traits and inherent tendencies through many generations." (qtd in Mencke 68-69)



Such speculations on the "true" character of African Americans were not without influence. Not only were they closely related to basic white opinions and beliefs about black Americans, but they predictably culminated in a "science": in the 1920s psychologists began devising scales to test the "personalities" of races. Measuring "integrity, kindness, courage, unselfishness, reasonableness, refinement, cheerfulness and optimism . . . non-compliance, and finality of judgement" these tests "proved" that African Americans, Native Americans, and Mexicans possessed "inferior" personalities when compared with white Americans (Gossett 376). And mulattoes, because they resulted from the intermixture of what were believed to be two very different races, were "assumed to show restlessness, instability, and all sorts of deviations from a harmonious and well-balanced personality type" (Myrdal 699).

The new "racial personality tests" of the 1920s accompanied post-World War I discrimination against African Americans in the workforce. African Americans were often barred from trade unions during the War; and when the War ended in 1918, white troops returned home, immigration rose, and African Americans were systematically discriminated against from factories to the civil service. President Woodrow Wilson instituted the personal interview and mandatory application photographs for all civil service positions, and blacks who had passed civil servant tests were nevertheless denied employment (Giddings 145-47). Moreover, African Americans who had fought for their country returned home to find that while they had proven themselves loyal citizens willing to risk their lives for their nation, they were not to be accorded political or social equality, nor equal access to employment. Instead, African Americans faced the resurgence of the Ku Klux Klan, with a membership numbering in the hundreds of thousands in 1919. Racism fuelled by increased labor competition in a diminishing

market culminated in the "Red Summer of 1919." As Paula Giddings documents, "more than twenty major racial upheavals occurred in cities from Omaha, Nebraska, to Longview, Texas. The worst riot took place in Chicago, where 37 people were killed, 537 wounded, and hundreds of families left homeless by the burning and destruction of property" (145). This same racism created a white demand for "explanations" of racial differences offered by new and established sciences that would support employer discrimination, public segregation, and white supremacy in general.

All white America had come to "know" about racial differences, be they physical, mental, cultural, or behavioral, cohered in a belief in race as blood itself that spanned the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.<sup>21</sup> While "blood" proves to be the omnipotent image associated with theories of race throughout the history of its construction in America, it became particularly insidious from the 1850s onward. George Fredrickson argues that the mid-nineteenth century saw a rise in "Anglo-Saxon racial pride" and a "concern for continued 'homogeneity'" that was enabled by the so-called scientific race theory it had created (132). That this fierce white "racial pride" coincided with abolitionist agitation and the approach of the Civil War foregrounds an increasing white anxiety over power and the identity it ensured. The overwhelming concerns of white Americans in this period, concerns that would continue in some cases into the mid-twentieth century, were with white racial purity and the effects of miscegenation.

Atavism was a popular fear associated with miscegenation -- this belief raised the spectre of retrogression, of biracial individuals reverting to a "remote type."<sup>22</sup> While white minds feared the potential "retrogression" that they believed black blood carried, they took care to reassure themselves that white blood was, as many white Americans thought, "genius-bearing."<sup>23</sup> A variety of nineteenth- and twentieth-century scientific

studies and popular understandings of the effects of "blood admixture" attribute ostensibly greater intelligence in mulattoes to their white blood, while less significant "traits" or "detriments" are traced to their black blood. Antislavery writings of the 1850s, such as C.G. Parsons's *Inside Slavery, or a Tour Among the Planters* (1855), occasionally praised the mulatto as superior to both blacks and whites: "The mulattoes . . . are the best specimens of manhood found in the South. The African mothers have given them a good physical system, and the Anglo-Saxon fathers a good mental constitution" (qtd in Fredrickson 121). Notably, "blackness" is figured bodily as responsible for "a good physical system," while "whiteness" is credited with reason and the intellect of "a good mental constitution." Such was the case when white Americans wrote on the subject. Civil War craniometric studies of soldiers were frequently cited as "proof" of the effects of blood intermixture upon the size of the skull and brain. A significant degree of white blood was said to "determine a positive increase in the negro brain which in the quadron is only three ounces below the white standard" (qtd in Mencke 40). Craniometry, then, was used in an attempt to claim that while white blood was "responsible" for increased intelligence among biracial individuals, no African American would ever be the equal of a white American.

Such claims continued with the establishment of the new schools of anthropology, psychology, and sociology, and did not abate by the early twentieth century.<sup>24</sup> Early psychological tests were devised and interpreted in the interest of supporting the popular belief among white Americans that the presence of various degrees of white blood in an African American resulted in corresponding degrees of intelligence. G.O. Ferguson's widely quoted 1916 study claimed that "the pure negroes . . . scored 73.3 percent as high; the mulattoes scored 81.6 per cent as high; the quadroons

ability. From 1929 to 1959 the *Encyclopedia Britannica's* section on differential psychology described African Americans as intellectually inferior to whites with this caveat: "the greater the admixture of white blood, the closer does the Negro approach the white in performance" (qtd in Hirsch 39). Perhaps the most bizarre claim to arise in what became a veritable lore about mulattoes was made by the new school of neurology which traced the "mental confusion" of mulattoes to the "strains of blood," both white and black, "running" within them:

Neurologists decided that the electrical signals that control the body run in one direction in white people and in the opposite direction in black people. Mulattoes, obviously, were bound to be a highly confused people. Their signals were hopelessly mixed, and the slightest mixture -- even one drop -- was enough to upset the system and jangle the nerves . . . [making them] a shallow, flighty, and fluttering people. (Williamson 95-96)

This preoccupation with blood as a guarantor of identity and the "essence" of who an individual is marks a shift in "race" from a matter of morphology to an issue of descent. "Race" configured as blood represents "the biological fleshing out of the metaphysical doctrine of the necessity of origins" (Appiah, "Source" 493).<sup>25</sup> Yet white Americans, while they believed one's "essence" was inextricably tied to the "sources" of one's blood, pursued an asymmetrical connection between identity and descent. No matter how distant its "origins," a single drop of "blackness" determined one's identity as "a Negro."

Whites were defining and legislating racial identities according to blood, but they were not the only Americans pursuing notions of racial purity as a guarantor of a group's identity and survival: "blood" and its purity are key concepts of the black nationalism of certain nineteenth-century African American intellectuals. Martin Delany's was one of the earliest black nationalist expressions of the importance of racial purity for the past and

certain nineteenth-century African American intellectuals. Martin Delany's was one of the earliest black nationalist expressions of the importance of racial purity for the past and future success of African Americans: "[A]mong those who have stood the most conspicuous and shone the brightest in the earliest period of our history, there are those of pure and unmixed African blood. . . . The elevation of the colored man can only be completed by the elevation of the pure descendants of Africa" (87). Delany reasoned that if "pure Africans" were accorded equality with whites in America, African Americans of biracial descent could not reasonably be denied equal status and rights. Delany knew that biracial Americans could demand equality by claiming "consanguinity" with their ancestors of "unmixed African blood," but white Americans would never recognize "blood" ties between African Americans and their white ancestors, as well as the rights, privileges, and property that would then accompany such a heritage.

While Delany was clear about the goal he hoped to achieve with his appeal to racial purity, other black nationalists were not and, as a result, appear to be racial chauvinists. Michael Echeruo documents that Edward Blyden's "insistence on 'pure blood'" stemmed from his belief that African Americans had been accorded subordinate status in America not only because of white oppression, but more importantly because of racial intermixture (676). Blyden, who argued through the 1860s that a biracial heritage is detrimental, was openly contemptuous of mulattoes whom he called "'the mixed classes', 'the miscegens', 'the half and three-fourths white *protégés*', and (in several instances) the 'mongrel' breed" (Echeruo 677). Alexander Crummell also developed a reputation for "championing blacks against mulattoes" (Toll 42). Undergirding Crummell's racial chauvinism was the definition he offered in 1860 of "race" as a homogeneity of blood: "a RACE, i.e. a compact, homogeneous population of one blood

ancestry and lineage" (qtd in Appiah, *Father's House* 10). However much Crummell may have argued that he did not disapprove of mulattoes but only of the "Afro-American oligarchy," he would not have included individuals of biracial descent in "the African race" as he defined it.

W.E.B. Du Bois seems also to have used the nineteenth-century preoccupation with blood for his own ends, but to argue for its less than central role in determining "race" and racial identity. In "The Conservation of Races" (1897), Du Bois proffers a definition of "race" that evokes blood as a commonly held criteria of a racial group, but not a requirement; more important to Du Bois is a shared history of lived experience: "What, then, is a race? It is a vast family of human beings, generally of common blood and language, always of common history, traditions and impulses, who are both voluntarily and involuntarily striving together for the accomplishment of certain more or less vividly conceived ideals of life" (817). In this definition Du Bois both evokes and refutes "race" as it was thought of at the turn of the century, making "race" less a matter of blood, and more a matter of consent to common ideals and goals that result from the experience of oppression.

Du Bois would go on to ironize the notion of "race" as solely a matter of blood in *Dusk of Dawn* (1940). In his chapter entitled "The Concept of Race," Du Bois outlines the progression of his thought on "'race' and race problems," and when he comes to tell of his experience as a student at Fisk from 1885 to 1888 he characterizes "race" as a composite of history, economics, and philosophy: ". . . when I went South to Fisk, I became a member of a closed racial group with rites and loyalties, with a history and a corporate future, with an art and philosophy. I received these eagerly and expanded them so that when I came to Harvard the theory of race separation was quite in *my blood*"

(627-28, my emphasis).<sup>26</sup> For Du Bois, blood becomes a metaphor for political commitment, not the carrier of inherent racial traits; racial groups are not natural formations along heritable blood lines, but a group of individuals sharing certain loyalties and a degree of common experience while pursuing similar economic, political, and philosophical goals. Du Bois, a descendant of African, Dutch, and French ancestors, quite likely advocated the idea of "race" as a community sharing political and philosophical commitments, rather than a "purity of blood" because of his own racial heritage and his experiences as a biracial American.<sup>27</sup>

Du Bois's notion of "race" as composed of a number of socio-cultural factors reflects, although it substantially differs from, ethnicity theory that emerged in the 1920s as a challenge to the long-held biologicistic paradigm of "race." Michael Omi and Howard Winant chronicle the several phases of ethnicity theory from the 1920s to the present day, observing that in its insurgency ethnicity theory "suggested that race was a *social* category. Race was but one of a number of determinants of ethnic group identity or ethnicity. Ethnicity itself was understood as the result of a group formation process based on culture and descent" (15). Ethnicity theory did not contest "race" as a viable category of difference, nor did the most significant work that advanced and gave credence to ethnicity theory entirely refute the entrenched biological concept of "race" as a series of heritable traits expressing one's blood. Franz Boas's cultural anthropological work in the early 1900s challenged prevailing beliefs, such as a racial continuum of civilization, and inherent physical and mental differences between races. Boas stressed that culture, intellect, and physical characteristics were malleable and separable from race, and that environment played a greater role in their determination than did heredity. However, while Boas contested the extent to which "race" exerted an influence, he did not

relinquish a belief in race as a biological entity. On the subject of biraciality, Boas wrote in *The Mind of Primitive Man* of mulattoes as though they were a homogeneous group quite distinct from whites and blacks, and speculated on studies that might consider their particular "physical types, their mental and moral qualities, and their vitality" (277).<sup>28</sup>

Du Bois, on the other hand, believed that culture was an aspect of what he called "race"; in fact, he describes race in terms that resemble culture in *Dusk of Dawn*: "rites and loyalties . . . history and . . . future . . . art and philosophy" (627-28). He did not believe that culture and "grosser physical differences" were separable; rather he maintained that they interacted to form racial identity, as Michael Echeruo observes: "Culture may be an index of race, but without the steadying pressure of color, racial identity does not and cannot exist" (683). Du Bois suggested that African Americans advance themselves through creating their own identity; for him, that self-conception was "race": "Turning to real history, there can be no doubt . . . as to the . . . prevalence of the race idea, the race spirit, the race ideal, and to its efficiency as the vastest and most ingenious *invention* for human progress" ("Conservation" 817, my emphasis). For Du Bois, "race" was invention, identity, culture, physical differences, shared history, traditions and ideals, and a matter of volition or consent. Du Bois embraced rather than elided the ambivalence of "race": "Perhaps it is wrong to speak of it [race] at all as 'a concept' rather than as a group of contradictory forces, facts and tendencies" (*Dusk* 651).

Du Bois's conception of "race," then, represents a vanguard in African American thought, for notions of "pure" blackness and racial purity continued to operate in black nationalist rhetoric and to appeal to a great number of African Americans. Blood as an image of race loyalty also figured prominently in Marcus Garvey's popular "Back to



Africa" movement of the 1920s, a movement Du Bois forcefully denounced.<sup>29</sup> Garvey brought his distinctions between "coloreds" and blacks with him from his native Jamaica, and agitated in America for both the formation of a mulatto buffer group between whites and "pure blacks," and a halt to miscegenation. The officers of his organization were required to prove they were "pure African," and were forbidden to marry whites. Moreover, Garvey routinely castigated the NAACP, and its "near-white" African American members like Du Bois and Walter White, calling it a "'bastard aristocracy that they had tried to maintain in this Western world at the expense of the masses'" (qtd in Williamson 160). As F. James Davis observes, Garvey espoused a religious view of race largely unheard since Alexander Crummell's day: "Believing that blacks were God's chosen people, and that Jesus Christ himself was black, he demanded racial purity" (134).

"Race" was a discontinuous "concept" through the nineteenth and into the twentieth century, with groups sharing similar aims unable to agree upon its meaning. Its power rested, and continues to rest, in its ability to naturalize a social and political order in America that was underpinned by, and had at stake, white power and white identity. The naturalizing power of "race" began with a recognition of, and stress upon, physical difference that never ceased, but shifted and developed as white needs changed. White Americans ushered in scientific schools and racial theories to generate this biologizing of a group's abilities, culture, and behavior, a biologizing which found its greatest power in the blood's transmission of "essence." African Americans, on the other hand, mobilized theories of "race" that best suited their political aims and would gain them a hearing. It is hardly surprising that during the nineteenth and through most of the twentieth century white Americans have been unwilling to conceive of race as a social construct. Du Bois's reference to race as an "invention" was certainly unheard of in this period; however, he

was not the only African American to make such an assertion.

African American women novelists at the turn into the twentieth century were also forwarding a new understanding of "race." Frances Harper, Pauline Hopkins, Jessie Fauset and Nella Larsen were foregrounding race and gender as constructions in novels that centered on mulatto heroines. These authors employed the mulatto figure to undermine the investment of both race and gender in a politics of visibility that relied upon the body as an index to identity and character. Playing on notions of race as a matter of blood and how that blood "tells," Harper, Hopkins, Fauset and Larsen created heroines that parody stereotypes of the mulatto and challenge constructions of black womanhood. In a period in which white Americans expended a great deal of intellectual effort and time to secure inherent and immutable differences between themselves and African Americans, these authors were theorizing race and womanhood as performable identities.

## NOTES

1. While miscegenation in the colonial period has been historically attributed to white servants and slaves, preventing the biracial children of the planter class from claiming rights to their white father's estates later became a significant concern for slaveholders. Certainly there were instances in which these children were manumitted, educated, and financially provided for, especially in states like Louisiana; however, these cases were the exception to the white male rule of denying parentage. And while mulatto population figures are scant prior to the first census to enumerate whites, blacks, and people of biracial descent in 1850, the Maryland census of 1755 did enumerate mulattoes: "Living among 108,000 white and 45,000 blacks were some 3,600 mulattoes, or 2.4 percent of the total population, of whom about 1,500 were free" (Williamson 13). The 1850 Federal Census reported that mulattoes "constituted . . . over eleven per cent of the Negro population of the country. Of the total mulatto population, approximately forty per cent were free. . . . Of the free mulattoes, approximately two thirds were in the slave states" (Reuter 116). The most telling statistic to emerge from the 1850 census is the high number of mulatto slaves exported West during the domestic slave trade that accompanied that region's settlement: "In 1850 in . . . Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, Michigan, and Wisconsin, mulattoes actually outnumbered blacks by 24,000 to 22,000, while in the . . . New England and Middle Atlantic states blacks outnumbered mulattoes by about three to one" (Williamson 58).

2. This law reveals the racial classification that held through the pre-Revolutionary era dividing whites from "others," as Joel Williamson documents: "By the middle of the eighteenth century . . . the legal status of mixed bloods was still only loosely defined, though in the white mind they were firmly classed as Negroes and in effect lumped on that side of the race bar. With them was a rather disparate collage of people of Indian and black ancestry, known as mustees, and offspring of Indian and white parents. For the most part, these people grew out of relations with the several hundred Indian slaves taken in each colony in the first few decades of settlement and cast indiscriminately with black slaves and white servants" (13).

3. The laws enslaving all individuals of African descent, and Native Americans taken prisoner in battle as well as their descendants, account in part for the rapid increase in Virginia's slave population from 1715 through the 1750s. The number of slaves imported to the American colonies from Africa had nearly doubled by the mid-1700s compared with those imported in the late 1600s (Williams 544). However, the slave population in Virginia had increased more than four times during this period: "In 1671 they [slaves] were 2,000 strong, and all, up to that date, direct from Africa. In 1715 there were 23,000 slaves against 72,000 whites. By the year 1758 the slave population had increased to the alarming number of over 100,000, which was a little less than the numerical strength of the whites" (Williams 133).

<sup>4</sup> The notion that racial difference was "divinely ordained" did not die with the Puritan founders. In 1842 Ohio courts were still ruling that "all nearer white than black [are] . . . entitled to enjoy every political and social privilege of the white citizens" (Catterall 5: 6). However, Justice J. Read of the Ohio State Court of Appeals used religious rhetoric to argue against such a definition of whiteness: "The word 'white' means pure white, unmixed. . . . Whether a man is white or black, is a question of fact. . . . The two races are placed as wide apart by the hand of nature as *white from black*; . . . to break . . . the barriers, fixed . . . by the Creator himself, . . . shocks us as something unnatural and wrong" (Catterall 5: 6-7).

<sup>5</sup> Colonists originally enslaved Native Americans "taken prisoner in war." However, in the late 1600s colonists began limiting their "service": "'*It is resolved* and enacted that all servants not being Christians imported into this colony by shipping shall be slaves for their lives; but what shall come by land shall serve, if boyes or girles, until thirty yeares of age, if men or women twelve yeares and no longer'" (qtd. in Williams 123).

<sup>6</sup> In North Carolina, a man named Jacobs was indicted in June of 1859 "as a free negro, for carrying fire-arms." Jacobs was convicted, and the judgement affirmed upon appeal, based on "the testimony of an expert." This "expert" was a man named Pritchett, who by virtue of his occupation as "a planter, an owner and manager of slaves . . . more than twelve years, . . . was well satisfied that he could distinguish between the descendants of a negro and a white person, and the descendants of a negro and Indian, . . . [and could] also say whether a person was full African . . . or had more or less than half . . . African blood in him. . . . [Pritchett] stated his opinion that the defendant was . . . a mulatto" (Catterall 2: 226).

<sup>7</sup> See Helen T. Catterall, *Judicial Cases Concerning American Slavery and the Negro*, 4: 199 (*United States v West*, District of Columbia, November 1836); Catterall 4: 227 (*State v Dillahunt, negro*, Delaware, April 1840); and Catterall 4: 228 (*State v Warrington, negro*, Delaware, October 1840).

<sup>8</sup> The March 8, 1856 edition of the New Orleans *Picayune* referred to free persons of color as "'a plague and a pest in our community, besides containing the elements of mischief to the slave population'" and called for their removal from Louisiana (qtd. in Williamson 66). Arkansas and Mississippi had already passed laws that prohibited free persons of color from entering the state. The upper South moved earlier to control its "free colored" population: the Virginia Constitution of 1850 legalized re-enslavement of emancipated slaves if they remained in Virginia longer than a year after gaining their freedom (Stephenson 38-39). These laws frequently left free persons of color expelled from one state, unable to enter another, and all the while under the threat of re-enslavement.

<sup>9</sup> Alabama considered association admissible evidence of race into the 1920s, and

Louisiana did so into the 1930s. See Mangum, *The Legal Status of the Negro*, 262.

<sup>10</sup> Louisiana abolished its one-thirty-second statute in May 1983 in favor of a "traceable amount rule" in the much publicized Phipps trial, *Jane Doe v State of Louisiana*. Susie Guillory Phipps, the great-great-great-great-granddaughter of a French planter and his wife's slave, petitioned the Louisiana courts to change her parents' racial classification to white so that she and her siblings could also be classed as white. Mrs. Phipps had been denied a passport because she looked "white," while her birth certificate listed her race as "colored." And while several of Mrs. Phipps relatives testified that they identified themselves as "colored," Mrs. Phipps claimed that the racial designation on her birth certificate was a shock to her since she had always believed she was white and had "married white." The state's attorneys claimed they were able to prove Mrs. Phipps was "three-thirty-seconds black"; the district court was convinced, and Mrs. Phipps and her siblings were legally designated as black. This decision was upheld upon appeal in October 1983, December 1985, and by the U.S. Supreme Court who refused to hear Mrs. Phipps case in December 1986 (Davis 9-11).

<sup>11</sup> In *The Race Concept*, Michael Banton and Jonathan Harwood contend that despite racial classifications like Linneaus's (1735) and Blumenbach's (1775), "it was only in the nineteenth century that they [Europeans] started to describe men as belonging to races and to maintain that differences between men and peoples stemmed from race" (11). America followed suit, and the nineteenth century saw a flurry of scientific studies of racial differences in both Europe and the United States.

<sup>12</sup> The polygenists' claim that the world was inhabited by different races that were, in fact, distinct species is reflected in the connotation the term "mulatto" acquired in nineteenth-century America. *Mulatto* existed as a term for biracial individuals as early as 1595, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, which notes its derivation from the Spanish for *mule*, the usually sterile offspring of an ass and a mare. However, "mulatto" was originally used "loosely for anyone of mixed race" (*OED* 10:68), and did not take on the connotation of a sterile hybrid until the nineteenth century, and then apparently only in America: "1861 VAN EVRIE *Negroes* 147 The fourth generation of mulattoism is as absolutely sterile as muleism" (*OED* 10: 68). The polygenist argument for supposed mulatto infertility was circular: biracial individuals must be sterile, it was claimed, *because* they were the offspring of two separate species; yet blacks and whites were "proven" to be distinct species because their mulatto offspring were always infertile, since members of the same species would produce fertile offspring. Nineteenth-century white Americans, then, resorted to a tautological line of thinking to argue for "black inferiority" and against miscegenation.

<sup>13</sup> Agassiz's conversion to polygenesis gave this new doctrine a certain authority in the eyes of white Americans, for his reputation was well known before he arrived in the United States to take up a position at Harvard as Professor of Zoology.

<sup>14</sup> Phrenology was developed by Dr. Franz Gall of Vienna in the late eighteenth century, and was popularized by Gall and his students Johann Spurzheim and George Coombe.

<sup>15</sup> Josiah Nott and G. R. Gliddon took up Morton's craniometric work where he left off, publishing their popular and respected *Types of Mankind: or Ethnological Researches* in 1854. Nott's and Gliddon's work may be seen as a precursor to the Social Darwinist claims of the late nineteenth century. They saw the world as composed of "pure races" that were immutable; yet they attributed to whites the ability to develop over time, while they argued that blacks remained fixed at the bottom of the racial hierarchy: "'The higher castes of what are termed Caucasian races . . . have been assigned, in all ages, the largest brains and the most powerful intellect; *theirs* is the mission of extending and perfecting civilization -- they are by nature ambitious, daring, domineering and reckless of danger -- impelled by an irresistible instinct, they visit all climes, regardless of difficulties'. . . Dark-skinned races, on the other hand, were 'only fit for military governments,' and Negroes . . . had never produced a thought above the level of plain narrative" (qtd in Banton 43). The turns in Nott and Gliddon's argument from the physical or biological to a broad stroke characterization of races is clear, as is the motivation behind such "research." Whites, by virtue of their "most powerful intellects" have a "natural mission" to dominate in the name of "perfecting civilization." White aggression is ostensibly beyond their conscious control and is excused as "irresistible instinct," while white domination and enslavement of "dark-skinned races" is constructed as the inevitable outcome of white "nature," as well as the "nature" of the oppressed who occupy their "fit" position in a predetermined racial caste system.

<sup>16</sup> For a summary of such arguments see Fredrickson, p. 255; and Gossett, p. 286.

<sup>17</sup> George Fredrickson notes that plantation romances like "the novels of George Tucker, William Gilmore Simms, James Kirke Paulding, John Pendleton Kennedy, and Nathaniel Beverley Tucker presented slaves who were . . . 'responsive to kindness, loyal, affectionate, and co-operative'" (102).

<sup>18</sup> George Fredrickson and Ronald Takaki make these arguments respectively: see Fredrickson p. 130; and Takaki pp. 69-79.

<sup>19</sup> Fredrickson observes that Hoffman's book was "the most influential discussion of the race question to appear in the late nineteenth century" (249). Hoffman's was hardly a lone

voice to blame black women for miscegenation. In what purported to be a definitive study of "the mulatto," Edward B. Reuter categorically states that black women, not white men, seek out interracial sexual relationships: "In every case the half-caste races have arisen as the result of illicit relations between the men of the superior and the women of the inferior race . . . . There is no mixed-blood race . . . where the mothers of the half-castes are not of the culturally inferior race. While all the advanced races have . . . mixed with the women of the lower race they have not done so with anything like equal readiness" (88).

<sup>20</sup> See also Gatewood, *Aristocrats of Color*, p. 9.

<sup>21</sup> John Blassingame documents a method of sidestepping the New Orleans anti-miscegenation law that underscores such a notion of race. Blassingame states that from 1860-1880 there were a number of inter-racial marriages in New Orleans despite their prohibition. While not a common solution to the law's interdiction, some couples avoided violating it by interpreting "blood," its mixture, and the resulting racial definitions quite literally: "The white cashier of a New Orleans bank, for example, married a Negro woman by transferring some of her blood to himself and claiming to be a Negro" (Blassingame 19).

<sup>22</sup> Nott and Gliddon quote J. Aitken Meigs, medical professor at the Philadelphia College of Medicine, on atavism in their *Indigenous Races of the Earth* (1857): "As long as the blood of one citizen . . . differs from that of another, diverse and probably long forgotten forms would crop out . . . as indications of the past, and obstacles to the assumption of that perfectly homogeneous character which belongs to pure stocks alone" (qtd in Fredrickson 132). Meigs's claims were part of the representation of blackness as primal and prepotent that continued in America through the early twentieth century.

<sup>23</sup> Lothrop Stoddard's *The Rising Tide of Color Against White World-Supremacy* (1920) foregrounds the dependence of white identity upon received notions of "blackness." Black blood's "prepotency" becomes the cornerstone for his appeal to white racial purity as a prerequisite for continued white power. In Stoddard's estimation whites are nothing short of all-powerful in their "pure" state, and this power is traceable to a single element: "That element is *blood*. It is clean, virile, genius-bearing blood, streaming down the ages through the unerring action of heredity, which, in anything like a favorable environment, will multiply itself, solve our problems, and sweep us on to other and nobler destinies" (305).

<sup>24</sup> Psychologist G. Stanley Hall and sociologist Charles A. Ellwood, noting the influential positions mulattoes held in African America, attributed their success to the quality of white blood they inherited. Hall, writing in 1905, stressed that mulattoes had inherited "'more or less of the best Anglo-Saxon cavalier blood, brain, and temper.'" A year later, Ellwood contended that "'good white blood must greatly improve the negroid stock'" (qtd in Mencke

72). This was a common assertion to make in the 1900s; see Reuter, note 8, p. 174.

<sup>25</sup> Appiah is referring here to "the chromosomal structure" of a person as believed to be his or her essence, a refined understanding of "blood" that racial theorists of the period in which I am interested never reached.

<sup>26</sup> Joseph DeMarco observes that Du Bois's conception of "race" in *Dusk of Dawn* "has its greatest emphasis on economic suffering, the sort of suffering that burdens the masses" (75). Du Bois moved, then, in both the course of his intellectual career and in his contemplations of "race" away from an emphasis on the "Talented Tenth" and toward an inclusion of "the folk."

<sup>27</sup> Because of his complexion, Du Bois's identity as an African American was scathingly called into question by Marcus Garvey. Du Bois seems to have been certainly conscious of, and likely sensitive to, such attacks, for in *Dusk of Dawn* he writes of giving up the "courtship . . . [of] one 'colored' girl because she looked quite white, and I should resent the inference on the street that I had married outside my race" (628).

<sup>28</sup> Boas goes on to state that existing studies of mulattoes would not "endure serious criticism." Yet while he refutes these studies, he does not refute their basic premise -- that mulattoes, being biracial, were worthy of study and would exhibit "traits and tendencies" that differed from those of either the black or white race. See Smedley, p. 277; and Mencke, p. 66 regarding Boas's belief in "race" as a biological entity.

<sup>29</sup> Garvey's organization, the Universal Negro Improvement Association, boasted a membership of over four million African Americans by 1921 (Wintz 46). In his article "Back to Africa," published in *Century*, February 1923, Du Bois condemned Garvey for promoting racial division.



**Unsettling "Race" and Womanhood in Turn-of-the-Century America:  
Frances Harper's *Iola Leroy* and Pauline Hopkins's *Contending Forces***

. . . although a female of a darker hue . . . I will virtuous prove.

-Maria W. Stewart, "Mrs. Stewart's Farewell Address to Her  
Friends in the City of Boston. Delivered September 21, 1833"

And when . . . our train stops at a dilapidated station. . . I see two dingy little rooms with  
"FOR LADIES" swinging over one and "FOR COLORED PEOPLE" over the other,  
while wondering under which head I come.

-Anna Julia Cooper, *A Voice From the South* (1892)

In *We Are Your Sisters: Black Women in the Nineteenth Century*, Dorothy

Sterling quotes a Southern freedwoman's story of single-handedly financing her husband's education at the Benedict Institute, a Baptist seminary in Columbia, South Carolina: "'I nebber was no rockin' chair setter,' said Dolly Haynes. . . . 'For t'ree long years I plowed the farm an' sent Paul to de Benedicts 'til he wuz edicated. De briars cut my legs an' de breshes tore my skirt, but I tuck up de skirt an' plow right on 'til I bought my little farm. Paul preached right up to de day he died'" (323). Dolly Haynes's act of "tucking" up her skirt so that it not interfere with her farming challenges the received understanding of nineteenth-century America as a society of "separate spheres." For many women, those not white and/or not of the middle and upper classes, Victorian notions of woman as the "angel of the house" or a "rockin' chair setter" conflicted with their lived experience. Women like Dolly Haynes did not have the luxury of pursuing the "lady-like" conduct and appearance set out by etiquette manuals, nor the luxury of limited encounters with the so-called immoral world outside the home. Rather, Dolly Haynes accommodated her skirt to her labor, her sense of womanhood to her need to support both her husband and

herself. For other working-class black and white women, home was not a "haven" for their husbands returning from work in an alienating marketplace; instead, homes were often the site of their own alienation, complete with insults to their humanity and assaults on their womanhood as they tended other women's kitchens, children, and laundry.

Such women found the attributes of the so-called "true woman" beyond them and their circumstances. Barbara Welter has defined "true womanhood," or Victorian womanhood, as a gender identity that was established through etiquette books, ladies magazines, and religious sermons during the 1820s. Carroll Smith-Rosenberg notes that domesticity or true womanhood, which began as an ideology couched in "religious metaphors" and delivered in sermons, came to be disseminated through "the new languages of science and medicine" from 1840-1860. The nineteenth-century "insistence that women's biology was women's destiny . . . . assumed a far more deterministic form during the 1880s and 1890s (178-70). The ideology of true womanhood continued to dictate women's conduct and relationships between the sexes into the latter part of the nineteenth century, as women continued to be judged largely by the following qualities: "piety, purity, submissiveness and domesticity. . . . Without them, no matter whether there was fame, achievement or wealth, all was ashes. With them she was promised happiness and power" (Welter 21). These sustained attempts to encourage American women to be the "angel of the house" were largely the result of two conditions in nineteenth-century bourgeois life. Women had left their homes during the Civil War to assist in the war effort or to sustain themselves and their families in the absence of working husbands, fathers, and sons. Many of these women, especially those in the South, never returned to the home and their domestic roles following the war either out of

necessity or by choice.<sup>1</sup> The other condition motivating the notion of woman as "light of the home" was a declining Anglo-Saxon birthrate: "[F]or white women between fifteen and forty-four years old, the birthrate dropped from 278 live births per 1,000 women in 1800 to 124 live births per 1,000 in 1900" (Green 30).

White American women found the dictates of true womanhood in conflict with their condition and/or their desires, and clearly resisted and revised this ideology to suit their own aims. The rise and spread of domesticity from sermons to medical manuals and scientific studies is a clear indication of the degree to which women's resistance was perceived as a serious threat to the social order. As Nina Baym argues in *Woman's Fiction*, this resistance and revision was expressed in women's novels throughout the nineteenth century. What Baym refers to as "woman's fiction," Susan K. Harris calls "exploratory" novels, and Mary Kelley names "domestic" fiction are novels that "theorize[d] the middle-class household as a base for newly recognized female power, a space from which women could powerfully influence the world" (Baym xxvii).<sup>2</sup> Whether the cult of true womanhood or domesticity, as it is more commonly called, actually provided women with access to power has been the subject of debate, as have the implications of claiming a feminist use for a gender identity that excluded, by definition, the majority of nineteenth-century American women. However, middle-class black women also invoked and revised the ideology of domesticity in their creation of a "noble womanhood" for African American women; from orators and essayists, to novelists and members of the club movement, they have been criticized by twentieth-century readers for consistently extolling the value of adopting Victorian mores as a step toward "racial uplift."

Wilson J. Moses argues that while the leaders of the late nineteenth-century black women's club movement were genuinely sympathetic to both the middle-class and "the folk," many of these women showed "at the same time a patronizing contempt" for working-class and poor African American women ("Domestic Feminism" 969).

Similarly, Mary Helen Washington reads Anna Julia Cooper's prototypical black feminist work, *A Voice From the South*, as conceding to the ethics of true womanhood, and failing to account for the experience of black women in America: "If there is a serious flaw in this feminist position, it is that it often bears so little relation to the lives of black women of the 1890s, most of whom were sharecroppers, struggling farmers, or domestic servants, few of whom could aspire to anything beyond an elementary education" ("Introduction" xlix). I would argue, however, that neither Cooper nor black feminists like Maria Stewart, Gertrude Mossell, Mary Church Terrell, and Josephine St. Pierre Ruffin were advocating a life of submissive domesticity for black women. Moreover, I would contend that authors such as Frances Harper and Pauline Hopkins, maligned for writing novels like *Iola Leroy* and *Contending Forces* that ostensibly perpetuated both the myth of the "tragic mulatta" and colorism in the black community, were contesting and revising nineteenth-century American notions of "race" and womanhood rather than capitulating to them.

In *The Signifying Monkey*, Henry Louis Gates, Jr. names "Signifyin(g)" the black trope for all other tropes, the trope of tropes, the figure of figures. Signifyin(g) is troping" (81). Gates confines "Signifyin(g)" to rhetorical strategies of "indirect communication" that commonly "turn upon repetition and difference" (79). However, he also identifies parody as a form of "motivated Signifyin(g)": "Motivated Signifyin(g) is the sort in which the Monkey delights; it functions to redress an imbalance of power, to clear a space,

rhetorically. To achieve occupancy in this desired space, the Monkey rewrites the received order by exploiting the Lion's hubris and his inability to read the figurative other than as the literal" (124).<sup>3</sup> While Gates focuses on the verbal, rhetorical forms of signifying employed in the black vernacular, I would argue that physical enactments or performances, as well as their representation in literary texts, could also be considered forms of signifying in this tradition. Harper and Hopkins signify on nineteenth-century womanhood and racial distinctions by using the mulatta figure's performance of true womanhood to indirectly subvert their era's "imbalance of power." However, their characters do not engage in the verbal rhetorical troping of "Signifyin(g)," rather they enact a physical "repetition" of true womanhood with a critical "difference" -- they are African American not white women. Harper's and Hopkins's "true black women" challenge the self-imposed status of the white woman as "lady," reconstituting womanhood through their performances and thereby "clearing a space" for a noble black womanhood.<sup>4</sup>

In this reconstitution of womanhood, their parodic passing as "true" women can be read as performatives in Judith Butler's sense of the performative as constitutive. In *Gender Trouble*, Butler argues that gender is constituted by the performance of behaviors that we consider to be masculine or feminine: "There is no gender identity behind the expression of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very 'expressions' that are said to be its results" (25). It follows, then, that altering the performance will in turn reconstitute the identity which it is believed to express. I read Harper's and Hopkins's heroines through Butler's notion of identity as performative in order to argue that their performative of "true" womanhood that not only challenges the notion that only

white women can be true women, but reconstitutes "true" womanhood as an identity that expresses the lived experiences of African American women.

In *Domestic Allegories of Political Desire: The Black Heroine's Text at the Turn of the Century*, Claudia Tate argues that "repudiating the racist sexual discourse of retrogressionism . . . was crucial to black people's changing their own subjugated social status" (10). While I have documented the dehumanizing mythology of turn-of-the-century racialist discourse that African Americans faced, African American women at this time also encountered a mythology of sexualized black womanhood. The notion of the "fallen" and "immoral" black woman had long been used by white men to "excuse" their rape of black women. Moreover, white men also attempted to defend their lynching of black men by arguing that a black man's "uncontrollable passion" for white women was the consequence of a home life lacking in a womanly, moralizing influence. The mythology of black womanhood, then, was dependent upon establishing the black woman as "lascivious," and simultaneously insisting that she was enough of a "true woman" to be held responsible for not only black but also white masculine morality.<sup>5</sup> Paula Giddings has documented the short mental leap white moralists made from supposed black female "licentiousness" to the ostensible "immorality of the black race":

. . . it was women who were "responsible" for moulding the institution of marriage and a wholesome family life which was the "safeguard against promiscuity" . . . Black women who saw no "immorality in doing what nature prompts," who did not "foster chastity" among their own daughters, were not only responsible for their own denigration but for that of the *entire race*. (31)

Thus, in white minds miscegenation and the violence of rape and lynching became the responsibility of the black woman who, rather than upholding morality within her own

family and encouraging proper behavior in white and black men generally, neglected the duty of her gender and tempted others to sin. Turn-of-the-century books and articles written by whites, and given such titles as "The Negro Problem" and "The Negro Woman: Social and Moral Decadence," argued that black women were failing in their womanly duty to safeguard their race's morality: ". . . the women, who properly should be bulwarks of sobriety and conservatism . . . are . . . [opening] the floodgates of the corrupting sexual influences that are doing so much to sap and destroy . . . [the black race]. The number of illegitimate children born to unmarried negresses is becoming greater every year" (qtd in Guy-Sheftall 42).<sup>6</sup>

This shifting construction of the black woman as both a "temptress" and a potentially civilizing agent who was expected to inculcate her family with Victorian morals permeated white American society. Such a contradictory notion of black womanhood was inherited from the antebellum era. Supporters of American slavery conveniently mythologized the black woman as wholly body, and that body was itself constructed in antebellum America as an unstable one -- a body that was both unsexed and oversexed. This era created a black female body that in travelling from field to plantation manor was materialized differently to serve differing aims and interests: unsexed in the field, and able to work as hard as black men; oversexed in the big house, and a seductress against which her master was supposedly powerless. Moreover, at the same time that white Americans were constructing the conveniently asexual and highly sexualized black female body that as chattel could not possibly be a woman, they were also imposing gender upon that body in selective instances. Enslaved black women donned gender upon entering the master's house, where they were forced to take on the

role of nurturing, womanly caregiver and entrusted with the upbringing of the next generation's "gentlemen."

At times these shifts from unsexed and/or oversexed body and chattel to gendered "woman" were almost instantaneous, though far from subtle. Dorothy Sterling relates the situation many biracial female slaves and free women of color encountered in antebellum Louisiana:

Slaves selected for their grace, beauty and light skins were shipped to the "fancy-girl markets" of New Orleans and other cities. . . . A *plaçée*, light skinned, well educated, chaste, was introduced to society at one of the famed quadroon balls, where attendance was limited to white gentlemen and free women of color. When her charms attracted a "protector," a period of courtship followed. The *maman* and protector signed a formal contract stipulating the support she and her future children could expect . . . . Her sons were taught a trade, while her daughters were trained to be the belles of future quadroon balls. (*Sisters* 27)

Higher prices for mulatto slaves and the *plaçage* system were the consequences of a white male belief that biracial women sought their attentions whether enslaved or free: "It was thought that a rather large proportion of the free colored females, particularly free mulattoes, were unchaste" (Reuter 150). These same "mulattas" and "quadroons" prized for their "chaste" beauty were named "yellow Jezebels," a stereotype that Patricia Morton observes remained as forceful in the twentieth century as did the stereotype of the black mammy: "Included among the visual media's cast was also the 'exotic mulatto,' usually played by a white woman. Like Mammy, this seductive figure flourished especially during the depression era at a time when the public sought . . . fantasies either comical or sexually titillating" (7).

While the white "true woman" was inherently virtuous, the chastity of African American women was a commodity that held good only long enough to attract a buyer.



In fact, despite what white "gentlemen" sought at the quadroon balls -- a light-skinned, educated, and morally pure woman of color -- white Americans believed that women of African descent, while capable of acquiring virtue, were in danger of "reverting" to a so-called inherently immoral state.<sup>7</sup> As Hazel Carby has noted, the cult of true womanhood adhered to popular biological theories of race and "a shared social understanding that physical appearance reflected internal qualities of character" (*Reconstructing* 25). Just as "blackness" had long been a sign of slavery, so too did it become a signal of "fallen" womanhood. Even into the twentieth century most white Americans refused to concede that their notion of womanhood could also apply to African American women, as evidenced by this Southern white woman's statement in 1904: "I cannot imagine such a creation as a virtuous black woman" (qtd in Higginbotham 264).

This woman's reference to the impossible "creation" of a virtuous black woman unknowingly exposes Victorian womanhood as a constructed gender identity. Successfully polarizing the metaphors of sexuality depended upon both the contrast and the impenetrability of each construct; "true" white womanhood depended upon black "fallen" womanhood in a dialectical relationship.<sup>8</sup> While the black woman's body was read as both asexual and overtly sexual, the "cult of purity denied that [white] women had natural sex drives" (Berg 84). Physically and ideologically, the black woman was believed to be everything the true white woman was not. As Hortense Spillers argues, the construct of black woman as body was used to delimit the feminine: "The black American female, whether whore or asexed, serves an analogous function for the symbolically empowered on the American scene in fixing the frontier of 'woman' with her own being" ("Interstices" 86). In an attempt to dispel the myths materializing the

black female (as) body and to claim their womanhood, black women adopted the only other version of "woman" existing at the time, that of a lady. While many turn-of-the-century white women rejected domesticity in favor of "asserting their right to a career, to a public voice, to a visible power" as "New Women," black women sought to acquire the "benefits of . . . [Victorian] womanhood -- respect, freedom from constant menial labor, interpretation as a morally pure human being" (Ammons 7-8). Deborah McDowell notes that "a pattern of reticence about black female sexuality tended to dominate novels by black women, particularly in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Like the club women, black women writers responded to the myth of the black woman's sexual licentiousness by insisting fiercely on her chastity" (141-42).

African American women undertook the recovery of their bodies from the discourses in which, as Spillers contends, "the black woman is reified into a status of non-being" ("Interstices" 76). But they were also fighting to literally protect themselves and their daughters from assault and violation. Anna Julia Cooper spoke of black women's fight for autonomy through the club movement as "'a struggle against fearful and overwhelming odds. . . . The painful, patient, and silent toil of mothers to gain a fee simple title to the bodies of their daughters, the despairing fight . . . to keep hallow their own persons'" (qtd in Carby, *Reconstructing* 3). Cooper foregrounded the white view of black women as commodities nearly thirty years after emancipation, when she delivered this address to the World's Congress of Representative Women at the 1893 Columbian Exposition in Chicago. The work "to gain a fee simple title" to their bodies and identities entailed both effacing the body rendered so grotesque by stereotypes of black female sexuality, and also confronting white Americans with their contradictory notions of the

mythic black female body.

In this world of gendered spheres, for a woman to speak in public was considered a masculine act that necessarily "exposed" the female body to public scrutiny and thereby "unsexed" the speaker. Black women like Maria Stewart, Sojourner Truth, Frances Watkins Harper, Sarah Parker Remond, and Mary Ann Shadd Cary lectured to "promiscuous assemblies" (audiences composed of both men and women) on issues like the abolition of slavery, temperance, voting rights for African American men, and "the woman question." Carla Peterson points out that while these women sought oratory as a vehicle of empowerment for themselves, black women, and the African American community, the lecture hall was a site "of oppression, separating the women from their 'homes' . . . forcing an unfeminine exposure of the body and thus further reminding them of their difference" (19-20). Consequently, these women negotiated a space from which to speak between the poles of a Victorian womanhood based upon the self-effacing female body, and the mythic black female body that continued to be constructed as public and on display.

While their perceived difference from white women caused audiences to be more accepting of their public appearances, it was this "difference" their lectures sought to redress. Sojourner Truth chose to unsettle white American notions of black women by confronting her audiences with their constructions of the black female body. At the 1851 Akron Women's Rights Convention, Truth's famous "Ain't I a Woman" speech was punctuated by her exposed muscular arm; she thereby confronted her audience with the unsexed black female body, all the while arguing that she is as much a woman as they.<sup>9</sup> In contrast, Frances Harper worked to "decorporealize the body" in her speeches to white

audiences who described her as "'quiet,' exhibiting 'feminine modesty; her gestures are few and fitting. Her manner is marked by dignity and composure. She is never assuming. never theatrical'" (qtd in Peterson 122). Yet Harper adopted a far different lecturing style when speaking to African American audiences, performances which Karla Holloway characterizes as "bodied":

Harper's public presentations were known for their drama and flair -- she *rendered* her verse, giving body and dramatic expression to her message . . . . Harper's audiences were often so responsive that her performances in the sanctuaries that frequently served as her lecture halls had to be held outside on the church steps so that she might reach the crowds who had gathered on the grounds of the churchyards. (113-14)

Harper lectured within and against the dictates of Victorian womanhood and the constructs of the black female body. Such mobilizations of gender and the body as constructs are also evident in the black feminism of the club movement, and in the fiction of African American women published at the turn of the century.

The federation of black women's clubs developed as a response to a direct challenge to black womanhood. James Jacks (president of the Missouri Press Association), indignant at the picture Ida Wells-Barnett was painting of the South during her speaking tour of England, wrote an open letter to British anti-lynching organizations in 1895 denouncing her arguments that blamed whites for creating the spectre of the black rapist. This letter, circulated among black women's organizations, claimed that "'the Negroes in this country were wholly devoid of morality, the women were prostitutes and all were natural thieves and liars'" (qtd in Lerner 436). Josephine St. Pierre Ruffin issued a call to action, citing this letter as the veritable last straw: the first national meeting of African American women's organizations (some of which had been formed as

early as the 1830s) was held in Boston in late July of 1895. Out of this convention the National Association of Colored Women was formed in 1896 with Mary Church Terrell as its president. With aims such as "moral education," "mental elevation," and proving their "aims and interests are identical with those of all good aspiring women" (qtd in Lerner 441-42), the NACW seems to have aligned itself with the discourse of domesticity circulated by white Americans.<sup>10</sup>

However, African American women used the club movement and domestic discourse to further the politics of a "noble womanhood." Rather than adopting "true womanhood" wholesale, early black feminists revised its notion of "woman" to accommodate the experiences of African American women. In an 1831 speech published by William Lloyd Garrison's *The Liberator*, Maria Stewart traced her own "spirit of independence" to a devotion to "piety and virtue" (29). She extolled the value of domesticity as a means not an end in itself, encouraging "the daughters of Africa . . . [to] raise a fund ourselves . . . for the building of a High School, that the higher branches of knowledge might be enjoyed by us. . . . Let each one strive to excel in good house-wifery, knowing that prudence and economy are the road to wealth" (37). In 1892 Anna Julia Cooper also argued against limiting women's choices to the roles of wife and mother, and the financial dependence upon a husband that such a role entailed: "I grant you that intellectual development, with the self-reliance and capacity for earning a livelihood which it gives, renders woman less dependent on the marriage relation for physical support" (68). Two years later Gertrude Mossell published *The Work of the Afro-American Woman* (1894). As the title suggests, Mossell advocated education and professional employment for black women in fields like journalism, teaching, medicine,

nursing, and law. Like Cooper, Mossell was quick to point out that Victorian mores seemed illogical and failed to speak to most American women's experience, whether they were black or white:

I may not be orthodox, but I venture to assert that keeping a clean house will not keep a man at home. . . . And you . . . that are being taught daily that it will, might just as well know the truth now. . . . [S]aints are rare and I don't believe that history . . . proves that saintly women . . . *gain men's love oftenest or hold it longest*. . . . I believe that a woman who has a mind and will of her own will become monotonous to a less extent than one so continuously sweet and self-effacing; and I believe history proves it. (119-123)

Mossell seems to have coined the phrase "noble womanhood" (47), which Joanne Braxton argues represented an "inclusive vision . . . [that] applied to working-class women as well as to professionals and homemakers. Moreover, it substituted the value of race-conscious activism for the submissiveness of the lady" (xxxiii).

Black clubwomen of the late nineteenth century took a feminist approach to womanhood, one that grounded "noble womanhood" in the experiences of black women. Rather than solely attending to Victorian ideals of female morality and virtue, these clubwomen "also realized that the realities of black women's lives were in conflict with the major tenets of the cult of True Womanhood" (Guy-Sheftall 156). As Gerda Lerner notes, "there was always a strong emphasis on race pride, on the defense of the black community and home, and on race advancement" in the black women's club movement (437). Yet despite the activities and goals these clubwomen undertook, their endorsements of Victorian mores have been interpreted by twentieth-century readers as attempts to assimilate by adopting a "white is right" policy. Critics charge that many nineteenth-century African American women writers and club leaders perpetuated class

divisions in the black community and distanced themselves from working-class blacks, arguing instead for social equality on the basis of their own similarity to bourgeois whites. However, club leaders like Mary Church Terrell and Josephine Ruffin had an ambivalent opinion of the relevance of Victorian womanhood to a political vision that kept in sight the working-class circumstances of their membership. Terrell believed that women should be politically involved and a strong moral influence in the home; she was also an advocate for working mothers. Ruffin, a middle-class Bostonian, also believed black women were pivotal in the development of a respectable home life that she saw as necessary for racial advancement; yet her experience as editor of *Woman's Era* led her to argue for women's activity in the public sphere. <sup>11</sup>

I would question a number of assumptions implicit in these critiques of the black women's club movement, assumptions that resurface in the negative assessments of turn-of-the-century novels written by black women. This period in African American politics was one in which both conservatism and agitation were advocated in different contexts and for different aims. At times individuals and movements combined both approaches, as did the black women's club movement in its incorporation of insurgent feminism with domesticity. But is this combination of apparent conservatism and political agitation necessarily compromised? The sole import of advocating a "noble womanhood" in the club movement and in the fiction of authors like Harper and Hopkins -- a gender identity that critics have argued reflected the influence of white, genteel standards of behavior -- may not be the pursuit of assimilation on white terms. <sup>12</sup> Rather, novels like *Iola Leroy* and *Contending Forces* problematize the correlation between one's practice and one's identity. In reading for the ways in which Harper and Hopkins unseat identity from the

body and its biology, we might begin to see Harper and Hopkins as undertaking a radical critique of race as a biological entity and refiguring "race" as a subject position. What appears at times to be a concession to Victorian ideals of domesticity and an adoption of white standards of conduct represented in the heroines of turn-of-the-century African American fiction, may instead have been a political strategy of parodic imitation.

Frances Ellen Watkins Harper established an "international reputation as a writer, lecturer, and political activist" (Foster, "Introduction" xxviii). Publishing seven collections of poetry between 1846 and 1891, she earned her livelihood by writing and by lecturing throughout the North and South to white and African American audiences. Taking up the anti-slavery cause in the North before the Civil War, Harper was later active in Reconstruction efforts in the South, and was a "nationally recognized leader in . . . the American Association of Education of Colored Youth, the Women's Christian Temperance Union, the American Women's Suffrage Association, and the National Council of Women" (Foster, "Introduction" xxvii-xxviii). Pauline Elizabeth Hopkins also lectured, though not on the scale Harper had undertaken, and usually on black history. She began publishing short stories in 1900 in the *Colored American Magazine* for which she would later serve as literary editor from 1903-1904.<sup>13</sup> Hopkins was the most prolific African American woman writer at the turn of the century, publishing four novels, seven short stories, essays, articles, and biographical sketches from 1900-1905 (Yarborough xxviii). Hopkins undertook to write fiction as a method of African American self-representation, and she urged others to counter stereotypes of "blackness" in the popular fiction written by whites: "*No one will do this for us; 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, and, as yet, unrecognized by writers of the Anglo-Saxon race*" (14, emphasis in original).

Despite such political commitment, commitment that was praised by their contemporaries. Harper and Hopkins have been either ignored or maligned for some time by twentieth-century critics, and their work is only recently being re-evaluated.<sup>14</sup> Those African-Americanists offering negative assessments of these writers reads as a veritable who's who of leading figures in the field. Houston A. Baker, Jr. categorizes both Harper and Hopkins as "departed daughters" in his critical study of African American women's writing. Writers like Harriet Jacobs, Harper, Hopkins, and their "bone of the bone descendants" Jessie Fauset and Nella Larsen are indicted for "wilfully refus[ing] to conceptualize a southern vernacular ancestry as a site of both consuming violence and discrete value" (*Workings* 23). Baker argues that in the stead of a "southern vernacular ancestry," one that he clearly views as an "authentic" African American heritage, nineteenth-century African American women writers establish a "subjecthood . . . [that] finally comes to mean an implicit approval of white patriarchy inscribed in the very features of the mulatto character's face. The nineteenth-century daughters' departure recapitulates, then, the dynamics of the daughters' seduction" (*Workings* 25).

Harper's and Hopkins's novels -- centering on biracial, middle-class African Americans living in the urban North -- represent a different historical experience than that valorized as "authentic" by Baker. However, they also employ African American cultural expression in ways current African American vernacular and blues literary theory may not account for. Ann duCille argues in "Blues Notes on Black Sexuality" that vernacular theories of African American literature represent "authentic blacks [as] Southern, rural,

and sexually uninhibited" (423). Yet Harper depicts Iola in a Northern, urban setting of a *conversazione* engaging with her mother Marie in the African American vernacular form of call and response:

"My heart," said Iola, "is full of hope for the future. Pain and suffering are the crucibles out of which come gold more fine than the pavements of heaven. . . ."

"If," said Mrs. Leroy, "pain and suffering are factors in human development, surely we have not been counted too worthless to suffer."

"And is there," continued Iola, "a path which we have trodden in this country . . . into which Jesus Christ has not put His feet. . . . Has our name been a synonym for contempt? 'He shall be called a Nazarene.' Have we been despised and trodden under foot? Christ was despised and rejected of men. Have we been ignorant and unlearned? It was said of Jesus Christ 'How knoweth this man letters, never having been learned?'" (256)

Geneva Smitherman defines call and response as a "spontaneous verbal and non-verbal interaction between speaker and listener in which . . . the speaker's statements ('calls') are punctuated by expressions ('responses') from the listener" (104). Iola "preaches" African American suffering and her mother briefly responds to and extends her call.

Iola, though not "preaching" in the African American vernacular, is engaged in what can be regarded as a sermon, for she reinterprets the Gospel in terms of African American experience. Hortense Spillers asserts that similar sermons helped enslaved African Americans envision their liberation: "If the captive could make the Gospel 'speak' his or her own state, then the subversion of dominance was entirely possible" ("Moving" 54). Iola's sermon envisions social and political equality for African Americans in the postbellum, urban North, rather than freedom in the antebellum, rural South, but it is no less a form of call and response because of this context and because it is "preached" by a true black woman. John Ernest contends that "African American self-expression constitutes the subtext of [*Iola Leroy*]" (509). While Ernest observes that

Harper represents this self-expression in the dialect form of slaves' "market speech," I would add that in Iola's "sermon" she also renders the standard English of a Northern, urban, middle-class character in the form of African American vernacular expression.

Invariably the most recurrent criticism of Harper's and Hopkins's work centers on their adoption of white values and standards as represented by their "ladylike," fair-complexioned characters. In her afterword to the Southern Illinois University Press's 1978 edition of *Contending Forces*, Gwendolyn Brooks contextualizes Hopkins's novel, situating it in the political climate of turn-of-the-century America. However, that climate was one of concession, integration, and "enslavement" to white standards says Brooks: "Often doth the brainwashed slave revere the modes and idolatries of the master. And Pauline Hopkins consistently proves herself a continuing slave, despite little bursts of righteous heat, throughout *Contending Forces*" (404-05). Mary Helen Washington points out the constraints under which African Americans wrote at the turn of the century, constraints that entailed "a white audience whose tastes were honed by the sentimental novel and whose conceptions of blacks were shaped by *Uncle Tom's Cabin* . . . a limited black audience who desperately needed positive black role models; and . . . an audience whose notions of female propriety and female inferiority made it nearly impossible to imagine a complex female character" (*Invented Lives* 75). Clearly, in Washington's estimation both Harper and Hopkins failed under such pressures, for she characterizes their work as "trying" and "struggling" in "attempts to give their women autonomy and power." Washington further indicts Hopkins as "a prisoner to an ideology that ultimately supports white superiority" (*Invented Lives* 73-79).<sup>15</sup>

Harper's Iola Leroy and Hopkins's Sappho Clark are indeed biracial heroines whose Caucasian features would enable them to pass for white should they so choose. Iola has long black hair, blue eyes, and her appearance frequently shocks white characters: "'Oh, no, said Dr. Gresham, starting to his feet, 'it can't be so! A woman as white as she a slave?'"<sup>16</sup> Sappho is described as "tall and fair, with hair of a golden cast, aquiline nose, rosebud mouth, soft brown eyes veiled by long dark lashes which swept her cheek, just now covered with a delicate rose flush . . . a combination of 'queen rose and lily in one.'"<sup>17</sup>

Accompanying their "whitened" beauty is the impeccable conduct that was the hallmark of true womanhood. Sappho's employer in New Orleans considers "himself very fortunate to have a woman of her refinement" to act as governess to his children (354). Dr. Gresham, a white doctor tending the Southern wounded during the Civil War, repeatedly refers to Iola as "as white as" himself:

"She is one of the most refined and lady-like women I ever saw . . . She is self-respecting without being supercilious; quiet, without being dull. Her voice is low and sweet, yet at times there are tones of such passionate tenderness in it . . . [her] education and manners stamp her as a woman of fine culture and good breeding." (57)

In addition to her "refined" behavior, Iola's reactions and constitution are selectively "womanly." Iola fends off assaults from white men when she is remanded into slavery:

"One day when he com'd down to breakfas', he chucked her under de chin, an' tried to put his arm roun' her waist. But she jis' frew it off like a chunk ob fire. . . . Her eyes fairly spit fire. Her face got red ez blood, an' den she turned so pale I thought she war gwine to faint, but she didn't, an' I yered her say, 'I'll die fust.'" (41)

Iola is strong enough to defend herself, but Harper also represents Iola as physically weakened by the experience. Iola is forced to resign from her position as a teacher in a

black Southern school during Reconstruction: "[H]er health having been so undermined by the fearful strain through which she passed . . . she was quite unequal to the task. She remained at home, and did what her strength would allow in assisting her mother in the work of canning and preserving fruits" (200). Although Sappho is born after the Civil War, her experience is no less harrowing than Iola's; she is raped by a white man, her father's half brother, and abandoned in "a house of the vilest character in the lowest portion of . . . New Orleans" (260). These events ruin Sappho's health: "I could not do housework, because my constitution is naturally weak" (127).

Sappho and Iola are forced to become self-reliant and independent as a result of their experiences. Protected in the privacy of their immediate families, they are endangered and violated when outsiders view them as publicly accessible because of their African descent. While Harper and Hopkins invoke this distinction between the safety of the private sphere and the danger of the public sphere common in fiction written by white women of this era, their African American heroines' development of self-reliance represents a reversal of that depicted in white domestic novels. Nina Baym notes that in "woman's fiction" a heroine's achievement of "self-dependence is only possible within the boundaries of a peaceful protectorate. She needs protection because she is weaker than a man and cannot fight -- more precisely, cannot fight successfully against men -- to defend . . . herself" (xxv-xxvi). Rather than attaining "self-dependence" within the protective privacy of the home and family, Iola and Sappho gain self-reliance while defending and supporting themselves in the public sphere, a public sphere that for black women was often the homes of white bourgeois families. Similarly, while heroines of white "woman's fiction" are weak and cannot defend themselves against men, Iola and Sappho

are strong enough to defend against and survive assaults by white men. Harper and Hopkins, then, simultaneously invoke and undercut white Victorian values in their novels. Invoking white bourgeois mores would appeal to their white readership, while their inscription of black female experience would forge a connection with their African American readers.

Sappho initially hides her past and does not acknowledge her son, but she later "resolve[s] that come what would she would claim the child and do her duty as his mother in love and training. She would devote her life to him" (342). Such maternal devotion signals Sappho's true womanhood, for the cult of domesticity reified motherhood: ". . . motherhood . . . added another dimension to [a woman's] usefulness and her prestige. . . . 'My Friend,' wrote Mrs. Sigourney, 'If in becoming a mother, you have reached the climax of your happiness, you have also taken a higher place in the scale of being'" (Welter 38). However, for Sappho to claim the role of mother to her child in the face of hardship also acknowledges the experience of African American women both in antebellum and postbellum times. During slavery mothers were separated from children sold away from them, and Hopkins's novel focuses on the attempts of families to reunite long after the War. Consequently, Sappho's maternal devotion simultaneously accesses the ideology of domesticity and infuses true womanhood with African American female experience.

Moreover, Hopkins's depiction of her mulatta heroine as purified through motherhood is politically charged as well. Harvey Green documents that the nineteenth-century drop in Anglo-Saxon birthrates was interpreted as a weakening of white hegemony: "the drop in the birthrate among white middle-class women and the

simultaneous immigration of large numbers of allegedly fertile southern and eastern European women threatened the stability of the existing social order of late nineteenth-century America" (30). Depicting successful and thriving African American families as Harper and Hopkins did signals racial progress toward greater political and economic power. In fact, Hopkins represents Sappho's maternal devotion as a necessary condition for future political action:

The mother-love chased out all the anguish that she had felt over his birth. She wondered how she had lived without him. . . . [I]n the years which followed she learned to value the strong, chastening influence of her present sorrow, and the force of character it developed, fitting her perfectly for the place she was to occupy in carrying comfort and hope to the women of her race. (346-47)

Sappho's and Iola's beauty, conduct, and frail health conform to both standards of Victorian womanhood and novelistic conventions, as Barbara Christian documents:

The nineteenth-century novel promoted a rather fragile beauty as the norm: qualities of helplessness, chastity and refinement rather than, say strength, endurance and intelligence were touted as the essential characteristics of femininity. The nineteenth-century heroine not only had to be beautiful physically, she had to be fragile and well-bred as well. ("Shadows" 199)

However, both Iola and Sappho survive their degrading pasts with "strength, endurance and intelligence": Iola's defiance, inherited from her enslaved grandmother, is self-protective; Sappho's "bold, strong, and ennobling" character (114), and determination to think for herself, enable her to financially support both herself and her son. Moreover, Iola's and Sappho's labor in the market place contradicts the classist base of the nineteenth-century notion of women as helpless and delicate: "Wanness and fragility as virtues reflect an ideology of deliberate uselessness, and thus a visual identity with those who do not have to work" (Green 114). Although Iola's and Sappho's histories are those of "fallen" women, their weak constitutions signal Harper's and Hopkins's ambivalent use

of Victorian womanhood to "redeem" their heroines in their white reader's eyes on the one hand, and to contest and revise this gender identity on the other. As "true women," Iola and Sappho conceive of marriage and family life as a woman's highest goal. Iola characterizes her future husband's proposal as "a clarion call to a life of high and holy worth" (271), while Sappho speaks of marriage as "the noblest heritage of woman" (205).

When Sappho leaves Boston with her son to begin a new life in New Orleans she must find employment. However, far from unwomanly, Sappho's position is as "angel of the house" for a wealthy "man of color": "she combined the duties of housekeeping with those of teaching, and soon became the moving spirit of the home, warmly loved by her little charges" (353). Hopkins revises "true womanhood" in this chapter, for to be a "spirit of the home" Sappho must leave her son in the care of others (352); like countless African American women before and after her. Sappho's labor necessitates that she be an absent presence in her son's life. Moreover, Hopkins's reference to Sappho's teaching both as governess and as "keeper" of her employer's house and that family's morality, and Iola's brief occupation as a teacher in a Southern school during Reconstruction, constitute a further revision of racialized gender identities. Nancy Cott notes that for white women schoolteaching was "less a means of essential support for unmarried women than a mode in which daughters of established families enacted their duty to the community" (32). Middle- and upper-class single women took up this occupation because they had access to the required education that working-class women would have found beyond their means. Teaching, then, signalled a privileged class position for white women. Conversely, teaching was one of the few professions open to African American women for whom it was indeed "a means of essential support." Moreover, rather than a gesture to a



community that held their families in high esteem, African Americans saw teaching as a tool of racial advancement, and education and literacy as the means to reunite families separated by slavery.

Hopkins's and Harper's white audience would interpret their heroines as "true women" employed in a respectable occupation, and read their novels as sentimental romances in which love and marriage are the ultimate rewards for proper behavior and pure ideals. However, their African American audience would recognize themselves in these heroines who work to support themselves and family; moreover, they would see the future of their race in reunited families and close-knit communities pursuing education as a means to economic and political progress. Such a message was popular among African American leaders of the day, whether it was W.E.B. Du Bois advocating higher education as racial uplift, or Booker T. Washington seeing industrial education as progressive. These differences between the "true woman" and Harper's and Hopkins's heroines are central to an understanding of the ways in which these authors parody and revise true womanhood. Harper and Hopkins create a "noble" black womanhood that incorporates African American female experience, rather than silencing that experience in order to capitulate to white American ideology.

Ironically, Harper's and Hopkins's mulatta figures -- the "spurious issue" and "mongrel breed" of white American mythology -- access through performance a gender identity believed to be exclusive to the "well-bred." As Hortense Spillers argues, the identity of the mulatta circulates in America as an "overdetermination" to which is attributed "the illicit . . . commingling of bloodlines that a simplified cultural patrimony wishes to deny. But in that very denial, the most dramatic and visible of admissions is

evident" ("Neither/Nor" 167). The mulatto represents a racial illegitimacy, for she falls outside the unitary concept of race as strictly either white or black. In an effort to protect and maintain the uniformity of "race" and the purity of whiteness, the mulatto's racial identity is constructed as black despite her biraciality. The mulatto voices, then, in the very attempt to silence her not only the "illicit commingling of bloodlines" as Spillers points out, but more importantly the cultural construction of racial identities. The mulatto as "neither/nor," as neither white nor black but both, reveals that "the concepts of 'black' and 'white'. . . are mutually constitutive and socially produced" (Gates, "Criticism" 21).

The mulatta as racial hybrid becomes a figure in Harper's and Hopkins's fiction for hybridity of another order -- "noble womanhood" as the hybrid resulting from a parodic performance of true womanhood by an African American character. In *The Dialogic Imagination*, Bakhtin theorizes parody as an "intentional hybrid": "Every type of parody . . . is in a broad sense an intentional hybrid -- but a hybrid compounded of two orders: one linguistic (a single language) and one stylistic" (75). In *A Theory of Parody*, Linda Hutcheon focuses on the etymology of parody to define it as a "trans-contextualization": "The prefix *para* has two meanings . . . that of 'counter' or 'against' . . . . However, *para* in Greek can also mean 'beside,' and therefore there is a suggestion of an accord or intimacy. . . . Parody, then, in its ironic 'trans-contextualization' and inversion, is repetition with difference" (32). Harper's and Hopkins's mulatta characters perform the "single language" of true womanhood -- their appearance and conduct are in "accord" with its dictates. However, their performances' affinity with true womanhood also "counter" this gender identity at its base -- as African American women their identity

as "body" was thought to deny them access to a womanhood they corporeally delimited. The "critical distance" their parodic performances of pure and pious womanhood implement is not only that signalled by their "racial illegitimacy," but also their introduction of an alien "stylistic order" into proscriptive Victorian womanhood. Harper and Hopkins insist that African American female experiences -- experiences of rape, concubinage, and labor that would disqualify them as true women -- are part of their characters' lives. This infusion of lived experience into their characters' parodic performances of true womanhood creates a parodic, hybrid construction. Hutcheon contends that parodists will "'refunction' . . . forms to their own needs" (4). In signifying on Victorian womanhood, then, Harper and Hopkins subvert the mythic black female sexuality upon which it depended, thereby "refunctioning" true womanhood as a gender identity through which African American women could articulate themselves as subjects.

Those who criticize Harper's and Hopkins's choice of mulatto heroines argue that they function as inscriptions of both colorism and the privilege historically accorded light-skinned blacks within the African American community and American society as a whole. Others argue that these mulattas represent a nod to the authors' contemporary white audience that would not recognize a black heroine as beautiful nor identify with her easily. I would contend that Harper and Hopkins disrupt rather than meet their audience's expectations of a beautiful and womanly heroine, however, by foregrounding the danger that accompanied an African American woman's beauty in both antebellum and postbellum America. A white woman's beauty would signal a corresponding purity of soul and elicit the protection and respect of white "gentlemen," but a mulatta's beauty was a liability that placed her at risk of sexual violence. Karen Sánchez-Eppler argues that

"traditional notions of female purity attach . . . to the body -- in its vulnerability to rape or enforced concubinage" (42). Since those "traditional notions" of vulnerability were race-specific and "attached" to a white skin, the mulatta's body has been read in two directions simultaneously: her fair skin is a sign of "whiteness" and all the notions of chastity, purity, and delicacy that correlate to Victorian womanhood, but within that same body is believed to flow a "tainted" blood that carries the so-called "traits" of a wanton sexuality. These conflictual readings cohere in the mulatta as a figure of womanhood rendered sexually available, of chastity as a commodity that is valued precisely because it is presumed impossible to violate. As Hortense Spillers observes, "the mulatta . . . has value for the dominant other only insofar as she becomes the inaccessible female property that can be rendered, at his behest, instantly accessible" ("Neither/Nor" 173).

Harper represents Iola's body as stripped of protections and sexualized the minute her manumission is revoked along with her identity as a white lady. Upon Eugene Leroy's death, his cousin Alfred Lorraine claims the estate and "property" including Marie Leroy and her children. Lorraine sends his lawyer, Bastine, North to bring Iola home; and upon first seeing her, Bastine speculates upon the price Iola would fetch as a "fancy girl": "She is a most beautiful creature. . . . She has the proud poise of Leroy, the most splendid eyes I ever saw in a woman's head, lovely complexion, and a glorious wealth of hair. She would bring \$2000 any day in a New Orleans market" (99). The very qualities that guarantee her the protection of respect as a "white" woman will attract a Southern aristocrat excited by the paradox of an enslaved courtship. Even before she reaches the South and learns she is not a white woman as she has always been led to believe, Iola is "affronted" and kissed by Bastine who refers to her as his "lovely tigress" (104).

Harper problematizes a reading of *Iola* as a privileged mulatta by foregrounding the complicated dynamics of her parents' relationship. *Iola* is the daughter of her mother's master who had educated her mother Marie, manumitted and then married her. Eugene Leroy falls in love with his "beautiful, faithful, and pure" mulatta slave, a woman in whose "presence every base and unholy passion died, subdued by the supremacy of her virtue" (66 & 70). While Eugene Leroy repeatedly attests to his love for Marie, his feelings seem to be inflected with a desire to possess her; he frees her as his slave to take her as his wife: "'This is the hand that plucked me from the grave, and I am going to retain it as mine; mine to guard with my care until death do us part'" (74). Marie speaks against slavery in an address to her graduating class, but her former master does not share her views: "Leroy listened attentively. At times a shadow of annoyance would overspread his face" (75). Harper represents Marie's marriage to Eugene Leroy as an exchange of one form of commodification for another. Moreover, Marie's history and *Iola*'s enslavement are narrated in a series of chapters that follow Dr. Gresham's proposal and precede *Iola*'s refusal, thereby characterizing Gresham as yet another white man whose desire for *Iola* may be inextricably linked to a concomitant desire for power and ownership. *Iola* and Marie may perform "true womanhood," but as mulattas they are denied the protections it offers white women.

While Harper makes it clear that *Iola*'s body will not emerge inviolate from her enslavement, Hopkins stresses that the victimization accompanying an African American woman's beauty continues after slavery ends. Sappho's mother is a "quadroon," and her father is "an educated man, descended from a very wealthy family" who is given an equal share in his white father's fortune (258). Her family is recognized by their white relatives

-- her uncle Beaubean, a Louisiana senator, is described as "very warm in his expressions of friendship for the family" (259). Sappho attends a Catholic girls' school run by nuns, yet despite her privilege as a member of the black bourgeoisie, her youth, and her very proper education, Uncle Beaubean sees her as sexually available because she is "of mixed blood." He rapes her, abandons her in a house of prostitution at the age of fourteen, and when confronted by Sappho's father he believes that he has only to pay for her in order to absolve himself: "[Y]our 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? . . . Now, I am willing to give you a thousand dollars and call it square" (260-61). As a result of her experience, Sappho comes to refer to her beauty as "a curse" (321). Hopkins further represents the stereotype of the "yellow Jezebel" as so powerful it invades the black community. John Pollock Langley, a mulatto himself and a prominent lawyer and politician in Boston, reads sexual availability into Sappho's genealogy and birthplace:

Her coldness urged him on . . . and made him impatient to force upon her an acceptance of his own devotion, at whatever cost. . . . He had detected in Sappho's personality a coldness more in accordance with the disposition of women of the North than with that of one born . . . of the langorous Southland. Where, with such a face and complexion, had she imbibed a moral character so strong and self-reliant as her conduct had shown her to possess? Not by inheritance, if he read the signs aright. (226-27)

Through Sappho's refined behavior and caucasian features Hopkins ironizes the nineteenth-century belief that "blood tells," or that one's appearance and conduct are the result of one's biology.

Iola's and Sappho's experiences in the hands of white men would be enough to deem them "fallen" women in the eyes of white Americans heavily influenced by Victorian morality, but their very survival of sexual violence marginalizes them further.<sup>18</sup>

A woman lacking in "purity" was considered "unnatural and unfeminine" by the cult of domesticity: "[S]he was, in fact, no woman at all, but a member of some lower order. A 'fallen woman' was a 'fallen angel,' unworthy of the celestial company of her sex. To contemplate the loss of purity brought tears; to be guilty of such a crime . . . brought madness or death" (Welter 23). White middle-class women resisted the cult of domesticity's indictment of work outside the home by forming reform societies and agitating for equal pay for working-class white women. Moreover, white women writing at the time problematized the cult's doctrine of submissiveness in their fiction (Baym xxxix). Yet these challenges had a limit and it was the "fallen" woman:

Obviously there could be no "fallen women" among protagonists; not merely unfallen, the protagonist was virtually immune to improper sexual overtures. However, they have fallen, women characters whose bodies are marked by sexual passion -- whether their own or the man's -- have no place in woman's fiction except as occasional recipients of protagonist sympathy or charity. (Baym xxviii)

Yet African American women did survive rape and brutal assault well after slavery had ended, and Harper and Hopkins both represent black noble womanhood as a gender identity that acknowledges and incorporates this reality.

Iola makes a distinction between being "tried" or "abased" by those white men who assaulted her while she was enslaved, and being "tempted" into a willing compliance or "degradation." Such a distinction furthers Iola's insistence that her pure and chaste character remains inviolate, though her body does not:

"Tried, but not tempted," said Iola, as a deep flush overspread her face; "I was never tempted. I was sold from State to State as an article of merchandise. I had outrages heaped on me which might well crimson the cheek of honest womanhood with shame, but I never fell into the clutches of an owner for whom I did not feel the utmost loathing and intensest horror. I have heard men talk glibly of the degradation of the negro, but there is a vast difference between abasement of condition and degradation

there is a vast difference between abasement of condition and degradation of character. I was abased, but the men who trampled on me were the degraded ones." (115)

Hopkins inscribes a similar distinction in *Contending Forces*. Mrs. Willis, a leading spokeswoman in the club movement, argues during "The Sewing-Circle" for a conception of "virtue" that acknowledges the reality of African American women who are offered no protection and are unable to defend themselves against white male brutality:

"But let us not forget the definition of virtue -- 'Strength to do the right thing under all temptations.' Our ideas of virtue are too narrow. We confine them to that conduct which is ruled by our animal passions alone. It goes deeper than that -- general excellence in every duty of life is what we may call virtue. . . ."

"I believe that we shall not be held responsible for wrongs which we have *unconsciously* committed, or which we have committed under *compulsion*. We are virtuous or non-virtuous only when we have a *choice* under temptation." (149)

White American society would condemn Iola and Sappho not only for their "loss of virtue," but also for their ability to survive such assaults on their "womanhood."

However, African American women put into practice a revised understanding of virtue and of womanhood. Rather than advocating a gender identity that depended upon their very exclusion for its definition, black women writers like Harper and Hopkins turned its dictates back upon the cult of domesticity.<sup>19</sup> Their black female characters refused to bear the responsibility for white male morality, or to keep silent about whose sexuality was indeed uncontrolled. To portray their heroines surviving rape with a virtuous character intact was a highly political undertaking for Harper and Hopkins, as the 1890s were violent years for African American women: ". . . rapes accompanied riots of the 1890s and the blood baths engendered by the Klan. Regardless of the degree of force and violence involved, such sexual exploitation posited its justification on the myth of the



promiscuous black woman" (Campbell 21). The rape of black women and lynching of black men were violent attempts by whites to intimidate and control an African American population that sought political, economic, and social equality. Harper and Hopkins not only challenge the myth of "licentious" black female sexuality and signify on Victorian notions of womanhood, but in exposing white men as preying upon defenceless black women, these authors contend that the root of postbellum lynching and rape is in fact a violent physical assertion of white power.

Harper and Hopkins use the mulatta figure as a "true black woman" to unsettle and set in motion a gender identity that supposedly inhered in the white female body. Rather than adopting a silence regarding the construction of the black female body and black female sexuality, Harper and Hopkins confront their readers with the violations their characters experience as a result of these constructions. These authors mobilize the myth of the black female body as public in order to foreground their mulatta characters' virtue, and claim the privacy and protection of womanhood for them. Far from effacing the body or disembodimenting their characters as a strategy to effect "seemly" African American womanhood -- strategies that orators like Maria Stewart and even Harper herself used when lecturing to white audiences -- Iola's and Sappho's parodic performances of womanhood reconfigure the black and female body.

My repeated contention that Iola and Sappho perform true womanhood, rather than imitate or mimetically represent this gender identity, is key to my reading of these novels as contesting, not conceding to, turn-of-the-century white ideology. Mimesis posits a "truthful" relation between model and copy, but Harper and Hopkins deliberately confront their audience with the differences between black and white women's lived

experience in America. Moreover, interpreting these characters as engaged in a performative opens a space for seeing such acts as generative rather than parasitic. Judith Butler, in *Gender Trouble* and more recently in *Bodies that Matter*, theorizes the performative as not merely a representation of identity but its constitution. She uses Foucault's explication of legal discourses and what they codify as an example, one which is pertinent to an understanding of "race" as a regulatory discourse: "Juridical notions of power appear to regulate political life in purely negative terms -- that is, through the limitation, prohibition, regulation, control and even 'protection' of individuals related to that political structure. . . . Juridical power inevitably 'produces' what it claims merely to represent" (*Gender Trouble* 2). Just as legal definitions of racial identity appeared only to recognize as "natural" what they in fact produced -- the unitary concept of whiteness and blackness -- the cult of domesticity produced both the "true" white woman and her obverse, the black "fallen" woman. Following Butler's theory of gender as a performative, the performance of "seemly" behavior constitutes true womanhood as a gender identity through its enactment of womanly conduct:

. . . acts, gestures, and desire produce the effect of an internal core or substance, but produce this *on the surface* of the body, through the play of signifying absences that suggest, but never reveal, the organizing principle of identity as a cause. Such acts, gestures, enactments, generally construed, are *performative* in the sense that the essence or identity that they otherwise purport to express are *fabrications* manufactured and sustained through corporeal signs and other discursive means. (*Gender Trouble* 136, emphasis in original)

By unseating virtue and purity from the white body and embodying the mulatta as a "true woman," these authors not only present true womanhood as a performable rather than essential gender identity, but also mobilize the performative in order to re-constitute both

womanhood and "race." Harper and Hopkins employ the performative as part of a political strategy to undermine American ideologies of race and gender that had constructed the "grotesque" black female body. Moreover, they undertook to represent mulattas as "true women" with the awareness that what was increasingly regarded as an individual's character or identity in turn-of-the-century America was an accretion of behaviors.

Critics have argued that rules governing proper behavior, or etiquette, worked to construct class and gender identities. I have further argued that race was read through behavior, as evidenced by those legal decisions that delimited racial identities according to reputation, conduct, and the society an individual kept. Though white Americans had consistently worked to naturalize social divisions by appealing to the bodily differences between races and the sexes, those denied social equality had a well-established history of challenging how "natural" these divisions actually were. The rapid social change caused by increasing industrialization and urbanization, as well as an influx of immigrants and a migration of African Americans from the South, created a fluid and highly mobile society in which individuals were able to shift class positions. The instability of social divisions in the late nineteenth century gave rise to a concern among white Americans for what were called the "excesses of democracy" (Kasson 60), excesses that took the form of industrial strikes, middle-class reforms, and the women's suffragist movement. Moreover, many whites believed that emancipation epitomized democracy gone too far. Fearing what they imagined would be the result of progressive social change, they increased their attempts to control black Americans. By the 1890s any progress Reconstruction efforts had secured for African Americans had been eroded. Grandfather clauses had effectively

rescinded the voting rights of African American men, lands in the South had been returned to former plantation owners who instituted the abusive sharecropping system. and Jim Crow, which would become legalized with *Plessy v Ferguson* in 1896, had made a further mockery of freedom for African Americans.

In addition to segregation and institutionalized racism, middle- and upper-class whites responded to the greater social mobility of the late nineteenth century with an increased regimentation of the social. The production of etiquette manuals surged to an all-time high as the turn of the century approached. However, rather than equipping the bourgeoisie with an ever more elaborate delineation of the "appropriate" with which to police the bounds of class, gender, and racial divisions, these etiquette manuals paradoxically served to further the notion that respect and consideration were acquirable commodities. A strict adherence to manners might further segment social roles, but it did little to restrict who took them on. John Kasson observes that while rules of etiquette may have served "as another means of exclusion at the upper ranks of society, for much of urban middle-class life the cultivation of bourgeois manners served as an instrument of inclusion and socialization" (43).

In *Aristocrats of Color*, Willard Gatewood points out that class position for African Americans was signalled by dress and conduct, just as it was in white society: "Aristocrats of color in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries pursued the elusive quality of gentility for the same reason as other Americans: they assumed that proper conduct was indicative of character" (208). However, the black bourgeoisie were not the only African Americans who sought social equality in decorum. Claudia Tate observes that African Americans generally believed that if they adopted the standards of

behavior white Americans ascribed to "civilized" societies, they "could realize their desire to be full citizens" (56). The belief that social equality would accompany acquired refinement culminated in schoolroom classes in decorum and the publication of etiquette manuals.<sup>20</sup> Originally books outlining manners and etiquette were confined to the schoolroom, but they later developed a wider readership. At times the negotiation between white-defined standards of behavior and African American values, between the need to attract white publishers and the wish to represent African Americans favorably thereby furthering a sense of African American community, resulted in apparent ambivalence.<sup>21</sup> For example, Elias M. Woods seems to rail against blacks pandering to whites one moment, and call for it the next in his manual *The Negro in Etiquette: A Novelty* (1899). In a chapter devoted to "church etiquette" Woods condemns those African Americans who would give up their seat to a white man attending service in their church: "All this is color worship and nothing else" (43). Yet in a chapter entitled "The Black Man Honors the White Man," Woods states that "the black man is . . . the white man's pupil. Then, is it not perfectly natural and proper for a grateful scholar to respect, honor and even reverence his instructor?" (137)

Books like Gibson's *Golden Thoughts on Chastity and Procreation* (1903), and E. Azalia Hackley's *The Colored Girl Beautiful* (1916), encouraged African Americans to perceive and present themselves as the social equals of white Americans. Just as *Godey's Lady's Book*, and *The Young Lady's Friend* instructed young white women in etiquette, Hackley's book addressed motherhood, relationships with men, dress, the home, and manners. Gatewood notes that "one of the book's themes was 'culture and self-control'

. . . . Young women were encouraged to 'affect modesty and purity' even if they 'did not feel them'" (184). Like other writers of her time, Hackley addresses the white stereotypes of African Americans; she invokes white notions of black sexuality in order to encourage her black readership to counter such images with exemplary conduct. Writers on etiquette published both manuals and columns in black weekly papers and magazines. The sources may have been diverse and numerous, but the topics addressed were consistent:

. . . the importance of restraint in all matters from emotion and expression to dress . . . . the necessity for good manners both in public places and in the privacy of the home . . . . [and] a notion that familiarity did indeed breed contempt . . . . was . . . applied to the proper attitude for young ladies to assume toward the opposite sex. (Gatewood 185)

What may have been for some African Americans a representation of self as "full citizen" has been largely interpreted by twentieth-century readers as a wholesale adoption of white values. Indeed, arguing that "professional attainment, social esteem, intellectual and cultural refinement -- in short, class -- were more important than an individual's racial designation" (Tate 62) may have worked to counter the white American assumption that "the" African American community was undifferentiated in its "inherent inferiority." But the result that accompanied such an argument was a widening division among African Americans along class lines. Further, these fractures were inextricable from the politics of color, since those African Americans with light skin color usually had more access to education and employment opportunities that would enable their advancement. Consequently, attention to decorum led to "charges that the elite possessed an acute case of 'white fever' and was intent upon transforming itself into a separate caste that would win immunity to the proscriptions being placed on all Negroes" (Gatewood 154).

However, charges that bourgeois blacks used their class position to hold themselves aloof from working-class blacks assumes that nineteenth-century African Americans adopted the values of white Americans along with the practice of middle-class manners. Nancy Cott observes that the cult of domesticity worked to demarcate and police class divisions in white America: "The canon of domesticity expressed the dominance of what may be designated a middle-class ideal, a cultural preference for domestic retirement and conjugal-family intimacy over both the 'vain' and fashionable sociability of the rich and the promiscuous sociability of the poor" (92). Ann Douglas similarly argues that the dress and conduct of bourgeois white women enabled them to differentiate themselves as consumers from the working classes as producers: "Expensively educated, well-treated, and well-dressed, they could . . . advertise male earnings. . . . They did not make homespun; they displayed fine cottons and silks" (61). Yet African Americans did not see domesticity as a sign of individual status; rather, as Carla Peterson argues, nineteenth-century blacks stressed the liberatory and empowering aspects of home life for the community as a whole:

Fundamental to their activities . . . was a conviction that the newly emancipated population must become self-sufficient and achieve community autonomy by means of "home building," education, and employment. Their emphasis on domesticity . . . must be seen instead as a continuation of those antebellum practices that viewed domestic economy as an instrument of family and community empowerment. (199)

Claudia Tate further contends that nineteenth-century black women's "domestic novels," novels like *Iola Leroy* and *Contending Forces*, offered their African American readership the opportunity to imaginatively explore actions that were "forbidden" to them in reality because of their exclusion from full social and political participation in American society:

"What is especially important to observe is that such exploration was not simply gratuitous escapism; it offered . . . an occasion for exercising political self-definition in fiction at a time when the civil rights of African Americans were constitutionally sanctioned but socially prohibited" (7).

Rather than confining her representation of "true womanhood" as a performative to which only fair-skinned mulatta's had access, and thereby perpetuating colorism. Harper depicts a number of African American women from diverse backgrounds as "noble" women. Harper's "ideal" of true black womanhood does not seem to be Iola, but Miss Lucille Delany, a university graduate who establishes a Southern school for African Americans: "[S]he is of medium height, somewhat slender, and well formed, with dark, expressive eyes, full of thought and feeling. Neither hair nor complexion show the least hint of blood admixture. . . . Her manner was a combination of suavity and dignity" (199). Rather than Iola serving as a model of womanhood for "the race," Lucille Delany becomes Iola's "ideal woman. She is grand, brave, intellectual, and religious" (242).

In addition to depicting true black women of the middle class devoted to racial progress, Harper depicts former slaves like Aunt Linda as wise "home builders" central to community autonomy. As the novel opens we see Aunt Linda, the cook on the Johnson plantation, using her enforced domesticity for subversive ends. The slaves on this and the neighboring plantations use a coded "market speech" to communicate recent Civil War events to one another. Domesticity is embedded in this code: "[I]f they wished to announce a victory of the Union army, they said the butter was fresh, or that the fish and eggs were in good condition. If defeat befell them, then the butter and other produce were rancid or stale" (9). While Harper depicts male slaves like Robert Johnson as able



to read and thereby relay the newspaper's latest accounts of the War to the enslaved community, it is Aunt Linda who organizes the slaves on the neighboring plantations and determines their meeting places: "'Now, Bob, you sen' word to Uncle Dan'el, Tom Anderson, an' de rest ob dem, to come to McCullough's woods nex' Sunday night. I want to hab a sin-killin' an' debil-dribin' time'" (13). Aunt Linda galvanizes her community under slavery and fosters its reconstruction after the War. She narrates the community's history to Robert Johnson when he returns to North Carolina with Iola to find their respective mothers; and she later takes them to a prayer meeting at which Robert is united with his mother, and discovers that Iola is her grandchild and his niece. As Elizabeth Elkins asserts, Aunt Linda "reinforces the importance of the women's role in their new community" as a uniting "moral force" (48). Aunt Linda's influence in her own family is noteworthy as well, for she encourages her husband to buy land, thereby facilitating their transition from chattel to land-owners:

"An' shore 'nough, ole Gundover died, an' his place war all in debt, an' had to be sole. . . . Well, John didn't gib in at fust; didn't want to let on his wife knowed more dan he did . . . . But I kep' naggin at him, till I specs he got tired of my tongue, an' he went and buyed dis piece ole lan'. . . . When we knowed it war our own, warn't my ole man proud!" (155)

Aunt Linda is not a submissive woman, but her strength is cast in domestic terms such as family and community unity. Lucille Delany is independent, but her independent act is to establish a school for the education of her community, and her independence of mind joins with Iola's to argue that men and women be equally involved in raising children. Iola speaks for a woman's right to work outside the home, but bases this on her belief that "'every woman should have some skill or art which would insure her at least comfortable support. I believe there would be less unhappy marriages if labor were more

honored among women" (210). Harper's white female audience would see an African American woman's self-sufficient labor as "unseemly," but would accept it in the name of a happy home and marriage. The novel's true black women advocate a woman's role as communal rather than individualistic, and they present their views under the guise of domesticity. Each incorporates a revision of true womanhood that voices rather than silences African American experience: they stress action and independence not submissive obedience, practicality and necessity not refinement.<sup>22</sup>

Similarly, Hopkins's characters perform true womanhood, but revise it by infusing domesticity with race consciousness. A sewing circle organized to raise money for a local African American church "that has been instrumental in . . . helping this race to help itself" becomes the setting for female involvement in African American politics (142). Talk among the working- and middle-class African American women attending this meeting centers on "The place which the virtuous woman occupies in upbuilding a race" (148). As in *Iola Leroy*, communal concerns and domestic activities occupy the foreground in such performances of true womanhood; however, these women contest constructions of both black female sexuality and "race" prevalent at the time. Mrs. Willis argues that African American women have inherited "'the native African woman[']s . . . impregnable . . . virtue'" (149), refuting the construction of the inherently oversexed black female. In answer to the popular myths regarding mulattoes as a "dying . . . mongrel mixture which combined the worst elements of two races" (150), and doomed to certain death because of the incompatibility of white and black blood running in their veins, Dora Smith responds, "'I am not unhappy, and I am a mulatto'" (152).<sup>23</sup>

However, while she clearly sees the liberatory potential of using domesticity and true womanhood as the forms through which to negotiate a space for black women in a society that denied their humanity and womanhood, and also challenge prevailing conceptions of race, Hopkins is also critical of those who would see the wholesale adoption of bourgeois white values as liberatory. Mrs. Willis is characterized as just such an individual. She is introduced as resourceful, self-sufficient, and "shrewd." However, while driven by necessity to support herself, Mrs. Willis does so by exploiting the current interest in the "Woman Question" and finds herself managed by a white "philanthropist who sought to use her talents as an attraction for a worthy charitable object, the discovery of a rare species of versatility in the Negro character being a sure drawing-card" (147). Mrs. Willis's attempt to exploit early black feminism for her own ends, "plans . . . conceived in selfishness," results in her own exploitation as an "oddy" subjected to the white gaze (147). She never seems to recognize her compromised position, but Hopkins's indictment of her self-serving aims is unmistakable: "Trivialities are not to be despised . . . love implanted in a woman's heart for a luxurious, esthetic home life . . . amid flowers, sunshine, books and priceless pamphlets, easy chairs and French gowns, may be the means of . . . freeing a race from servitude. It was amusing to watch" (147).

Hopkins, then, makes a clear distinction between African American women performing true womanhood and thereby charging the private sphere and domestic ideology with what were considered radical political concerns at the time -- female independence and African American social and political equality -- and a blind faith that bourgeois trappings will uplift a race reduced to poverty by racial inequity. Mrs. Willis may profess to advocate suffrage and "the *evolution* of true womanhood" (146, my

emphasis), but she has clearly adopted the Victorian notion of a woman's place: "'Your duty is not to be morbid, thinking these thoughts that have puzzled older heads than yours. *Your* duty is, also, to be happy and bright for the good of those about you. Just blossom like the flowers, have faith and *trust*'" (157, emphasis in original).

In contrast to Mrs. Willis who would advocate a submissive and dependent womanhood, Hopkins's black female working-class characters direct their entrepreneurial skills into developing self-sufficient businesses in the African American community. Mrs. Ophelia Davis and Mrs. Sarah Ann White, "raised on neighboring plantations," utilize skills that previously contributed to their masters' capital to form a "partnership in a laundry" (104). Like Aunt Linda in *Iola Leroy*, Ophelia and Sarah Ann transform their status from property to propertied, from servitude in the slave economy to capitalists in the market economy. Moreover, they use the spoils of the Civil War and the profits of their own enforced labor to do so:

"Yas'm, I've got a silk dress, two of 'em, an' a lace shawl an' a gold watch and chain. . . . I come by 'em hones', I did. Yas'm, when my ol' mistis left her great big house an' all that good stuff -- silver an' things -- a-layin' thar fer anyone to pick up that had sense 'nough to know a good thing an' git it ahead of enybody else. I jes' said to myself: 'Phelia, chile, now's yer time!' Yas'm, I feathered my nes', I jes' did. Sarah Ann, you 'member that time, honey. . . . You stuffed yerself with greenbacks, but, honey, I took clo's, too." (105)

Ophelia and Sarah Ann were once relegated to the frontiers of the private feminine sphere by their forced circulation as property appraised and sold in the public economic sphere. However, they not only cross these borders to take up the silks and laces of womanhood and the greenbacks of capitalism, but Ophelia and Sarah Ann also conflate these gendered spheres in their boardinghouse laundry.

Peterson and Tate re-vision nineteenth-century black women's novels as participating in efforts of black communal advancement. They argue that rather than adopting white values, African American women put into practice bourgeois conventions to serve their own values and further their own aims. We cannot ignore the ambivalence of a strategy aimed at attaining social and political equality via practicing the very conventions that were meant to ensure the exclusion of African Americans from the dominant culture. Nor can we fail to see the problematic implications of narratives that seem to argue such parity on the basis of "virtuous" and "near-white" heroines. Yet I contend that the very ambivalence of the mulatta figure is what makes novels like *Iola Leroy* and *Contending Forces* transgressive rather than conciliatory, subversive rather than compromised. It seems to me that in addition to the political act of forging a sense of community with their African American readership, as Tate and Peterson argue, Harper and Hopkins were also fully aware of the transgressive import of portraying an African American character as a "true woman" in novels read by blacks and whites alike. African American readers would "exercise political self-definition" by identifying with their heroines, as Tate asserts; however, white readers who might be interested initially in characters who "appear" to be "as white as" themselves, would undoubtedly be unsettled at a deeper level by the boundaries violated in these novels.<sup>24</sup> The ambivalence of the mulatta figure facilitates the reading of these novels in two different directions by these different audiences -- one self-affirming, the other undermining the distinction between self and "other."

American bourgeois culture had come to believe that "the *manner* in which a person says or does a thing, furnishes a better index of his character than *what* he does or

says" (qtd in Kasson 98). Appearance and conduct were not merely indications of character; rather, they had come to constitute identity. The self was largely conceived of as an accretion of behaviors or "a series of dramatic effects" in turn-of-the-century white America (Kasson 94). Paradoxically, the "science" of etiquette and the system of meanings attached to behavior that, in turn, signalled economic and social status as well as a "respectable" upbringing enabled the performance of "upstanding" character by so-called undesirables. The stability of "good character" and its attachment to whiteness and the middle- and upper-classes was eroded by such accessibility.

White Americans, clearly disturbed by the idea that African Americans might not "know their place" and keep to it, complained of African American women "'putting on airs,' desiring 'to play the lady and be supported by their husbands like the white folks'" (qtd in Sterling, *Sisters* 322). In the early years of the Southern sharecropping system accounts, like this one related by Henry Adams, circulated of African American families being evicted solely because wives and daughters avoided field work:

. . . the white people would tell them if he expected for his wife and children to live on their place without working in the field they would have to pay house rent or leave it; and if the colored people would go to leave, they would take everything they had . . . and tell them it was for what his damn family had to eat, doing nothing but sitting up and acting the grand lady and their daughters acting the same way . . . . (qtd in Sterling, *Sisters* 332)

Such sentiments amongst whites do not seem to have abated by the early twentieth century. Eleanor Tayleur, writing for *The Outlook* in 1904, "recalled" enslaved African American women "copying" their mistresses manners such that "'many a black woman was a grand dame who would have graced a court'" (qtd in Guy-Sheftall 44). Despite the number of black women who were educated by 1904 (many of whom were working as

professionals), and the majority of African American women who were considered "well-mannered" enough to be employed as domestic workers in white homes, Tayleur characterizes early twentieth-century African American woman as "childishly" preoccupied with imitating bourgeois whites: "'She copies her [the white woman's] extravagance in tawdry finery that is a grotesque exaggeration of fashion, she copies her independence in utter abandon of all restraints, she copies her vices and adds to them frills of her own'" (qtd in Guy-Sheftall 44). Most turn-of-the-century white Americans could not conceive of African Americans beyond caricatures such as these.

Tayleur's comments, and the white anxiety over black women "playing the lady" they reveal, do unknowingly allude to a significant aspect of African American cultural practice. Rather than the childish imitation that Tayleur recounts and which was the stuff of white minstrel caricatures of "blackness," African Americans have an established tradition of engaging in performances that ridiculed or played whites for fools, and worked to subvert hierarchies and social divisions. African Americans participated in what might be called communal parodies of whiteness. Election Day, dating from the 1750s, was a carnivalesque celebration that took place annually. Eric Lott documents the day's activities and import:

On this day blacks chose their own government officials, who had real power among themselves and, for the space of the celebration at least, symbolic power over whites. Part appropriation of similar ceremonies, part African survival, this political ritual openly burlesqued the dominant culture. . . . Amid the usual celebratory excess, culminating in the election of black kings, governors, and judges, blacks enacted rituals of reversal in which they lampooned their masters, wore their masters' clothes, and mounted their masters' horses. (46-47)

In *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, Mikhail Bakhtin defines the carnivalesque

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as a ritual celebration of shifts in power or "the process of replaceability" (125). The carnivalesque is dualistic and ambivalent: as much as carnival revels in the unseating of power or "the *joyful relativity* of all structure and order, of all authority and all (hierarchical) position" (*Problems* 124, emphasis in original), it indulges in a temporary shift in power that will inevitably be returned to those in authority. Election Day took place on a sanctioned and prescribed day, and the positions of power blacks occupied reverted to whites at day's end. However, Lott mentions not only the sanctioned or "usual celebratory excess," but also the parodic acts blacks engaged in. In dressing and behaving like their masters, slaves went beyond the authorized and ritualistic to parody whiteness. Bakhtin defines parody as ambivalent because it partakes of the very hierarchy it seeks to subvert: "Parody . . . is an integral element . . . in all carnivalized genres. . . . Parodying is the creation of a *decrowning double*; it is that same 'world turned inside out.' For this reason parody is ambivalent" (*Problems* 127, emphasis in original). Slaves temporarily taking on positions reserved for whites would implicitly affirm the power and desirability of such positions. Moreover, since the shift in power was temporary, with the "usurped" positions always reverting to whites, Election Day also served as an annual reassertion of the white "right" to power and control. However, for slaves to "lampoon" and "burlesque" whites through imitation amounts to a subversion rather than affirmation of white authority that goes beyond the sanctioned activities of celebration. A master might be entertained by the incongruence of his slaves taking on the roles of political power beyond his plantation, but he would quite likely find it unsettling to see himself the subject of ridicule; slaves playing at king or governor would be one thing, having slaves



wear his clothes and mimic his behavior would be another.<sup>25</sup>

I am not arguing that any African American who contradicted white stereotypes of blacks was engaging in some form of imitation of white behavior, for to do so would be to evoke and inscribe those very stereotypes. Rather, I am arguing that the African American women writers on whom I focus used the mulatta figure to challenge the dominant culture's construction and mobilization of "race" as what Henry Louis Gates has called "a trope of ultimate, irreducible difference between cultures, linguistic groups, or adherents of specific belief systems which . . . also have fundamentally opposed economic interests" ("Writing 'Race'" 5). To do so, these writers expose true womanhood as a racialized gender identity, constituted and regulated by appearance and behavior, that is performable by the very women it sought most to exclude -- biracial women who looked "as *white* as" they did but threatened to "pollute" white American purity with "tainted" African blood.

By supplementing the text of physical characteristics with the meanings read through one's deportment, white Americans revealed their anxiety over the growing indiscernibility of racial, class, and gender differences upon which their social order was based. Identities such as whiteness and womanhood, based upon the assurance of the visible, could be adopted by anyone who could play the part. As Homi Bhabha argues in "Interrogating Identity," such performances would not merely adopt the image of "whiteness" or of "the lady," but function to place identity itself and our understanding of it in a state of crisis:

By disrupting the . . . equivalence between image and identity, the secret art of invisibleness . . . changes the very terms of our recognition of the person. . . . What is interrogated is not simply the image of the person, but

the discursive and disciplinary place from which questions of identity are strategically and institutionally posed. (46-47)

Categories of identity such as race and gender operated in turn-of-the-century America, and continue to do so today, with what Robyn Wiegman calls an "assurance . . . to represent, mimetically, the observable body" (9). But once we acknowledge that neither one's appearance nor one's practice authenticate one's identity, we see that race, gender, and class identities are constructed and inhere in neither the body nor that body's acts. If one's "image" -- traditionally read through one's body and/or one's character -- is neither a reliable nor even discernable index of one's race and/or gender, more than the individual's identity is unsettled: the very categories of "race" and gender become unstable and shifting. An African American woman's "performance" of true womanhood would destabilize the limit of both this gender identity and the distinctions between white and black races at its nexus. By exposing Victorian womanhood as a performable rather than inherent gender, writers like Hopkins and Harper in turn unsettle the notions of "race" upon which it was based.

In considering possible subversions of gender identity, Judith Butler speculates that "if subversion is possible, it will be a subversion from within the terms of the law, through the possibilities that emerge when the law turns against itself" (*Trouble* 93). By establishing a woman's physical characteristics as the proof of her nature, and defining true womanhood by the attributes of piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity, the cult enabled its own subversion. Iola and Sappho, mulatta's so fair-skinned they are mistaken for white women, possess the physical attributes of true women, while all of Harper's and Hopkins's African American female characters behave in accordance with its

doctrines. Harper and Hopkins appropriate the power attending true white womanhood to contest myths of black female sexuality, and revise turn-of-the-century notions of womanhood to accommodate the experiences and values of black women. In unseating true womanhood from its dialectic relationship with black "fallen" womanhood, these parodic performances subsequently destabilize "race"; both nineteenth-century womanhood and "race" are foregrounded in these novels as regulatory identities based upon binaries that are unstable. Thus, Harper and Hopkins set gender and, in turn, race on the move.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Those bourgeois women not compelled to labor outside the home did take on humanitarian work and formed reform societies, and in doing so shifted the cult of domesticity from the private to the public sphere. Smith-Rosenberg argues that "few of these newly active bourgeois matrons . . . questioned the cultural presumptions of women's innate piety, purity, and domesticity. They moved into America's corrupt and unjust cities not as self-conscious feminists but as . . . the conscience and the housekeepers of America" (173).

<sup>2</sup> See Susan K. Harris, *Nineteenth-Century American Women's Novels: Interpretive Strategies* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1990); Mary Kelley, *Private Women, Public Stage: Literary Domesticity in Nineteenth-Century America* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1984).

<sup>3</sup> The "Signifying Monkey" tales and poems, which Gates notes seem to have originated in the slave experience, center on three characters: the Monkey, the Lion, and the Elephant. The Monkey is a trickster figure who realizes that while he is no physical match for the Lion, the Elephant is. The Monkey, "a rhetorical genius," is "intent on demystifying the Lion's self-imposed status as King of the Jungle." To do so, the Monkey undertakes to trick the Lion into a physical confrontation with the Elephant, "who is the true King of the Jungle for everyone else in the animal kingdom. This the monkey does with a rhetorical trick, a trick of mediation . . . a play on language use" (56). The Monkey's trick is to speak figuratively to the Lion who always believes he has spoken literally; the Lion's status as King is undermined by the Monkey proving him to be slow-witted and tricking him into being "trounced" by the Elephant.

<sup>4</sup> Claudia Tate uses the phrase "true black woman" to denote the heroines authors like Harper and Hopkins used to "celebrate the roles of domestic nurturer, spiritual counsellor, moral advocate, social activist, and academic teacher" (97). I am interested in the phrase for its irony; it "blackens" a gender identity that was instituted to ensure the purity of the white race.

<sup>5</sup> Barbara Welter, quoting *The Young Ladies' Class Book: A Selection of Lessons for Reading in Prose and Verse* published in 1831, notes that a central tenet of "true womanhood" was female piety that would save man from his "natural" propensity to immorality: "[T]he vestal flame of piety, lighted up by Heaven in the breast of woman' would throw its beams into the naughty world of men. . . . She would be another, better Eve . . . bringing the world back 'from its revolt and sin' . . . bringing an erring man back to Christ" (22).

<sup>6</sup> As James Horton documents, this belief in female responsibility for male morality was held by African Americans as well and promoted in black newspapers. In 1837 *The Colored American* was enjoining the black woman to lead her family by example in moral and economic concerns: "As the popular media demanded of all women, black women were expected to maintain the highest moral standards themselves and to be responsible for the morality of their men. They were instructed to resist all men who indulged in drinking and gambling and 'through your smiles and economical conduct in your domestic pursuits . . . provoke the indolent and improvident husband to active industry and frugality'" (Horton 675).

<sup>7</sup> Atavism, as this belief came to be called, hinged on the notion that despite the "civilization" of African Americans in the "new world," they may revert to their "earlier state." Since white Americans, following Europeans, thought that African women had once "copulate[d] with apes" (Gilman 231), they believed African Americans might revert to not only an "uncontrolled" but "animalistic" state of being.

<sup>8</sup> This dialectical relationship between true womanhood and the black female body is vividly illustrated in the "topsy-turvy" doll, popular in the nineteenth-century American South and apparently still produced. Shirley Samuels describes the doll in *The Culture of Sentiment*: ". . . held one way, the doll appears as a white woman with long skirts. Flipping over her skirts does not reveal her legs, but rather exposes another racial identity: the head of a black woman, whose long skirts now cover the head of the white woman" (157).

<sup>9</sup> Truth repeats this strategy of proving her argument bodily in 1858 at an antislavery meeting in Silver Lake, Indiana. In response to an accusation that she was a man masquerading as a woman, Truth reportedly again gave bodily testimony by revealing her breasts to the audience who were offended by her "unwomanly" behavior. Truth again mobilized constructions of the black female body to unsettle white notions of gender and to contend that she too is a woman. In this instance Truth uses the myth of the oversexualized black female to argue for her womanhood. At different points in her career as an orator, then, Truth used the contradictory and shifting materialization of the black female body as oversexed and unsexed in order to unseat gender from the realm of whiteness.

<sup>10</sup> The NACW's charter also echoes ideals of racial uplift promoted by African American men since antebellum times. One can trace a widening gender division amongst African Americans through early nineteenth-century black newspapers. As James Horton documents, these newspapers instructed African American women to be submissive rather

than self-assertive: "One anecdote that appeared in an 1827 issue of *Freedom's Journal* related the plight of a woman doomed to a life without a man because she violated one cardinal role [*sic*] of female behavior, she 'could not keep her mouth shut'" (56). Nineteenth-century African American leaders, in accordance with the cult of domesticity's notion of "separate spheres," denied African American women membership in organizations, and limited their participation in activist causes to supporting roles. For example, when W.E.B. Du Bois, Alexander Crummell, and the Reverend Francis Grimké organized the American Negro Academy in 1897, they drafted a bylaw limiting participation to "men of African Descent" (Giddings 116). In "The Conservation of Races" published that same year Du Bois called for the Academy to "gather about it the talented, unselfish men, [and] the pure and noble-minded women" (824-25). Yet Paula Giddings notes that no women were ever listed in its membership. Linda Perkins observes that "it was clear by the end of the nineteenth century that many black men viewed women as their intellectual subordinates and not capable of leadership positions" (24). Frederick Douglass's support for female suffrage was an exception not the rule, argues Perkins.

<sup>11</sup> Ruffin founded *The Woman's Era*, the first magazine in America published by and for black women.

<sup>12</sup> While Wilson J. Moses and Mary Helen Washington have criticized members of the black women's club movement and early black feminists for uncritically adopting white bourgeois gender roles, scholars such as James Oliver Horton and Linda M. Perkins focus on the differences between noble black womanhood and true white womanhood. Perkins notes that "unlike women of the white society, black women were encouraged to become educated to aid in the improvement of their race" (919). Horton argues that gender roles adopted by antebellum African Americans are a complex combination of "conventions . . . descended from Afro-American traditions developed during colonial times influenced by African, European, and American Indian cultures" (668).

<sup>13</sup> Hopkins left the *Colored American* after it came under the control of Booker T. Washington. Hopkins had been vocal in her opposition to Washington's policies, and even though she moved to New York to continue as editor, she left the magazine a short time later. *Colored American* released a statement that attributed her departure to ill health, although Hopkins continued to publish elsewhere during this period of so-called illness that had rendered her unable to work.

<sup>14</sup> Recent studies that re-evaluate Hopkins and/or Harper are: Hazel Carby, *Reconstructing Womanhood: The Emergence of the Afro-American Woman Novelist* (Oxford: Oxford UP,

1987); Carla L. Peterson, *"Doers of the Word": African-American Women Speakers and Writers in the North (1830-1880)* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1995); Claudia Tate, *Domestic Allegories of Political Desire: The Black Heroine's Text at the Turn of the Century* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1992).

<sup>15</sup> See the following for arguments that Harper's and/or Hopkins's fiction is apolitical, complacent, assimilationist, or caters to bourgeois white standards: Sterling A. Brown, et al., *The Negro Caravan: Writings by American Negroes* (New York: Dryden, 1941); Robert Bone, *The Negro Novel in America* (1958, rpt. New Haven: Yale UP, 1965); Dickson D. Bruce, Jr. *Black American Writing From the Nadir: The Evolution of a Literary Tradition, 1877-1915* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State UP, 1989); Jane Campbell, *Mythic Black Fiction: The Transformation of History* (Knoxville: U of Tennessee P, 1986); Arlene Elder, *The Hindered Hand: Cultural Implications of Early African-American Fiction* (Westport: Greenwood P, 1978).

<sup>16</sup> Frances E. W. Harper, *Iola Leroy, or Shadows Uplifted*, *The Schomburg Library of Nineteenth-Century Black Women Writers*, ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1988) 58. All subsequent references will be to this edition.

<sup>17</sup> Pauline E. Hopkins, *Contending Forces: A Romance Illustrative of Negro Life North and South*, *The Schomburg Library of Nineteenth-Century Black Women Writers*, ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1988) 107. All subsequent references will be to this edition.

<sup>18</sup> Frances Smith Foster makes a similar observation regarding representations of the rape of black women in antebellum slave narratives: "...her ability to survive degradation was her downfall. As victim she became the assailant, since her submission to repeated violations was not in line with the values of sentimental heroines who died rather than be abused. Her survival of these ordeals and continued participation in other aspects of slave life seemed to connote, if not outright licentiousness, at least a less sensitive and abused spirit than that of white heroines" (131).

<sup>19</sup> By reversing and revising the standards of womanhood, these authors build upon Harriet Jacobs's earlier representation of her relationship with Mr. Sands in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861). Jacobs persuades her readers, an audience composed largely of white bourgeois women, that this relationship was a means of escape from an impending degradation at the hands of her owner, rather than a morally degrading act in itself.

<sup>20</sup> For example, *On Habits and Manners* was written for the students of Hampton Institute. However, this book was published for "general use" in 1888, and Elias M. Woods's *The Negro in Etiquette: A Novelty* followed in 1899 (Kasson 54). Woods's etiquette manual began as a lecture "delivered before the Faculty and Students of Lincoln Institute at Jefferson City, [Missouri]." According to the manual's preface, the lecture was then published as a pamphlet entitled "The Gospel of Civility" which sold out; and in response to demand. Woods published this longer work (7).

<sup>21</sup> For my reading of Wood's *The Negro in Etiquette*, I am indebted to Carla Peterson's explication of the negotiation between black and white cultures and audience that nineteenth-century African American writers faced.

<sup>22</sup> Frances Smith Foster notes that African American women writing autobiographies in the nineteenth century undertook a similar negotiation between the tenets of Victorian womanhood and black female experience. See "Adding Color and Contour to Early American Self-Portraiture: Autobiographical Writings of Afro-American Women." *Conjuring: Black Women, Fiction and Literary Tradition*. Eds. Marjorie Pryse and Hortense J. Spillers. (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1985) 25-38.

<sup>23</sup> Hopkins's novel problematizes beliefs regarding "blood" popular among whites in her day. Rather than writing blood as determinant of character and destiny, Hopkins argues that environment is responsible for an individual's actions and choices. Moreover, the event that sets in motion her narrative of dispersed families is the suspicion that Grace Montfort, the Smith's foremother and wife of a wealthy planter, is of mixed race: "Thar's too much cream color in the face and too little blud seen under the skin fer a genooine white 'ooman'" (41). As a result of this unfounded suspicion, Grace's husband is killed, she is whipped and later commits suicide, and her sons fall into the hands of Anson Pollock. One son, Jesse, escapes his enslavement and takes on the "character of a fugitive slave . . . [and] from the first cast his lot with the colored people of the community" (78). Hopkins clearly represents Jesse Montfort as taking on blackness as a subject position.

<sup>24</sup> This phrase, "as white as," recurs in the writings of nineteenth-century white Americans. Transcribing the history of Louisa Picquet, an "octoroon," through a series of interviews, the Reverend Mattison repeatedly asks Louisa if her children and any other slaves she knew were "as white as" her. See H. Mattison. "Louisa Picquet, The Octoroon; Or Inside Views of Southern Domestic Life." 1861. *Collected Black Women's Narratives. The Schomburg Library of Nineteenth-Century Black Women Writers*. Ed. Henry Louis



Gates, Jr. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1988. Mary Chesnut refers to her slave Martha Adams in her diary as "so nearly white" (qtd in Carby, *Reconstructing* 31).

<sup>25</sup> James Oliver Horton notes that Election Days or governor elections were more than festive occasions: "The festival might last a week or more . . . and involved the election of a 'governor' or 'king'. . . . Among blacks these were important positions of substantial political power to which only men were elected. Moreover, those who voted for the office holders . . . during the festival days were men" (670). Interestingly, while these communal parodies upheld gender division while signifying on whiteness, Harper's and Hopkins's parodies contest not only their era's notion of "race" but also of gender.

**Policing the Bounds of Race:  
Jessie Fauset's *The Chinaberry Tree* and Nella Larsen's *Quicksand***

My grandmother warned me away from red . . . nice girls did not wear red. . . . When she warned us away from red, she reinforced the persistent historical reality that black women's bodies are a site of public negotiations and private loss.

-Karla F.C. Holloway, *Codes of Conduct*

I'm a young woman and ain't done running around.  
I'm a young woman and ain't done running around.

. . . . .  
I ain't no high yella, I'm a deep killa brown.

-Bessie Smith, "Young Woman's Blues"

Black women writers in the early twentieth century challenged racist ideologies that continued to mythologize white womanhood as pure and black womanhood as immoral. Jessie Fauset, the most prolific novelist of the Harlem Renaissance, and Nella Larsen, the first black female novelist to be awarded a Guggenheim fellowship, parodied the modern age's notion of womanhood and racial difference. Politics of representation continued to be fraught with complications for African Americans in the 1920s and 1930s, a politics rendered more complex by a cult of primitivism in full swing as whites descended nightly on Harlem. While Fauset and Larsen wrote parodic novels as had Frances Harper and Pauline Hopkins before them, the empowerment Harper and Hopkins believed would follow from their representations of African Americans is critiqued in novels like Larsen's *Quicksand* (1928) and Fauset's *The Chinaberry Tree* (1931). Fauset and Larsen present the "emancipatory texts" of womanhood and bourgeois individualism represented in Harper's and Hopkins's novels as displaced from a democratic African American politics by the 1920s and 1930s.<sup>1</sup> Contrary to what Harper and Hopkins

envisioned, Larsen's and Fauset's novels represent a black middle class that restricts women, apes whites, and pursues a bourgeois lifestyle of materialism that furthers white economic and social interests and, at times, the commodification of "blackness." The noble black womanhood and the bourgeois individualism depicted in Harper's and Hopkins's novels as opportunities for African Americans to imagine their full participation in nineteenth-century American society, become problematized in Fauset's and Larsen's fiction.

African Americans began moving into Harlem in the early 1900s from the Tenderloin and San Juan Hill districts of Manhattan.<sup>2</sup> In *This Was Harlem*, Jervis Anderson relates accounts of riots and vicious white attacks on blacks that served as catalysts for a mass migration of African Americans from the middle West Side to Harlem. Hell's Kitchen, an area of the middle West Side running from Broadway to 8th Avenue between 34th and 42nd Streets, was the scene of rioting in 1900 and "had become . . . the most warlike area in all of Manhattan" (Anderson 43). These intermittent riots culminated on August 12 in an attack on African Americans that according to most accounts was led by police. The event was investigated, but as James Weldon Johnson reported, "colored citizens who testified to having been beaten by the police were themselves treated as persons accused of crime. . . . The investigation turned out to be a sham and a whitewash" (qtd in Anderson 45). By the time a race riot broke out in 1905 in the San Juan Hill district, African Americans had come to distrust the police and the judicial system to protect them, and left the area for the West Nineties and Harlem.

In addition to this migration within New York City was the second major migration from the rural South to Northern cities like Chicago and New York. African Americans migrated from the South to escape white violence, only to find riots in the North that, in some cases, lasted as long as five days before "order" was restored.<sup>3</sup>

Blacks also moved North for economic reasons; David Levering Lewis estimates that some "[t]hree hundred thousand, and possibly many more, Afro-American farmers, unskilled laborers, and domestics left the South before 1920" (20). Drought and the boll weevil disasters of 1915 and 1916, a decrease in European immigrant labor during the first World War, an increase in war-time industrialization that sent Northern factory agents South in search of laborers, and later the Great Flood of 1927 in the Mississippi Delta, culminated in the largest migration of African Americans northward. Cities like Chicago, and later Harlem, came to be called the promised land by African Americans.

However much Harlem was touted as a uniquely African American city set apart from larger white New York, it was white Americans who profited economically in Jazz-Age Harlem. Whites owned the majority of businesses and saloons in Harlem before 1920, even though many of these businesses displayed the "signs of Negroes and Negro firms" and were managed by African Americans. Jervis Anderson quotes the *Age* reporting in 1916 that of "145 businesses on the Negro stretch of Lenox Avenue, only twenty-three per cent . . . [were] owned and operated by blacks." Even though the figure had increased by 1921 -- "'about eighty percent' of the businesses on 135th Street between Lenox and Seventh Avenues were owned by blacks" -- African Americans in Harlem often frequented white owned businesses rather than those owned by members of their own community, citing better selection and a suspicion that black store owners believed their fellow African Americans owed them their business and consequently treated customers poorly (Anderson 66-67). The same white New Yorkers who would seek to drive African Americans from "their neighborhoods" and deplored the "blackening" of Harlem, set up business in the area solely to exploit a growing black market. They competed with African Americans largely in the saloon trade; by 1915 the National Urban League estimated that "there were ninety-eight saloons and liquor stores in

Harlem," an area that then stretched east of Eighth Avenue to the Harlem River between 140 130th and 145th streets. <sup>4</sup> White gangsters owned the most popular Harlem cabarets and speakeasies through the Jazz Age; many of these establishments, like Connie's Inn and The Cotton Club, served white patrons only and used intimidation tactics to prevent black-owned cabarets from booking top African American musicians. <sup>5</sup>

Ann duCille cogently sums up the results of white business interests in Harlem:

From record company, to Broadway theatre, to Harlem speakeasy (the overwhelming majority of which were owned by white racketeers), the "Negro craze" had made white men and women wealthy, while most of the impoverished black masses who were the putative subjects of the period's so-called authentic black art did not even know they had passed through a renaissance. (*Coupling* 79-80)

Most whites descended on Harlem after midnight, chauffeured from expensive cabaret to cabaret, seeing only the African Americans who served and entertained them. However, as the comments of a white journalist in the twenties reveal, whites knew of the poverty that existed alongside the lavish clubs, but their limited experience of Harlem facilitated their blindness: "'One must have his purse well garnished when visiting the place. A hundred-dollar bill will not go very far . . . in this luxuriously fitted-out cabaret. But what charm! What exoticism! One easily forgets that all Harlem is not like it! Harlem, the Harlem of the poor, overcrowded, underfed, with children crippled with rickets and scurvy. . .'" (qtd in Anderson 172). White Americans were interested in purchasing a certain type of "blackness," one tailored to flatter their self-image as a disillusioned, decadently civilized society. The cult of primitivism and its white Western followers -- from Picasso and Stravinsky in Europe, to Ezra Pound and T.S. Eliot at Mabel Dodge's retreats in Taos, New Mexico -- sought the "purity" of an innocent and uninhibited vitality lost to the modern industrial age.

What was ostensibly new in the Jazz Age was white America's fascination with

the musical, dramatic, and literary output of the "New Negro." However this voyeuristic<sup>141</sup> fascination was all too familiar, having been registered nearly a century earlier with the popularity of spirituals, minstrelsy, and the later development of vaudeville.<sup>6</sup> The "New Negro" was as predictable as the new fad of primitivism, for white Americans sought the same version of "blackness" they had always sought -- carefree, spontaneous, and physical. *Collier's* magazine described Harlem as "'a national synonym for naughtiness.'" and "'a jungle of jazz'" (qtd in Anderson 185). Whites visited Harlem to shed their inhibitions, visit the "jungle," and rejoin "civilization" after last call as one white New Yorker related in 1926: "'One by one, the cherished biases are taken off like arctic overcoats. It becomes natural to laugh and shout in the consciousness of an emotional holiday. Then when the last ambiguously worded song is done, one puts on again one's hat, coat, and niceties, and once again is staid, proper, and a community pillar'" (qtd in Anderson 168-69). White Americans sought difference in Harlem, but an easily accessible difference. Moreover, they believed they found what they once had, an innocence and vitality that a capitalistic and changing world had robbed them of; in this sense white Americans believed the "difference" they fetishized reflected their past selves.

The similarity to an earlier and uncorrupted American culture with which white primitivists invested black "difference" is as contrary as the intent and inevitable result of their fetishization of "blackness." In "Writing up the New Negro," Chip Rhodes argues that in seeking an escape from capitalism, primitivists only furthered consumerism:

[White Americans] discovered in black culture all those innocent virtues they felt whites no longer possessed due to coerced compromises with modern capitalism. . . . However . . . this ideology informed rather than antagonized corporate capitalism because this human essence found expression . . . in the consumer marketplace. (192-93)

White primitivists were ultimately interested in an unchanged black essence, an essence 142 that they believed all humanity shared. However, that is where this essential similarity ended, for the fetishization also entailed the repeated reassurance that whites had moved beyond such a "primitive" state. Flocking to Harlem, white Americans shed their inhibitions only to prove to themselves that they could easily do them again, a reassurance they purchased night after night.

Rhodes observes that the cult of primitivism racialized "socially and economically useful `instincts'" (197), but who profited from the consumerism of Harlem? Black artists and performers received the unprecedented interest of white publishing houses, white recording companies, and the Great White Way. But this interest, which reached its apex in the middle and late 1920s, was also objectifying to an extreme, as Arna Bontemps's recollections of being young and black in Harlem reveal:

Within a year or two we began to recognize ourselves as a "group" and to become a little self-conscious about our "significance." When we were not too busy having fun, we were shown off and exhibited and presented in scores of places, to all kinds of people. And we heard their sighs of wonder, amazement, sometimes admiration when it was whispered or announced that here was one of the "New Negroes." (qtd in Anderson 207)

Frequently, the black musicians who drew whites to Harlem did not profit economically from the attention. A form of transitional piano playing called "stride" that bridged classical ragtime and jazz was popular between 1914 and 1920. One of great stride innovators was Willie (the Lion) Smith, who recalled packed cabarets and poorly paid black musicians:

To the Harlem cabaret owners, to all night-club bosses, the money was on a one-way chute -- everything coming in, nothing going out. . . . It was your job to draw in the customers. All the owners had to do was count the money. For all this, they paid you off in uppercuts. That was a saying we got up in those days; it meant you were allowed to keep your tips, but you got no salary. Sometimes they would give us a small weekly amount -- like twenty dollars. That was known as a left hook. (qtd in Anderson 129)

Cabaret owners were not the only white Americans who profited from the cult 143  
of primitivism and, more directly, from representations of the "New Negro." Perhaps the  
most controversial white figure of the literary scene, both during the 1920s and 30s as  
well as in the Harlem of our present imagination, was Carl Van Vechten. Van Vechten  
was an enabling presence in the New Negro Renaissance: he was influential in *Vanity  
Fair's* publication of Countee Cullen's and Langston Hughes's early poems, convinced his  
publisher Alfred A. Knopf to publish Hughes's first collection of poetry, and encouraged  
Nella Larsen to publish and continue to write fiction. Of Van Vechten, James Weldon  
Johnson said no one had done "more to forward" the renaissance of African American  
writing (qtd in Anderson 215).<sup>7</sup> However, Van Vechten's contribution to the New Negro  
Renaissance is complicated by the nature of his very interest in Harlem, an interest he  
characterized as "violent," "almost an addiction," and which he predicted would soon  
fade: "Doubtless, I shall discard them too in time" (qtd in duCille, *Coupling* 76).<sup>8</sup> Van  
Vechten's fascination with Harlem was common knowledge and the source of derision:  
"*Vanity Fair* noted his 'deep tan,' and the fashionable caricaturist Miguel Covarrubias  
sketched a black Van Vechten with the subtitle 'A Prediction.' 'Go inspectin' like Van  
Vechten,' crooned Andy Razaf . . . in 'Go Harlem'" (Worth 462). Harlem paid off for  
Van Vechten before he "discarded" African American writers and the cabarets; *Nigger  
Heaven*, published by Knopf in 1926, was a huge commercial success despite and  
because of the scandal it created. Most African Americans who read *Nigger Heaven* or  
had heard of its subject matter called it demeaning to the race. While Van Vechten  
insisted the title was an ironic reference to the vernacular term for the blacks-only  
balcony sections of theatres, his call to black writers to exploit the riches of Harlem life  
indicates a far less self-conscious stance:



The squalor of Negro life, the vice of Negro life, offer a wealth of novel, 144 exotic, picturesque material to the artist. . . . Are negro writers going to write about this exotic material while it is still fresh or will they continue to make a free gift of it to white authors who will exploit it until not a drop of vitality remains? (qtd in Worth 471)

Langston Hughes, who along with James Weldon Johnson, was one of the few Harlem writers who maintained they were not incensed by the novel, wrote in a 1927 issue of the *Courier* that even though Harlemites denounced the book as a betrayal, they were all reading it: "[N]o book has ever been better advertised by those who wished to damn it. Because it was declared obscene everybody wanted to read it and I'll venture to say that more Negroes bought it than ever purchased a book by a Negro author" (qtd in Worth 465). Imbedded in Hughes's remarks is a reference to the effect primitivism in general, and Van Vechten's novel in particular, had on readership and, in turn, on African American writers. White interest in the "New Negro" carried with it expectations of "authentic" blackness, expectations shared by publishers that became restrictive for African American writers. Amritjit Singh speculates that *Nigger Heaven* "had a crippling effect on the self-expression of many black writers by either making it easier to gain success riding the bandwagon of primitivism, or by making it difficult to publish novels that did not fit the . . . commercial success formula adopted by most publishers for black writers" (25).<sup>9</sup> In "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain," Hughes characterizes New Negro writers as caught between both an African American and a white politics of representation that they were beginning to refuse:

"Oh, be respectable, write about nice people, show how good we are," say the Negroes. "Be stereotyped, don't go too far, don't shatter our illusions about you, don't amuse us too seriously. We will pay you," say the whites . . . . We younger Negro artists who create now intend to express our dark-skinned selves without fear or shame. If white people are pleased we are glad. If they are not, it doesn't matter. We know we are beautiful. And ugly too. The tom-tom cries and the tom-tom laughs. If colored people are pleased we are glad. If they are not, their displeasure doesn't matter

either. We build our temples for tomorrow, strong as we know how, and 145  
we stand on top of the mountain, free within ourselves. (694)

Hughes's call to New Negro writers to resist both the conservative African American's and the white primitivist's notion of "blackness" in order to "express [their] dark-skinned selves" was intended to defy the commodification of things black during the Harlem Renaissance. However, Hughes's version of uncommodified and "authentic" African American expressivity has become our late twentieth-century vogue -- canons and critical theory are built on the litmus test of how "black-skinned" both the self and the expression are judged to be. Is African American expressivity liberated in our time, as Hughes believed possible; or, as Ann duCille ponders, "Are we, in our attempts at cultural criticism, modern-day primitivists? Are our Afrocentric interests and our vernacular theories and our feminist concerns for female agency colluding with primitivist proclivities like those that helped to bring the black 'other' into vogue in the 1920s?" (*Coupling* 85)<sup>10</sup> Which texts are illuminated and which elided by the current ascendancy of blues and vernacular theories of African American literature?

Although Jessie Fauset and Nella Larsen approached the primitivism of the Harlem Renaissance differently, they shared a keen sense of both its workings and key proponents. Through her position as literary editor of *Crisis* from 1919 to 1924, the official publication of the NAACP, Jessie Fauset was instrumental in the careers of writers we have come to see as central to the Harlem Renaissance: Jean Toomer, Countee Cullen, Langston Hughes, and Claude McKay. While Fauset freely admitted to personally disliking certain aspects of modernist technique and wrote what has been deemed "conservative" fiction, she did not allow her taste to interfere with the encouragement of young African American writers, as this letter to Jean Toomer dated February 17, 1922 indicates:

Where did you get a chance to work out your technique? . . . You must 146  
have studied and practiced to achieve it. I think in some cases it is still a  
little difficult in its form, that is you are a little inclined to achieve style at  
the expense of clearness, but doubtless that will disappear. . . . I think the  
modern tendency is toward an involving of ideas, -- a sort of immeshing  
the kernel of thought in envelopes of words. I don't like it and hope that  
you will not fall too deeply into it.<sup>11</sup>

In fact, Fauset frequently recognized African American literary talent well before any of her contemporaries. In January of 1923 Fauset recommended Jean Toomer's writing to Arthur B. Spingarn, saying he would make a "contribution to literature distinctly negroid and without propaganda" (qtd in Sylvander 60).<sup>12</sup> Fauset "discovered" Langston Hughes, published his early poetry in *Crisis*, and introduced him to other writers in Harlem (Sylvander 62). Lewis documents the importance of gatherings at Fauset's apartment: "Her large apartment . . . became, like those of Regina Anderson, Charles Johnson, James Weldon Johnson, and Walter White, a shelter for arriving talent, as well as a forum for cultural activity" (123).

However, while Fauset's apartment was known as a gathering place for "New Negroes," she was very reluctant to invite whites interested in the Harlem literary scene. recalls Langston Hughes: "White people were seldom present . . . because Jessie Fauset did not feel like opening her home to mere sightseers, or faddists momentarily in love with Negro life" (*Big Sea* 247). Fauset, as Barbara Christian puts it, "was not fooled by the fad of primitivism" (43); moreover, she distrusted Carl Van Vechten and his predilection for Harlem. In an undated letter to Hughes sent in the early 1920s, Fauset writes of returning from France to find Harlem a changed place:

I was interested in your diagnosis of V.V. [Van Vechten]. I don't know what his motives may be for attending and making possible these mixed parties. But I do know that the motives of some of the other pale-faces will not bear inspection. I've been home five weeks and (as you said to me these things are only for your eyes) already I've seen such remarkable manifestations of a changing social order that I am ready to retire

bewildered. However if I'm going to be a writer I have certainly got to face life, get into it, mix with it. Ideals are not a good forcing-bed for ideas. . . .<sup>13</sup> 147

The popular conception of Jessie Fauset is of a woman who decidedly did not "get into it, mix with it." Fauset's focus on the black bourgeoisie in her fiction, her *soirées* at which no alcohol was served and guests discussed literature, and her preference to avoid Harlem's primitive vogue, quite likely all contributed to her reputation as conservative, a member of the "Rear Guard." Claude McKay, of whom Fauset wrote, "He is a better artist than a man I imagine." criticized her in *A Long Way From Home* (1937): "Miss Fauset is prim and dainty as a primrose, and her novels are quite as fastidious and precious" (qtd in Sato 68).<sup>14</sup> If Fauset's response to an era that "exoticized" African Americans was to lead what many regarded as a "conservative" life, she seems to have been aware that this was a role like any other. In 1922, Fauset was approached to translate *Batouala* by René Maran, a French West Indian writer and winner of France's Prix Goncourt; she decided against doing so, believing it would be taken as a step out of character: "I know my own milieu too well. If I should translate that book over my name, I'd never be considered "respectable" again" (qtd in Lewis 123). She reveals herself to be keenly aware of how others perceived her, of the role or character she had taken on in their minds.

Nella Larsen lived and wrote in the same Harlem of speakeasies and literary salons that Fauset did, but she responded quite differently to the American interest in the "New Negro." Larsen, it seems, played to rather than eschewed the white fetishization of African Americans. Thadious Davis's biography of Larsen pieces together her life from fragmented and incomplete sources. Larsen was adept at recreating herself and appealing to the misperceptions and fabrications that passed for "blackness" in the 1920s and 30s. Born Nellie Walker in Chicago, she frequently maintained that she was born in "the

Virgin Islands or Danish West Indies not only for whites eager to hear about cultural primitives, but also for blacks curious to learn about an instant celebrity" (Davis 23). 148

Larsen clearly delighted in the ignorance of those for whom she "performed":

I went to lunch the other day with some people I knew very little (ofays). In the course of our talk it developed that they would have been keenly disappointed had they discovered that I was not born in the jungle of the Virgin Isles. So I entertained them with quite a few stories of my childhood in the bush, and my reaction to the tom-tom undertone in Jazz. It was a *swell* luncheon.<sup>15</sup>

Davis contends that Larsen "welcomed the intense white interest in things Negro as an opportunity for herself and others to achieve " (242).

Larsen obviously turned Van Vechten's interest to her advantage; he gave her *Quicksand* manuscript to Knopf who published it. Her letters to Van Vechten refer to her attendance at frequent dinners and parties given by him and his wife Fania Marinoff.<sup>16</sup> From her correspondence with Van Vechten, as well as in her references to him in letters to her close friend Dorothy Peterson, Larsen seems to have cultivated what she considered to be a genuine friendship with him. Yet there are also glimpses in this correspondence of Larsen playing to Van Vechten's penchant for stereotyped "blackness": "Carl would adore the Negro streets. They look like stage settings. And the Negroes themselves! I've never seen anything quite so true to what's expected. Mostly black and good natured and apparently quite shiftless, frightfully clean and decked out in the most appalling colours; but some how just right. Terribly poor."<sup>17</sup> Larsen writes this letter upon arriving in Nashville, where her husband Elmer Imes had taken up a position at Fisk University. Larsen herself had studied at Fisk. Quoting this letter in her biography of Larsen, Davis notes that Larsen deliberately cultivates an ignorance of working-class black life in Nashville quite likely to "impress Marinoff and Van Vechten with her reportage and her implicit sophistication in contrast to her southern surroundings" (356).

I would add that whether or not Larsen wanted to appear sophisticated in comparison to 149 southern blacks, she clearly narrates what she knows "Carl would adore," consciously manipulating and mocking Van Vechten's fascination with what he took to be "blackness" and his preconceptions of Southern "Negroes" -- "shiftless," "good natured," and dressed in "appalling colours."

Despite the fact that Fauset and Larsen seem to have been keenly aware of, and self-consciously positioned themselves within or against, Harlem's politics of representation, they have been largely judged to be conservative. Similarly, their novels have been historically received as reflections of a small, privileged segment of the African American population. Addison Gayle groups the fiction of James Weldon Johnson, Fauset, and Larsen together as examples of surrendered African American identity: "The end result of the journey from land, from one's roots, from one's ancestral past, means to sever all relationships with the race. . . . It means too, this journey from race, and thus from self, to surrender one's identity, which once lost is impossible to regain again" (120). Larsen has fared much better than Fauset, the critical consensus being that she is a superior writer, though nevertheless a member of the "Rear Guard." Both writers, however, have been consistently assigned the motivation of attempting to prove that blacks are no different from whites and, in turn, they have been relegated to the position of cultural mediators. Mary Dearborn praises Larsen for having "achieved that much-maligned and problematic goal: she showed that black experience was like white experience" (60). Barbara Christian, on the other hand, condemns Fauset for the same reason:

Her novels insist that the upper-middle-class Negro has the same values as the upper-class white. . . . The problem with Fauset's novels is that she gives us this particular Negro exclusively and as the representative of what the race is capable of doing. . . . [B]ecause she was so conscious of being

an image maker and because she accepted wholesale American values, 150  
except on the issue of race, her novels hardly communicate the intellectual  
depth that some of her articles do. (41-43)<sup>18</sup>

These assessments of Fauset's and Larsen's work reflect an understanding of the Harlem Renaissance as the first sustained collective effort by African American artists to represent themselves and their culture freely and accurately. George Kent locates the accomplishment of the Renaissance in the period's movement "to gain authority in its portrayal of black life by the attempt to assert, with varying degrees of radicality, a disassociation of sensibility from that enforced by American culture and its institutions" (27). Such a "disassociation of sensibility" from the white bourgeois "mainstream" has been interpreted almost exclusively as a focus on "the folk," a figure which in turn has come to signify "authentic" African American experience. However, as Cary D. Wintz documents, Harlem's "New Negroes" did not come from working-class urban backgrounds, nor did they have strong connections to the rural South:

The black intelligentsia and virtually all of the Renaissance writers came from thoroughly middle-class backgrounds. However, a number of writers tried . . . to capture the spontaneity they felt characterized the black lower classes. Many of their most successful novels were set against the life of the lower classes in the urban ghettos. (118-19)

I would question both the "authenticity" of black life represented in the works of major Renaissance figures, as well as the degree to which the writing of this period was "disassociated" from white cultural tastes. I find it telling that in an era of white fascination with "primitive" cultures and their art, the most successful African American novels of the 1920s and 30s focused on the rural folk or the urban working classes, and that these writers rarely represented the middle-class of which they were a part. Cheryl Wall's observations call into question the veracity of claiming that New Negro writers resisted white influences to connect with a uniquely black artistic tradition:

The peculiar demands of the Jazz Age further complicated matters for the

Harlem bourgeoisie. As more and more white New Yorkers, like Americans generally, were drawn to black culture -- or at least what they believed to be black culture -- the New Negroes felt compelled to increase their own identification with their traditions. Unfortunately, they were often as ignorant of these traditions as anyone else, and embraced the popular imitations instead. (100)

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Those writers who represented an African American culture of which they had limited experience and knowledge (but one that clearly interested whites) are not accused of commodifying or betraying their "blackness," while those writing from and of the black middle-class have been criticized for adopting white values.

In fact, the black bourgeoisie was so rarely represented that those writers, like Fauset and Larsen, who depicted this class and the experience with which they were most familiar have been accused of distorting and misrepresenting African American life and culture. Ann duCille argues that this notion of the middle-class black writer as pariah continues to plague our own historical moment: "Middle-class, when applied to black artists and their subjects, becomes a pejorative, a sign of having mortgaged one's black aesthetic to the alien conventions of the dominant culture" ("Blues Notes" 423). Ironically, such writers are perceived as "selling-out," when the market to which they supposedly "mortgaged" their art and themselves was buying elsewhere, getting as much of the uninhibited "real thing" as they could. Moreover, writers we currently hail as faithfully representing African American vernacular culture nevertheless silenced certain aspects of African American lived experience in the 1920s and 30s. Hazel Carby has argued that the second migration North of rural African Americans from the South, and with it the growth of an African American urban working class, made it impossible "to mobilize an undifferentiated address to 'the black people'" (*Reconstructing* 164). Yet we have recreated this period as one that accomplished precisely that. Moreover, those we have credited with representing "the people" are figures like Zora Neale Hurston, who,



Carby goes on to argue, represented "'the people' . . . as a metaphorical 'folk,' which in its rural connotations avoided and ignored the implication of the presence of black city workers" (*Reconstructing* 164). 152

Carby, and duCille more recently, encourage us to consider whether what we elevate as "genuine" expressions of African American culture and experience is merely one representation among many. We have canonized and, in doing so, homogenized a period and culture that was informed by two polarized visions of African American expressivity as well as a range of positions in between. Wintz contends that "the Harlem Renaissance blended a somewhat militant and avowedly independent, bohemian outlook which emphasized freedom of expression and the quest for black identity with a more moderate attempt at literary success and middle-class respectability" (82). Critics have labelled the latter an aging "Rear Guard" with diminished influence; consequently, we have attended to the former, focusing on writers like Jean Toomer, Langston Hughes and Zora Neale Hurston. In fact, both schools of artistic representation were alive, well, and in dialogue during this period.

While there was disagreement among African American intellectuals on the Harlem scene as to what representation would best serve the interests of blacks, many were in agreement as to the importance of artistic achievement in refuting racist stereotypes and, in turn, gaining political and social equality in America. As bell hooks documents in "An Aesthetic of Blackness," this link between art and politics has been part of a "historical aesthetic legacy" for African Americans:

Art was seen as intrinsically serving a political function. Whatever African-Americans created in music, dance, poetry, paintings, etc. it was regarded as testimony, bearing witness, challenging racist thinking which suggested that black folks were not fully human, were uncivilized, and that the measure of this was our collective failure to create "great" art. (105)

The most influential proponent of a political aesthetic in the 1920s and 30s was the Urban League's Charles S. Johnson. Johnson took up the position as editor of *Opportunity* magazine in 1922 and turned it into the period's only established African American magazine to focus on black art and literature.<sup>19</sup> According to Lewis, Johnson came to see art as the only arena that had not already been closed to African Americans:

Johnson . . . . gauged more accurately than perhaps any other Afro-American intellectual the scope and depth of the national drive to "put the nigger in his place" after the war, to keep him out of the officer corps, out of labor unions and skilled jobs, out of the North and quaking for his very existence in the South -- and out of politics everywhere. Johnson found that one area alone . . . had not been proscribed. No exclusionary rules had been laid down regarding a place in the arts. (48)

Johnson was not naive; he was well aware that whites were interested in "black" performance even though that interest was largely in the blackface acts of minstrelsy and vaudeville, and he knew that white writers had already profited from depicting "negroes" in fiction. Johnson saw this as an opportunity to expose a ready-made white audience to the artistic gifts of African Americans.

Charles S. Johnson was joined in his efforts by Alain Locke, who guest-edited the March 1925 issue of *Survey Graphic* entitled "Harlem -- The Mecca of the New Negro," and later that year published an expanded version titled *The New Negro*. Locke maintained that the African American's "more immediate hope rests in the revaluation by white and black alike of the Negro in terms of his artistic endowments and cultural contributions, past and prospective" (qtd in Worth 466). In addition, James Weldon Johnson -- who worked for the NAACP throughout the 1920s as secretary to the association and director of its campaign against lynching -- was active in promoting the young Harlem writers during his lectures across the country, and edited several anthologies of New Negro writing. In 1924 during a speech at Howard University, James Weldon Johnson contended that cultural achievements were the most effective weapon

against racism: "I can conceive of nothing that will go further to raise the status of the Negro in America than the work done by great Afroamerican creative artists" (qtd in Wintz 105).<sup>20</sup> 154

W.E.B. Du Bois seems to have been one of the only prominent African American intellectuals who doubted that art alone could virtually transform the position of blacks in American society. To be sure, Du Bois was concerned throughout his career with the representation of African Americans in art and popular culture, and advocated what was then regarded, and continues to be seen, as a "conservative" approach to this issue. Du Bois's notion of the "Talented Tenth" was dependent upon a re-presentation of successful African Americans in a positive light as representing the capabilities of the race as a whole; this often translated into an exclusionary elitism. However, as much as Du Bois emphasized a re-presentation of African American life and culture as a corrective to white racist stereotypes, he did not believe that this was a primary avenue to social and political advancement as did Charles S. Johnson, Alain Locke, and James Weldon Johnson. In *Crisis* from March to September 1926, Du Bois ran a series of responses from over twenty writers and critics, both black and white, to the question "The Negro in Art: How Shall He Be Portrayed?" Whites said blacks were too sensitive regarding their portrayal in fiction; blacks revealed a mistrust of white writers and publishers. Du Bois saw the results of this survey as supporting his own belief that a direct correlation between publishing works that re-presented African Americans and dismantling institutionalized racism was not possible. For Du Bois, white influence in the publishing industry, and white self-interest in caricaturing African Americans, complicated the politics of aesthetics.

It is arguable that racial boundaries were just as rigidly maintained in the 1920s and 30s as they had been during the retrenchment following the failure of Reconstruction.

maintained by the existence of the very cult of primitivism that repeatedly traversed 155  
them for artistic inspiration, social entertainment, and psychic gratification. In many  
senses the Jazz Age was not as "free" as it has often been represented, and certainly it was  
not free for "the Negro," however new. As Robert Worth documents, "Lynchings, having  
faded almost into the single digits for three years, went up considerably" in early 1926  
(466). In the early twenties, President Harding had promised to enforce civil rights. but in  
actuality denounced social equality and racial amalgamation. Harlem itself was  
becoming overcrowded by the late twenties, which resulted in health problems and the  
highest infant and general mortality rates in New York City. By 1930, the mortality rate  
of African Americans from tuberculosis in the city was five times higher than that for  
whites. Job ghettoization meant a life lived on the edge of poverty for most black  
Harlemites. School district zoning was manipulated to ensure segregated schooling and  
often resulted in sub-standard facilities and resources for blacks, while trade schools  
would not train African Americans in fields dominated by whites (Wintz 8-29). In such a  
climate of racial segregation, discrimination, and violence, Fauset's and Larsen's  
representation of race and gender as performable identities amounted to a highly political  
undertaking. Fauset and Larsen were radical for their time. more radical one could argue  
than leading African American political figures, in their configuration of "race" as a  
power-effect of white supremacy rather than some tangible essence.

The mulatto trope as Fauset and Larsen employ it is ambivalent, just as white  
Americans imagined mulattoes to be ambivalent beings mentally confused as a result of  
"blood" intermixture, torn between white and black cultures, and symbols of both taboo  
and transgression. In *Pocahontas's Daughters*, Mary Dearborn argues that the mulatto.  
"as an unsuccessful repression, represents a naming of the taboo" (150). The taboo to  
which Dearborn refers is miscegenation, and the mulatto surely names the taboo of

"illegitimate" racial mixing. Moreover, the mulatto is a figure of genealogical illegitimacy, a "bastard" the founding fathers refused to acknowledge. But more than this, the mulatto, being neither white nor black but both, threatens "race" based as it is in America on the uniform and contained black-white binary. In an effort to stabilize and maintain the uniformity of "race," white colonists refused to acknowledge the mulatto's genealogy and constructed her racial identity as "black" despite her biraciality. Judith Butler's observations regarding the construction and use of homosexuality and bisexuality as categories of "abject being" to define the heterosexual individual as "subject" is applicable to white America's creation of "the mulatto":

This exclusionary matrix by which subjects are formed thus requires the simultaneous production of a domain of abject beings, those who are not yet "subjects" but who form the constitutive outside to the domain of the subject. . . . This zone of uninhabitability will constitute . . . that site of dreaded identity against which -- and by virtue of which -- the domain of the subject will circumscribe its own claim to autonomy. . . . (*Bodies* 3)

However, this very refusal and attempt to silence the threat the mulatto poses is a far more pronounced acknowledgement than America has ever been willing to admit. Throughout the term's history, "mulatto" has signalled a failure to naturalize the construction of "race" as a polarization of white and black.

In "Notes on an Alternative Model -- Neither/Nor," Hortense Spillers argues that the term "mulatto" designates "a special category of thingness that isolates and overdetermines the human character to which it points. . . . America's 'tragic' mulatto exists for others . . . in an attribution of the illicit . . . that a simplified cultural patrimony wishes to deny. But in that very denial the most dramatic and visible of admissions is evident" (167). If the mulatto has been identified as black and assigned to the "other" side of the color line so that whiteness may "remain" ostensibly pure, she has also been labelled "illegitimate" by African Americans. "Yella," "high yella," "all that yellow gone

to waste" -- the biracial individual has been reminded she is "not black enough" by African Americans, and has been seen at times as illegitimate in this community. The mulatto's racial identity, then, has been constructed by white Americans as decidedly "blacker" than either biology would indicate, or than African Americans were often willing to acknowledge. As Spillers contends, the mulatto has been "overdetermined" in American culture from both sides of the color line, but this overdetermination may create the very possibility of a subversion. Stuart Hall argues of black popular culture that the "underlying overdetermination [of] black cultural repertoires constituted from two directions at once," that is incorporating European- and African-inflected forms, "may be more subversive than you think. It is to insist that in black popular culture, strictly speaking, ethnographically speaking, there are no pure forms at all" (28). The overdetermination of the mulatto's identity does not result in an effective silencing of the threat to "race" that she poses, but rather speaks volumes regarding the impossibility of "pure forms" and stable meanings when it comes to race. The mulatto as "excluded site" not only bounds and constitutes the limits of whiteness and blackness, but also "haunt[s] those boundaries as the persistent possibility of their disruption and rearticulation" (Butler. *Bodies* 8).

"Race" has depended upon the construction and circulation of stereotypes in America, as it has elsewhere in the colonized world. These stereotypes focus on the "pathology" of blackness and its visible "difference" from a decorporealized whiteness, which is absent from debates regulating racial identity yet ever present as an ideal of purity. Homi Bhabha argues that an integral element of colonial discourse is fixity in its constructions of "otherness," and that this fixity is sought through the stereotype. However, as Bhabha goes on to theorize, the power of the stereotype lies not in its fixity but in its ambivalence:

For it is the force of ambivalence that gives the colonial stereotype its 158  
currency: ensures its repeatability in changing historical and discursive  
conjunctures; informs its strategies of individuation and marginalization;  
produces the effect of . . . truth and predictability which . . . must always  
be in *excess* of what can be empirically proved or logically construed. (66)

To be sure, the mulatto has been constructed selectively as a being superior to "pure blacks" and a potential ally to whites, as well as an effete hybrid in whom a mixture of white and black blood results in a high degree of criminality and viciousness. But if the stereotype's power, as well as the power of "race" as a "discursive formation" and formative discourse, lies in the ambivalence of overdetermined identities, that very ambivalence may also be the site of a potential subversion.<sup>21</sup> I would contend that while shifting and selective stereotyping of "the mulatto" has served very effectively to marginalize biracial individuals, the shifts in the stereotype betray the constructedness of "race." Moreover, the ambivalence with which the mulatto herself has been invested proves the impossibility of pure forms -- she is at once neither white nor black, and both. The ambivalence of the mulatto's constructed identity, then, exposes "race" as a formative discourse that cannot refer to a "pure" body or form without simultaneously regulating the formation of that body and its meaning.

In *The Chinaberry Tree* and *Quicksand*, Fauset and Larsen foreground the efforts to fix the mulatto by dramatizing the preoccupation with legitimacy that is held by both whites and the black bourgeoisie. Fauset's novel centers on Sal Strange, her daughter Laurentine, and niece Melissa Paul. The Stranges find themselves alienated in the small community of Red Brook, New Jersey because of Sal's long-standing relationship with a white man, Colonel Holloway. Holloway publicly recognizes Laurentine as his daughter, providing for her and Sal through his life and after his death, but this recognition and their continued relationship even after his marriage cause his white wife to effect their "social [and] economic ostracism" (22). Fauset plays on notions of Laurentine's

illegitimacy as a mulatto and the offspring of an "unsanctioned" relationship with the surname "Strange," and repeated references to "that Strange blood" (25). Laurentine takes on a metaphorical status in Red Brook: 159

Gradually . . . the case of Sal Strange and her daughter, Laurentine, became confused, the sign was accepted for the thing signified and a coldness and despite toward this unfortunate mother and child became a fetish without any real feeling or indignation on the part of the executioners for the offenses committed. Neglect of these two women became crystallized. (22)

In white minds, Laurentine is associated with popular conceptions of "the mulatto," including a lack of social inhibitions that was believed to culminate in vice and criminal behavior: "'H'm. well whoever she is, she's like the rest of them . . . you know me, a broad-minded man if ever there was one. But I tell you there's bad, there's vicious blood in that bunch. The town would do well to get rid of 'em'" (49). Just as Laurentine's "illegitimacy" is a metaphor for her mother's miscegenous relationship with a white man, Laurentine's "vicious blood" in turn demonizes both her young cousin Melissa and her mother. By extension, Melissa is seen as not only "high and mighty," but a dishonest "high yaller" like her cousin Laurentine:

"Who," fumed Pelasgie, "does she think she is? Comin there to Mrs. Brown's just as big as any of them real big colored folks from New York . . . I feels like goin' to her with her fine airs and tellin' her I may not be the high yaller she is, but at least if I'm black I'm honest. My family ain't never been mixed up with white folks yit." (233)

Fauset foregrounds the hypocrisy of whites who label mulattoes "vicious," yet institutionalize discrimination that favors light-skinned African Americans. The black bourgeoisie of Red Brook is comprised of professionals and merchants, the majority of whom are biracial and described as "brown" (99), or "bronze" (69). Laurentine is shunned by this group as well, not due entirely to her "bad blood" in this case, but largely because her mother's behavior has violated their strict moral code. The black middle



class is less offended by the fact of Sal's interracial relationship with Halloway, than 160  
they are by its nature. Neither Sal Strange nor Colonel Halloway attempt to hide their  
relationship; yet despite the fact that the "black bourgeoisie" or "colored aristocracy" not  
only acknowledged, but were reputed to be proud of their connections to prominent  
whites, Fauset portrays this class as hypocritically outraged when Sal Strange, a working-  
class girl, does the same. Even though Sal and Lauretine live a middle-class life  
supported by Halloway's bequest and Lauretine's dressmaking, they have lived most of  
their lives alienated from "colored people of [their] own rank and sympathies" (87).

The Stranges are also rejected by working-class members of the African  
American community. Denied the advantages that whites accord fair-skinned blacks,  
some working-class blacks of Red Brook use reminders of Lauretine's parentage to  
undermine what they regard as "uppity" behavior on the part of the Stranges, as well as  
the limited and precarious acceptance they eventually gain with some members of the  
town's black middle class: "'Take some of the shine outa that high and mighty Melissa  
Paul, think-so-much-of-hers'ef ever-sence-you-all-tuk-'er up. But ev'y-body 'round yere  
know that bad Strange blood, yessir-ee'" (292). The Stranges are selectively rejected, and  
their life of seclusion -- brought on by Sal's ostracization from the black community as a  
young woman -- is regarded as an act of holding themselves aloof from associations they  
believe beneath them.

Larsen also focuses on the mulatto's alienation from the African American  
community, despite the white American belief that constructing her identity as "black"  
renders the racially illegitimate legitimate. Larsen's heroine, Helga Crane, teaches at  
Naxos, a southern school for blacks where visiting white preachers extol the virtue of the  
students' knowing their place and keeping to it:

[I]f all Negroes would only take a leaf out of the book of Naxos and

conduct themselves in the manner of the Naxos products, there would be 161  
no race problem, because Naxos Negroes knew what was expected of  
them. They had good sense and they had good taste. They knew enough  
to stay in their places, and that, said the preacher, showed good taste. (3) <sup>22</sup>

Larsen ascribes to Helga's white relatives the fear and denial that has been a characteristic white response to the mulatto: Helga's white "stepfather, her step-brothers and sisters, and the numerous cousins, aunts, and other uncles . . . feared and hated her" (6). One could read the Crane family's denial of Helga as a historically accurate account of race relations in a society divided by racial segregation. African Americans who had migrated to the North often referred to Northern prejudice toward African Americans as a fear that "the black will rub off." In Helga's case, this resonates on two levels: a fear of "blackness" as some sort of contagion, but also a fear that as a mulatto she may be more white than the Cranes and other white Americans would care to contemplate. This fear acknowledges Helga's racial liminality. Victor Turner theorizes liminality as "a complex phase or condition. It is often the scene . . . for the emergence of a society's deepest values in the form of sacred dramas and objects. . . . But it may also be the venue and occasion for the most radical skepticism" (22). The mulatto as a liminal figure, then, is a repository for a skepticism that "race" may be contingent rather than stable; the logical extension of this is the fear that whiteness is also contingent rather than a "pure form." Consequently, the mulatto's liminality must be neutralized by legitimating her identity as "black," keeping her in her place, and consequently legitimating whiteness as "pure."

As a mulatto, Helga not only threatens the fixity of racial boundaries designed to keep the "other" in place, but she also unsettles the black middle-class who similarly fear that she may be crossing class borders. Filmmaker and cultural studies scholar Isaac Julien notes that crossing culturally policed lines -- in Helga's case, both racial and class lines -- "causes anxiety, [and] undermines the binary notions of self/other, black/white,

straight/queer" (259). However, Helga does not experience her indeterminacy as a potential ability to undermine constructed identities and thereby redress a power imbalance; instead, she feels a heightened sense of alienation:

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Her own lack of family disconcerted them. No family. That was the crux of the whole matter. For Helga, it accounted for everything, her failure here in Naxos, her former loneliness in Nashville. . . . Negro society, she had learned, was as complicated and as rigid in its ramifications as the highest strata of white society. If you couldn't prove your ancestry and connections, you were tolerated, but you didn't "belong." (8)

Significantly, those who are "disconcerted" by Helga's lack of family are the Vayles, members of the black bourgeoisie. Larsen points out that just as whites banish the mulatto in order to maintain the illusion of whiteness as a "pure" racial identity, the black middle-class polices prospective members in order to close ranks against "imposters" and "undesirables." The black middle class recognizes racial discrimination exercised by whites, but willingly blinds itself to its own discriminatory practices along class lines -- they may seek social and economic equality with whites, but not with all African Americans.

While Helga feels alienated from the black middle class in Nashville and Harlem, she is attracted to black Harlem only when it appears to conform to her notions of the area as exotic and colorful: "Helga caught herself wondering who they were, what they did . . . . What was passing behind those dark molds of flesh. Did they really think at all? Yet, as she stepped out into the moving multi-colored crowd, there came to her a queer feeling of enthusiasm, as if she were tasting some agreeable, exotic food" (30). Helga, however, seems more interested in a taste of Harlem than in calling it home, and her palate is very selective. Like the middle-class blacks she criticizes for "proclaiming loudly the undiluted good of all things Negro" while displaying a "disdainful contempt" for African American song, dance and speech, Helga prefers to distance herself from and

avoid identifying with the "black folk" she sees as "other."

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However, Helga's desire to hold herself aloof from Harlem is complicated by her own feelings of alienation. She has come to dislike the "Talented Tenth" and their talk of racial uplift while working to distinguish themselves from the very people they profess a desire to help; and she has received a "brief" and final rejection from her white Uncle in Chicago accompanied by a five thousand dollar cheque. Perhaps Helga's classism is as keen as that of her bourgeois friends, but I would also suggest that her sense of alienation from those African Americans she knows in Harlem, coupled with a rejection from her only family in America, may also be part of her insistence that she is "different":

Here the inscrutability of the dozen or more brown faces, all cast from the same indefinite mold, and so like her own, seemed pressing forward against her. . . . It was as if she were shut up, boxed up, with hundreds of her race, closed up with that something in the racial character which had always been, to her, inexplicable, alien. Why, she demanded in fierce rebellion, should she be yoked to these despised black folk? . . . "They're my own people, my own people," she kept repeating over and over to herself. It was no good. . . . She didn't, in spite of her racial markings, belong to these dark segregated people. She was different. She felt it. It wasn't merely a matter of color. It was something broader, deeper, that made folk kin. (54-55)

Helga both rejects "blackness" and feels alienated by an "inscrutable," "inexplicable, alien . . . racial character" that is simultaneously "so like her own" yet different. Helga's alienation is in part her own creation, in part her rejection of "despised black folk," but it is also complicated and heightened by the rejection she has experienced throughout her life. It is important to note that my reading of this scene is itself bound up with, and limited by, Larsen's own reputed sense of abandonment and by Larsen's "fellow feeling" for African Americans in Harlem. In a letter to Dorothy Peterson Larsen writes, "I'm still looking for a place to move. It's really rather ridiculous I suppose. but ----. Right now when I look out over the Harlem streets I feel just like Helga Crane in my novel. Furious at being cooped up with all these niggers." <sup>23</sup>

Helga's alienation from what she protests are her "own people," is even further 164 complicated by the fact that what she perceives as African American life and culture is a packaged "blackness" with a high market value amongst white Americans. Significantly, Helga's last outing in Harlem, and her final feelings of being "unhappy, misunderstood" amongst her middle-class African American friends, are set in a cabaret. Harlem nightclubs were often decorated with tropical plants, imitation African carvings, and "primitive" prints; the infamous and popular Cotton Club, for example, decorated its stage with plantation cabins and cotton bushes. Lena Horne recalls that shows at the Cotton Club "had a primitive naked quality that was supposed to make a civilized audience lose its inhibitions. The music had an intensive, pervasive rhythm -- sometimes loud and brassy, often weird and wild" (qtd in Anderson 175). Clubs that catered to white patrons lined 133rd Street, which by the late twenties had come to be known as "The Jungle." But as Jimmy Durante noted in 1929, "The average colored man you see along the streets in Harlem doesn't know any more about these dumps than the old maid in North Forks, South Dakota" (qtd in Lewis 208). It is highly ironic, then, that a white comedian be more aware of the difference between the "blackness" sold nightly in clubs and African American lived experience in Harlem than is Helga Crane.

Helga's rejection by her white relatives, her awareness that she does not "belong" to a black middle class that only "tolerates" her, and her repression of a "blackness" she does not recognize as constructed, foreground the traditional notion of the mulatto as a mediator and definer of boundaries between white and black.<sup>24</sup> Historically, those Southern states that accorded biracial individuals an intermediary status between whites and blacks, the *gens de couleur libre* as they were called in Louisiana, sought to consolidate and exert control over a group they believed would be useful in mediating relations between whites and black slaves, and quelling potential uprisings. These

elements of control and fear remain present in the construction of the mulatto's identity, 165 but as Fauset's and Larsen's representations dramatize, silence rather than acknowledgement is the key principle in mobilizing the mulatto to define rather than challenge boundaries. Michel Foucault's analysis of how the Victorian bourgeoisie defined and controlled sexuality proves illuminating on this point. In *The History of Sexuality, Volume I*, Foucault chronicles the entrenchment of distinctions between acceptable and "deviant" sexuality. He cites the brothel as a site of sexuality under interdict, an interdiction used by the bourgeoisie to represent certain forms of sexuality as illicit because outside the confines of reproductive sexual intercourse. Foucault documents both the operation and the results of such a manoeuvre: "Nothing that was not ordered in terms of generation . . . could expect sanction or protection. Nor did it merit a hearing. It would be driven out, denied, and reduced to silence. Not only did it not exist, it had no right to exist and would be made to disappear upon its least manifestation -- whether in acts or in words" (4).

Denial, banishment, and silence regarding unsanctioned sexuality in the Victorian era parallels both the construction of the mulatto's identity and her experience as represented in Fauset's and Larsen's novels. The Strange house literally marks the boundary between the town of Red Brook and the bordering countryside: "It stood at the end of a street which terminated gracefully in a meadow" (1). Laurentine not only lives on the outskirts of town, but also outside both black and white communities as a child: "the children at school whether white or colored never included her in their play" (7). The black bourgeoisie continue to hold her at a distance from their society when she reaches adulthood: "The street outside was lined with cars of colored ladies who had driven out . . . from New York, Newark, the Oranges, Trenton, Bordentown. . . . The place was full of . . . well-to-do, well-dressed women. . . . Not even Laurentine had been

asked to cross this threshold" (33-34).

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While Laurentine is driven out and excluded, Helga lives most of her life silenced from within the black middle class. She avoids referring to her family -- her West Indian father deserted her Danish mother -- but when she does, she is met with silence:

The woman felt that the story, dealing as it did with race intermingling and possibly adultery, was beyond definite discussion. For among black people, as among white people, it is tacitly understood that these things are not mentioned -- and therefore they do not exist. Sliding adroitly out from under the precarious subject to a safer, more decent one, Mrs. Hayes-Rore asked Helga what she was thinking of doing when she got back to Chicago. (39)

Mrs. Hayes-Rore advises Helga to keep her background to herself, "what others don't know can't hurt you" (41). Her white uncle's family in Chicago clearly wishes she would do the same: "[T]his woman, [her uncle's] wife . . . so plainly wished to dissociate herself from the outrage of her very existence . . . . She saw herself for an obscene sore in all their lives, at all costs to be hidden" (29). In fact, Helga is no more accepted for who she is by her "welcoming" white relatives in Denmark than she was in Chicago; her Aunt may call Helga's belief that "mixed marriages" bring only "trouble" a foolish one, but she also maintains that "We don't think of those things here. Not in connection with individuals, at least" (78). As in America, Helga is simultaneously black and "not black enough" in Denmark: "[A]n old countrywoman asked her to what manner of mankind she belonged and at Helga's replying: 'I'm a Negro,' had become indignant, retorting angrily that . . . she knew as well as everyone else that Negroes were black and had woolly hair" (76). Larsen dramatizes the asymmetrical construction of "race" in Helga's experiences as a "curiosity" in Denmark; Helga may be scrutinized as both black and not black enough, but the Danes certainly never entertain the notion that she may also be white: "To them this girl, this Helga Crane . . . was not to be reckoned seriously in their scheme of things. True, she was attractive, unusual, in an exotic, almost savage way, but she wasn't one of

them. She didn't at all count" (70).

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Foucault contends that what cannot be completely silenced from within will be allowed to exist only in "safely insularized forms," referred to only in "clandestine, circumscribed, and coded types of discourse" (4). The mulatto's naming of the taboo threatens, not simply because it voices miscegenation but because it manifests the failed attempt to fully silence or circumscribe any suggestion that "race" is not a stable and uniform entity. The "solution" then becomes the mulatto's alienation from, and position bordering, both races. Fauset and Larsen represent their mulatto heroines as corporealized boundaries separating white from black, "good" society from "disreputable." When the mulatto is relegated to, and remains at, the border between whiteness and blackness, she serves to consolidate these racial identities and an entire culture built around them. In *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression*, Stallybrass and White argue that "cultural identity is inseparable from limits; it is always a boundary phenomenon and its order is always constructed around the figures of its territorial edge" (200). As much as white Americans would have the mulatto circulate as "other" and African Americans be at times unwilling to accept her, the mulatto is anything but extraneous to these cultures.

Fauset and Larsen were writing during a period in which art and issues of representation were politically charged. The debate among African American intellectuals ranged between the conservative "Rear Guard," who feared "black bohemia" could too easily be misinterpreted by whites as signalling an "uncivilized" culture and was too readily exploitable in a white-dominated marketplace; and the "New Negroes," who felt their artistic expression was limited by such conservative aesthetics, and found the "Rear Guard's" emphasis on the middle-class an elitist misrepresentation of African American culture. Fauset and Larsen negotiated these waters, which were further



muddled for black women writers and artists by gender issues. All of the figures promoting the Harlem Renaissance were male, while women like Fauset -- who in reality played a crucial role in the workings of the era's literary production -- were relegated to supporting roles.<sup>25</sup> Fauset herself has been referred to as a "midwife" of the Harlem Renaissance, attending at and assisting a birth that has not been seen as also her own, despite her prolific literary career. Moreover, as Gloria Hull has detailed in *Color, Sex, and Poetry: Three Women Writers of the Harlem Renaissance*, "broad social factors and patterns of exclusion" affected black women writers who were "penalized for their gender" (7 & 29). Women writers had less access to patronage and support, with the exception of Zora Neale Hurston who impressed Alain Locke, the middle man between Charlotte Osgood Mason's coffers and young African American writers. "Even a certified misogynist like Locke (customarily he dismissed female students on the first class day with the promise of an automatic grade of C)," recognized Hurston's talent, writing to Charles S. Johnson that she was the most promising student he had seen in years at Howard University (Lewis 96).<sup>26</sup> However, Locke neither promoted nor offered encouragement to other black women writers of the 1920s and 30s.<sup>27</sup>

In addition to limited access to financial support, black women writers at times found it difficult to secure suitable publishers for their work. As Hull documents, Georgia Douglas Johnson could not find a major press to publish her third and arguably best volume of poetry in 1928, the height of the New Negro vogue. Fauset's first novel, *There is Confusion*, was rejected by the first publisher to read it because the company believed that "White readers just don't expect Negroes to be like this" (qtd in Starkey 219). Fauset continued to write against such stereotypical notions of African Americans and to have her work rejected because of it; in 1931 the Frederick A. Stokes Company, having published *Plum Bun* in 1929, expressed reluctance to publish *The Chinaberry*

*Tree*. Fauset corresponded with white critic and writer Zona Gale requesting that she write what amounted to a verification that a black middle class did indeed exist. The readers at Stokes, Fauset wrote, "declare plainly that there ain't no such colored people as these who speak decent English, are self-supporting and have a few ideals. . . . If I could find someone much better known than I, speaking with a more *authentic* voice. . ." (qtd in Sylvander 74, my emphasis). Carolyn Sylvander notes that the Stokes Company "used Zona Gale's introduction to *The Chinaberry Tree* prominently, with Gale's name on the cover and referred to her statements in its ads for the novel" (75). As late as 1931, then, white American publishers were pressuring African American authors to authenticate both their works and "*the black experience*" as it existed in white imaginations. This was a situation all too familiar to African American writers whose literary tradition had originated in slave narratives authenticated and authorized by white abolitionists. 169

African American writers also found themselves doubly burdened by both the demand for "positive" portrayals of the race and the voyeuristic interest of white publishers and readers in "exotic primitives." However, since these pressures often divided along gender lines with black female sexuality being the most valued commodity in the period (as the popularity of black women blues singers indicates), black women writers negotiated a more problematic politics of representation than did their male counterparts. Most critics have read Fauset and Larsen as writers adhering to a bourgeois representational politics in their depiction of black female characters.<sup>28</sup> But heeding Deborah McDowell's calls to attend to the ways in which Fauset and Larsen explore the possibilities of representing black female characters as sexual subjects, recent work on these authors has argued that they were far more daring than we have been led to believe.<sup>29</sup> Recently, Ann duCille has encouraged us to investigate "the role of ideology in shaping the period [the 1920s and 1930s], its artists, and its attention both to the folk and

to black female sexuality" (*Coupling* 69). She argues that to champion both the sexually<sup>170</sup> uninhibited lyrics of the blues and the "self-invented" black female blues singer as authentically black is a misreading of this era, as is reading Fauset's and Larsen's novels as sell-outs to white ideals a misreading of their work.<sup>30</sup> Instead, duCille argues, we might more productively read Fauset's and Larsen's texts as "unique in their attention to the extremes of their historical moment and the powers of competing ideologies and colliding material conditions" (70).

One way we might see this "attention to extremes" in their work is through their figuration of womanhood as a performative gender identity. Fauset and Larsen invoke the notion of the black female in two ways: firstly, as the uninhibited, erotic, and highly sexualized black female that is inscribed in fiction and popular cultural forms like the blues and cabaret dance revues; and secondly, as the "lady" proscribed by both the black bourgeoisie's and white America's conservative notions of womanhood. However, neither author inscribes these versions of womanhood as somehow "natural"; instead, Fauset and Larsen foreground the identities of the lady and the sexualized black female as performative rather than essential, and indict the restrictive nature of America's racialized female script.

Early twentieth-century ideals of womanhood turned on much the same markers as the nineteenth-century cult of true womanhood -- sexual purity, a responsibility to inculcate high moral standards in one's family, and attention to domestic matters. The "lady" and her opposite, the "red-hot mamma," were mobilized by white Americans to effectively draw racial bounds, much as they had used true and fallen womanhood in the previous century. Mulatto women were sexualized to an even greater degree than "pure black" women generally. They were said to "prey upon . . . [the men of] the pure-blood native race": and were believed to be "the chief sinners" amongst Americans of African

descent (Reuter 94 & 163). Joel Williamson notes that "light mulattoes in Harlem were 171 also . . . associated with pandering to salacious if not criminal tastes," a stereotype he speculates was, in part, the result of a policy on the part of cabaret owners to hire only fair-skinned African American women for their chorus lines (117). The mulatto ostensibly defined both the propriety of white womanhood and the extreme of illicit black female sexuality with her "salacious" behavior. The mulatto heroines in Fauset's and Larsen's novels, then, take on double border duty, defining the poles of womanhood as well as "race." Consequently, Hortense Spillers's contention that black female sexuality in America serves a function similar to Foucault's Victorian brothel -- "outside the circle of culture . . . defin[ing] the point of passage between inner and outer" -- resonates on the level of both racial difference and racialized gender difference for the mulatto ("Interstices" 86).

Fauset and Larsen invoke constructions of gender that mobilized the black female as an embodied border separating reified white womanhood from illicit black womanhood. Further, they use the mulatto to hold both extremes of womanhood in tension within the same figure. Yet critics have read Fauset and Larsen as being far more conservative in their treatment of black female sexuality than may in fact be the case.<sup>31</sup> In "It Jus Be's Dat Way Sometime," Hazel Carby states that Larsen's *Quicksand* both "contains the first explicitly sexual black heroine in black women's fiction," and "is symbolic of the tension in nineteenth- and early twentieth-century black women's fiction in which black female sexuality was frequently displaced onto the terrain of the political responsibility of the black woman . . . expressed as a dedication to uplifting the race" (748-49). Deborah McDowell notes that "Jessie Fauset and Nella Larsen could only hint at the idea of black women as sexual subjects behind the safe and protective covers of traditional narrative subjects and conventions" ("Nameless" 142). In McDowell's

estimation Larsen's novels, not Fauset's, "wrestle simultaneously with [the] dialectic 172  
between pleasure and danger. In their reticence about sexuality, they look back to their  
nineteenth-century predecessors, but in their simultaneous flirtation with female sexual  
desire, they are grounded in the 'liberation' of the 1920s" ("Nameless" 143). McDowell  
concludes that "Larsen and Fauset were profoundly ambivalent [about] independence  
from cultural expectations of women" ("Nameless" 142-43).

I would make a distinction, however, between these authors' employment of an  
ambivalent figure -- the mulatto trope -- to explore constructions of "race" and  
womanhood, and an ambivalence ascribed to the authors themselves regarding their view  
of feminine cultural scripts. Further, I would contend that both Fauset and Larsen  
represent black female sexuality and, in turn, womanhood and "race" as dialectical  
constructions rather than essential identities. The "narrative subjects and conventions"  
they employ to do so signal a parody and critique of such representational possibilities,  
rather than a "safe and protective cover" as McDowell argues. Finally, it seems to me  
that both Larsen's and Fauset's novels do indeed dramatize a "tension" between the  
expression and the denial, repression, and displacement of black female desire and  
sexuality as Carby argues. Yet I would emphasize that Fauset and Larsen, far from  
accepting such representations of black womanhood, critique them as overdetermined  
performances that are commodified whether by the black bourgeoisie or white  
primitivists. Fauset and Larsen continue to attend to the racialized constructs of  
womanhood foregrounded in the novels of Frances Harper and Pauline Hopkins, but  
extend their focus to concerns of class and the dynamics of their own cultural moment.

In "Policing the Black Woman's Body in an Urban Context," Hazel Carby traces  
the development of a white American dis-ease with the migration of large numbers of  
southern rural African Americans to urban centers in the North, arguing that this dis-ease

was expressed as a fear, and call for control, of a "pathological" black female sexuality: 173

"The movement of black women between rural and urban areas and between southern and northern cities generated a series of moral panics. One serious consequence was that the behavior of black female migrants was characterized as sexually degenerate and, therefore, socially dangerous" (739). Carby goes on to contend that black female sexuality not only came to stand as a metaphor for the black urban condition in white discourses, but was also circulated by the African American middle class as a potential social threat. Whites used the myth of black female sexuality along racial lines, while bourgeois blacks used it along class lines:

The need to police and discipline the behavior of black women in cities, however, was not only a premise of white agencies and institutions but also a perception of black institutions and organizations, and the black middle class. The moral panic about the urban presence of apparently uncontrolled black women was symptomatic of and referenced aspects of the more general crisis of social displacement and dislocation that were caused by migration. White and black intellectuals used and elaborated this discourse so that when they referred to the association between black women and vice, or immoral behavior, their references carried connotations of other crises of the black urban environment. Thus the migrating black woman could be variously situated as a threat to the progress of the race; as a threat to the establishment of a respectable urban black middle class; as a threat to congenial black and white middle-class relations; and as a threat to the formation of black masculinity in an urban environment. ("Policing" 741)

Defenders of black female sexuality were also effectively engaged in "policing" the behavior of African American women, whether or not this was their intention. Elsie Johnson McDougald, writing "The Task of Negro Womanhood" in 1925, defends black women against the charge that they are somehow "naturally" immoral; yet her defence also contains an implicit call to black women to prove their adherence to a "strict code" of ancestral African morality:

The women of the working class will react, emotionally and sexually, similarly to the working-class women of other races. The Negro woman does not maintain any moral standard which may be assigned chiefly to the

qualities of race any more than a white woman does. Yet she has been singled out and advertised as having lower sex standards. . . . Sex irregularities are not a matter of race, but socio-economic conditions. Research shows that most of the African tribes from which the Negro sprang have strict codes for sex relations. (379) 174

McDougald, a teacher, "social investigator and vocational guidance expert" (Locke, *New Negro* 419), dissociates the black middle class from "irregular" sexuality, targeting instead the working classes as the repository of immorality and vice.

For black women writers, then, the alternatives to extolling morality and "policing" the bounds of proper behavior were to, as Deborah McDowell has noted, adopt a "reticence" to address the issue of black female sexuality; to, as Hazel Carby has argued, "displace sexuality onto another terrain"; or, to depict black female characters as sexual subjects and run the risk that white audiences would interpret them as "primitive."<sup>32</sup> Barbara Christian notes that black women writers rarely chose the latter option: "Not surprisingly, male writers explored the primitive view more intensely than did the women novelists of the day. The garb of uninhibited passion wears better on a male who, after all, does not have to carry the burden of the race's morality or lack of it" (401). Again, this risk was greater for women because primitivism was gendered. As Ann duCille observes, primitivism thrived on icons; and if "no single icon combined the erotic, the exotic, and the innocent to the extent that the new Negro seemed to," the black woman blues singer was believed to go one better (*Coupling* 73). duCille documents the evolution of blues recordings; originally only white women recorded the blues, until black women artists "became the principal instrument through which the sexually explicit lyrics of the classic blues began to reach the ears of white America . . . in the early 1920s . . . . Under what might be called the cult of true primitivism, sex -- the quintessential subject matter of the blues -- was precisely what hot-blooded African women were assumed to have always in mind and body" (*Coupling* 73). Fauset and Larsen choose not

to displace, silence, or discipline black female sexuality in their novels; rather, they 175  
explore both poles of womanhood as a dialectical construct, as well as the psychological  
affects such constructions have on their characters.

In *Quicksand*, Larsen represents the power of primitivism's "hot-blooded" black  
female as so insidious that Helga mistakes this construct of black female sexuality for  
herself. She believes she not only "descend[s] through a furtive, narrow passage, into a  
vast subterranean" blackness at a Harlem cabaret, but that she also enters a "jungle"  
within herself:

They danced, . . . violently twisting their bodies . . . to a sudden streaming  
rhythm, or shaking themselves ecstatically to a thumping of unseen  
tomtoms. For a while, Helga was oblivious to the reek of flesh . . .  
oblivious of the color, the noise, and the grand distorted childishness of it  
all. She was drugged, lifted, sustained, by the extraordinary music, blown  
out, ripped out, beaten out, by the joyous, wild murky orchestra. The  
essence of life seemed bodily motion. And when suddenly the music died,  
she dragged herself back to the present with a conscious effort; and a  
shameful certainty that not only had she been in the jungle, but that she  
had enjoyed it, began to taunt her. . . . She wasn't, she told herself, a  
jungle creature. (59)

Larsen positions Helga as a corporealized boundary between "civilized" and "primitive"  
in this scene. Moreover, she plays on the period's popular belief in atavism -- "blood will  
tell" -- through Helga's fear that she has "reverted" to a primitive state, a state for which  
whites believed her black blood responsible.

However, rather than having her heroine explore the borderland of "the mulatto,"  
testing its limits and possibilities of transition and transgression, Larsen explores instead  
the manner in which Helga's liminality appears to be neutralized. Firstly, Helga mistakes  
fabricated "blackness" for an inherent set of desires and behaviors that she feels she has  
failed to control in herself. Helga fears what she views as the "jungle," and believes she  
can, and has, momentarily crossed a line within herself between civilized and primitive in  
this Harlem cabaret. However, she has merely mistaken a form of entertainment



packaged for white consumption as African American culture and identity itself.

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Consequently, her belief that only her exterior is civilized while her essence is primitive, colludes with white ideology and maintains racist distinctions between white and black. Secondly, because Helga mistakes primitivism's "red-hot" black female for the "real thing," she does not recognize this construction as a performable identity. If Helga were to see iconic "blackness" as provisional rather than stable and "natural," she might also recognize it as an "identity [that] can become a site of contest and revision" (Butler, "Imitation" 19). Helga does not realize that black female sexuality in the Jazz Age is so overdetermined that it says little, if anything, about her identity or her sexuality. Rather than transgressing gender identities and racial boundaries by choosing to perform as both a "red-hot" and a true woman, Helga consolidates these identities by policing her own behavior and "racial character," both of which she views through the lens of the dominant culture.

Laurentine is similarly both drawn to and repelled by what she sees at a Harlem club:

[S]he was also intensely taken by the night-clubs, because she could not puzzle out why people should care for places such as these . . . where a dark, sinuous dancer singing a song, whose words she could not catch, and making movements with her supple body, whose meanings she could not fathom, pranced and postured and gestured before a fascinated lad of twenty-one. . . . After this she was glad to get out into the air. . . .  
(307-08)

Fauset does not fully develop the internalization of such stereotyped versions of "blackness" in her heroine, as Larsen does in *Quicksand*. But I would argue that Laurentine's desire "to get out" may be read as a claustrophobic response to a definition of black female sexuality she feels thrust upon her. While Helga's response to the image of the uninhibited black female is to suspect its "essence" in her, Laurentine's is to refuse to even attempt a comprehension of the sexually suggestive lyrics and performance of the

black female blues singer.

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Whether signalled by Helga's "repression" or Lauretine's denial, Fauset and Larsen foreground the powerful effect of white America's icon of the sexual black female. While the icon's effect seems to be restrictive, and Fauset's and Larsen's novels seem reticent when it comes to female sexuality, what appears to be "conservative" is arguably a quite radical aspect of their work. Ironically, Lauretine's denial and Helga's repression of their so-called illicit black female sexuality parody white sexuality. White Americans historically ascribed to African Americans what they preferred not to acknowledge in themselves. Rather than embodying mythic black sexuality, Fauset's and Larsen's heroines enact a version of white sexual denial and repression from which stereotypes of "blackness" arose. They consequently perform white womanhood in scenes critics have dismissed as examples of Fauset's and Larsen's conservative bourgeois ethos. However, rather than signalling an adoption of white values, such a parody in fact undermines them. Lauretine's and Helga's "illegitimate" though convincing performance of a controlled sexuality traditionally ascribed to true white women inverts the opposition of controlled white sexuality versus uninhibited black sexuality. More importantly, their performance subverts the dialectic of "true" versus "fallen" womanhood by undermining the stability and impenetrability of these racialized gender identities. Lauretine's and Helga's parodic performance of "true" (white) womanhood not only undermines the gender identities of the true and fallen woman, but also the racial distinctions with which they were invested. In Fauset's and Larsen's novels it is their African American heroines who aspire to be virtuous contrary to popular stereotypes of black female sexuality.

While Fauset and Larsen clearly recognize the radical potential to undermine stereotypes of racial hegemony that lies in configuring race and gender as performatives, their characters do not. Throughout *Quicksand*, Helga continues to keep herself at the

boundaries of what she takes for "blackness," failing to recognize that what she sees as 178  
her forays into its "essence" is a constructed and commodified spectacle feeding white  
voyeurism and white identity. In Denmark, Helga is disturbed by a vaudeville show she  
attends. Characteristically, the Danes accompanying Helga are bored until "out upon the  
stage pranced two black men, American Negroes undoubtedly, for as they danced and  
cavorted, they sang in the English of America an old ragtime song" (82). Larsen makes a  
point of noting that the songs they perform are "old, all of them old, but new and strange  
to that audience" (82). White Europeans and Americans alike sought the "primitive"  
African, never suspecting a difference or distance between the role African Americans  
played in such shows and African American identity, experience, and culture; nor does  
Helga perceive such a distance. The performers are described as moving their  
exaggerated limbs in excessive gestures: "And how the singers danced, pounding their  
thighs. slapping their hands together, twisting their legs, waving their abnormally long  
arms. throwing their bodies about with a loose ease!" (83). Their performance takes on a  
Bakhtinian carnivalesque quality of excess, but it is important to note that Bakhtin also  
theorizes "disguise" as an "accessory ritual of carnival" (*Problems* 125). The vaudeville  
performers do not dramatize "something in [Helga] which she had hidden away and  
wanted to forget"; there is no pure or essential African American character here.

Rather, this performance, like minstrel and vaudeville acts historically, is the site  
of a complex interweaving of African American cultural forms and stereotypes of  
"blackness." Helga is disturbed both by her fear that this vaudeville performance of  
"blackness" reflects African American character and identity -- her identity, and by the  
performers' "cavorting" or playing to the voyeuristic pleasure of a white European  
audience. Helga, who searches for an identity and sense of belonging in one role after  
another, does not recognize the parodic nature of the performance. Larsen stresses its

excess in both the players' gestures and costume, and it is this excess that is invested 179  
with what Bakhtin calls "grotesque realism." For Bakhtin, the "grotesque body" is one of  
"corpulent excess," it is multiple, over-sized, mobile (Stallybrass and White 8).  
Minstrelsy and vaudeville acts performed by African Americans in blackface may be  
interpreted as "grotesque realism": "it is always in process, it is always *becoming*, it is a  
mobile and hybrid creature, disproportionate, exorbitant, outgrowing all limits . . . a  
figural and symbolic resource for parodic exaggeration and inversion" (Stallybrass and  
White 9). Rather than a performance in which Helga might see an aspect of herself, her  
identity, that she prefers stay "hidden," this vaudeville act is a hybrid construction of  
African American cultural forms and their masking, of parodied stereotypes that are so  
exaggerated they mock white notions of "blackness" rather than African Americans  
themselves. These performances effectively invert or turn the white impulse to  
commodify "blackness" back on itself, so that the audience unknowingly laughs at itself  
as object of the performance's parody.

Vaudeville acts descended from the minstrel shows of the mid-nineteenth  
century. Eric Lott notes that "the minstrel show's humor, songs, and dances were so  
culturally mixed as, in effect to make their 'racial' origins quite undecidable" (94).  
Vaudeville, like minstrelsy before it, combined a variety of cultural forms that were  
themselves tailored to suit the expectations and interests of the white audiences in  
attendance. But they were not solely performances constructed by whites for the pleasure  
and profit of whites. Lott argues that minstrelsy could be a complex mix of white power  
expressed through demeaning caricatures, as well as African American control of and  
profit from the display and sale of roles that masked their own identity and culture.<sup>33</sup>  
African American performers and their white collaborators performed "blackness" at the  
expense of whites who believed they were seeing the "real thing":

Black performance itself, first of all, was precisely "performative," a cultural invention, not some precious essence installed in black bodies. . . . Black people . . . not only exercised a certain amount of control over such practices but perform sometimes developed them in tandem with white spectators. . . . In minstrelsy these practices were fed into an exchange system of cultural signifiers that both produced and continually marked the inauthenticity of their "blackness"; their ridicule asserted the difference between counterfeit and currency even as they disseminated what most audiences believed were black music, dance, and gesture. (Lott 39) 180

The vaudeville actors in Copenhagen perform an exaggerated and excessive "blackness" in which social and political interests intersect -- white with black. "currency" with "counterfeit," identity with masked role. There is undoubtedly more of white identity, and the difference it invests in "blackness," evident in the "cavorting" Helga watches than African American identity. Yet Helga confuses role for reality, not only as a spectator, but also when she becomes the spectacle.

Initially Helga's stay in Copenhagen is "the realization of a dream. . . . Always she had wanted . . . leisure, attention, beautiful surroundings. Things. Things. Things" (67). However, it soon becomes evident that Helga herself is the "thing"; she quickly becomes a curiosity, a status symbol that draws attention to Herr and Fru Dahl. Helga's bourgeois materialism and her belief in the white exoticization of the New Negro blind her to, and facilitate her participation in, her own objectification. She is sexualized and objectified in Denmark; Axel Olsen's remarks reflect not only his own beliefs regarding black women, but also the manner in which Helga has been displayed and constructed: "You have the warm impulsive nature of the women of Africa, but my lovely, you have. I fear, the soul of a prostitute. You sell yourself to the highest bidder" (87).

Helga's installation as an exhibit of "blackness" in Denmark culminates in a portrait that Olsen insists "is, afterall, the true Helga Crane" (88). Helga protests that it is not a good likeness, "but some disgusting sensual creature with her features." Yet she must tell herself this repeatedly, ask a maid for confirmation that "[i]t looks bad, wicked,"

and still she seems unconvinced (89). Larsen establishes a link between representation. 181 commodification, and the controlling power of ownership with this portrait of Helga. The tradition of portraiture in Europe began as a vehicle for the bourgeoisie to represent their status not only through the collection of *object d'art*, but also through commissioned portraits of their families, mistresses, and themselves set against their residences and grounds. These portraits not only advertised the bourgeois male's status to others, but also served to constantly remind him of his ownership and power.<sup>34</sup> In addition to Helga's particular sexualization through this portrait, Larsen also represents the commodification and exoticization of the black female generally in European interpretations of the primitive. Moreover, Helga's decision to retain the trappings of her exhibition in Denmark upon returning to Harlem signifies both the trans-Atlantic influence of primitivism, as well as the danger and lack of control that accompanies her attempt at self-representation in an era that has thrived on degrading stereotypes of black women. Helga discovers an increased popularity in Harlem: "Her courageous clothes attracted attention, and her deliberate lure -- as Olsen had called it -- held it. Her life in Copenhagen had taught her to expect and accept admiration as her due. This attitude . . . was as effective in New York as across the sea. It was, in fact, even more so. And it was more amusing too. Perhaps because it was somehow a bit more dangerous" (98). Indeed, it is "dangerous" for Helga, who not only does not control the stereotypes that create her "popularity," but who also so internalizes the construction of black female sexuality as lascivious and degenerate that she marries a Southern preacher in "the confusion of a seductive repentance" (118). Helga moves from the role of exotic black female to that of dutiful wife; both roles are scripted for her by the dominant culture and neither allows her the autonomy to express, nor be the subject of, her desire. Seeking a redemption not only from what she sees as her "shameful" sexuality, but also from an alienation that has

become so profound as to rob her of any sense of self, Helga takes on yet another role. 182

For Helga, salvation takes the form of a sanctioned sexuality in marriage; however, as I will examine in more detail later, the "safety" of her life as a reverend's wife is dubious.

In addition to exposing the effects of fabricated "blackness" and the sexualized icon of black womanhood on their characters, Fauset and Larsen also explore and parody constructions of "ladyhood." It is significant that *Quicksand's* Helga Crane is a teacher at a black college. for as Barbara Olomade notes, African Americans "encouraged their daughters to become teachers to escape the 'abominations' of the white man. . . . Teaching required of black women an even more rigorous adherence to a sex code enjoining chastity and model womanhood than that guiding other black women" (361). Moreover, teaching continued to be one of the few professions open to black women in the early twentieth century. Larsen, by representing her mulatto heroine as a teacher, inscribes the experience of African American women in her text, and ascribes such experiences to a figure whom the African American community historically rejected as "high yella," or as Helga herself says, "a despised mulatto" (18). Larsen thereby invites her African American readership to identify with a character they may simultaneously regard as "not black enough." Helga as a mulatto school teacher would also be read by a white audience in two directions at once. The school teacher as a rigorously chaste "model of womanhood" would "whiten" Helga in this readership's eyes, but at the same time they would also read Helga through their conception of the mulatto as "driven" by sexual impulses beyond her control.<sup>35</sup> Larsen, then, confronts both an African American and a white audience with their essentialist notions of the mulatto by representing Helga as a school teacher.

Significantly, Larsen accomplishes this confrontation of essentialism by parodying her audience's beliefs and expectations regarding her heroine's racialized

behavior. Larsen's parody depends upon holding in tension both her audience's resistance to, and acceptance of, Helga as a model of both black women's lived experience and ideals of white womanhood. This tension between the parody and a resistance to its "parodying intentions" is characteristic of the trope's "double-voicedness" as Bakhtin defines it:

With such an internal fusion of two points of view, two intentions and two expressions in one discourse, the parodic essence of such a discourse takes on a peculiar character: the parodied language offers a living dialogic resistance to the parodying intentions of the other . . . the image becomes an open, living, mutual interaction between worlds, points of view, accents. This makes it possible to re-accentuate the image, to adopt various attitudes toward the argument sounding within the image . . . and, consequently, to vary the interpretations of the image itself. The image becomes polysemic. . . . (*Dialogic* 409-10)

Larsen uses the mulatto figure as trope to parody African American and white stereotypes of the mulatto as outside black and white womanhood, gender identities that Helga accesses through both lived experience and performance.

In *Black Feminist Thought*, Patricia Hill Collins observes that "[i]n their goal of dispelling the myths about African-American women and making Black women acceptable to wider society, some historically Black Colleges may also foster Black women's subordination" (87). At Naxos, African American "ladies-in-making" are encouraged to "at least try to act like ladies and not like savages from the backwoods" (12). Ironically, Helga's affinity with the lived experience of African American women is set in a school Larsen critiques as working to effectively "whiten" its black students: "This great community . . . was no longer a school. It had grown into a machine . . . ruthlessly cutting all to a pattern, the white man's pattern. Teachers as well as students were subjected to the paring process" (4). Helga is frustrated by the rigorous discouragement of individuality at Naxos, from behavior to dress: "'Bright colors are vulgar' -- 'Black, gray, brown, and navy blue are the most becoming colors for colored



people' -- 'Dark complected people shouldn't wear yellow, or green or red'" (17-18). 184

Naxos effectively subjects its female students and faculty to a white notion of black female sexuality as illicit, and encourages them to imitate what the dominant culture approves as a bourgeois, "ladylike" decorum.

Larsen invites her readers to interpret Helga's dissatisfaction at Naxos as the expression of an internal confusion. Playing to the stereotype of the "psychologically . . . unstable" mulatto torn between her white and black blood (Reuter 102), Larsen establishes Helga's "frustration" at the novel's outset and carries it through the narrative like a refrain: "There was something else, some other more ruthless force, a quality within herself, which was frustrating her, had always frustrated her, kept her from getting the things she had wanted. . . . But just what did she want? . . . She couldn't define it, isolate it, and contemplate it" (10-11). Larsen depicts Helga's inculcation into the Naxos cult of the "lady" as harmful to her. Helga prefers not to contemplate her sexuality, and is shamed by the desire she arouses in her fiancé, James Vayle:

The idea that she was in but one nameless way necessary to him filled her with a sensation amounting almost to shame. And yet his mute helplessness against that ancient appeal by which she held him pleased her and fed her vanity -- gave her a feeling of power. At the same time she shrank away from it, subtly aware of possibilities she herself couldn't predict. (7-8)

She suspects she barely veils a "backwoods" sensuality that can easily be discovered, and sees this as a failure on her part. Despite the influence Naxos exerts upon all its "ladies-in-making," Helga perceives in herself "a lack somewhere. . . . She hadn't really wanted to be made over. This thought bred a sense of shame. . . . Evidently there were parts of her she couldn't be proud of" (7). Helga, then, resists being labelled a "lady" because she believes her ancestry defines her and cannot be denied:

"It's an elusive something," he went on. "Perhaps I can best explain it by the use of that trite phrase, 'You're a lady.' You have dignity and

breeding."

At these words turmoil rose again in Helga Crane. . . . "If you're speaking of family, Dr. Anderson, why, I haven't any. I was born in a Chicago slum. . . . My father was a gambler who deserted my mother, a white immigrant. It is even uncertain that they were married. As I said at first, I don't belong here." (21)

Helga cannot see that ladyhood is as much a construction as the "primitive" black sexuality she believes she hides and controls in herself. Larsen, however, underscores that Helga feels alienated because of, not despite, the Naxos influence and its bourgeois notions of womanhood. Parodying the myth that Helga's frustration and restlessness are essential to her being and the result of her "blood," Larsen contends that Helga's dissatisfaction is produced by her discomfort with the limitations to which a patriarchal culture subjects women.

Larsen further extends her use of the mulatto figure to parody not only stereotypes of racial difference, but gender difference and class distinctions as well. We learn that Helga's conflicted view of sexuality is thoroughly bourgeois, rather than either the "natural" response of a "lady" or the result of her "confused" blood. Her refusal to name, much less explore, her desire is both a product of her class position and of that class's expectations of women, but it is nevertheless not exclusive to her gender. Robert Anderson, the head of Naxos during Helga's tenure there, represses an attraction to Helga that his new bride easily detects:

Anne had perceived that . . . in a more lawless place where she herself never hoped or desired to enter, was . . . a vagrant primitive groping toward something shocking and frightening to the cold asceticism of his reason. Anne knew also that . . . with her he had not to struggle against that nameless and to him shameful impulse, that sheer delight, which ran through his nerves at mere proximity to Helga. (94-95)

Larsen invokes a ladylike avoidance of the passionate and "lawless" in her characterization of Anne Grey, but then dispels any notion of this as an essentially feminine response to sexuality by ascribing an "ascetic protest against the sensuous, the

physical" to Robert Anderson (94). Such refusals to acknowledge and explore one's sexuality are identified by Hazel Carby as signals of a "secure" bourgeois class position in novels of the Harlem Renaissance.<sup>36</sup> 186

Larsen's parody of racialized sexuality in this case is multifaceted. On the one hand, she plays to white notions of African Americans as primitives with Helga's suspicion of her "backwoods" sensuality and Robert Anderson's "lawless" sexuality. Yet she undercuts such stereotypes not only with Anne Grey's refusal to "enter" into a "lawless" black sexuality, but also with her characters' performances as true ladies and gentlemen. She further parodies constructions of womanhood that would characterize repressed sexuality as essential feminine frigidity, with Anderson's "protest against the sensual." Finally, Larsen parodies the stereotype of the mulatto as an outcast from both races, conflicted and uncertain in every area of her life. Helga is thoroughly middle-class in her view of sexuality, and the uncertainty she feels regarding desire and its expression are equally shared by Robert Anderson and other members of the black bourgeoisie, regardless of their genealogy. In every aspect of Larsen's treatment of stereotyped black sexuality and the mulatto, she gestures toward stereotypes only to invest them with a critical difference that undoes their attempt to pass as inherent or natural. Behavior associated with femininity is enacted by male as well as female characters; ostensibly uninhibited African Americans lead highly moral lives; and Helga's confusion regarding her sexuality seems more a product of bourgeois proscriptions than any "crossed signals" resulting from her "mixed blood." This is parody as "trans-contextualization" in Hutcheon's theory of the trope as "an integrated . . . modelling process of revising, replaying, inverting, and `trans-contextualizing'" (11).

As Larsen did in *Quicksand*, Fauset also depicts her mulatto heroine in one of the few professions to which African American women had access in the early twentieth

century -- Laurentine sews clothing for the white women of Red Brook. Barbara Christian criticizes Fauset's depiction of African American working women as less realistic and decidedly more privileged than those of nineteenth-century black women novelists:

Fauset's heroines tend to be less independent than Iola Leroy, the contemporary pampered young woman. . . . Appropriately Laurentine is a seamstress and a very good dress designer. . . . No teacher of Sunday School or composer of papers on the education of black mothers, the heroine of *The Chinaberry Tree* is touted as the first Negro to introduce fashionable pajamas to her small New Jersey town. (46)

Yet Ann duCille argues that representing Laurentine as a seamstress amounts to an arguably Afrocentric inscription on Fauset's part:

Dressmaking . . . is an age-old art for black women traceable to Africa, to the weaving and wrapping of cloth. Before their profit potential as breeders was discovered, their skill at weaving and sewing helped make African women valuable slaves. The fact that Laurentine Strange is a dress designer and seamstress . . . speaks with historical specificity to the limited professional options for African American women in the 1920s. (*Coupling* 88-89)

Laurentine's dressmaking may be read as an attempt on Fauset's part to encourage her African American readership to see her mulatto heroine as "blacker" than they may have otherwise, to encourage empathy across the divide of colorism in the black community. It is interesting to note, however, that she seems not to have been successful with late twentieth-century readers. duCille points out that what Christian sees as Fauset's misrepresentation of working black women, "is the same craft that Celie practices in *The Color Purple* when she goes into business making Alice Walker's version of lounging pajamas: unique one-size-fits-all pants" (*Coupling* 89).<sup>37</sup> Laurentine does lead a privileged middle-class life, but I would argue that reading her class position and profession as indications that she is "not black enough" only underscores the stereotypical connection between class position and race that readers continue to make today, and that

continues to homogenize African American lived experience. In the same figure, Fauset<sup>188</sup> invests black female experience as well as stereotypes of class and color as limits of "blackness." She uses the mulatto figure to parody notions of "blackness," inscribing both similarity with black women's lived experience and disjuncture from popular conceptions of "authentic" blackness; the parody consequently undercuts stereotypical notions of "the mulatto" and "the Negro."

Fauset plays upon a similar ambivalence that results when white readers' expectations collide with her representation of Laurentine. Laurentine's employment may also have worked to mitigate against the alienation of a white audience, the majority of whom lived contented, privileged, and racially segregated lives. Designing dresses exclusively for the white women of Red Brook despite her desire to do otherwise, Laurentine "knows her place" and keeps to it, which would have appeased the novel's white readership: "'I've never had colored customers. . . . You know how Jersey is. I can't afford to trifle with my living'" (56). Yet Fauset's publisher worried that whites would not favorably receive a novel that countered their stereotypical notions of blacks by portraying African Americans as self-sufficient. Fauset parodies the white American notion that blacks must keep to their subordinate place -- Laurentine's dressmaking for an exclusively white clientele is in keeping with segregated life in America and the expectations of Fauset's white audience; yet because this profession enables Laurentine to support herself and her mother, it simultaneously counters these same expectations. Fauset uses the "double-voicedness" of Laurentine's labor as seamstress, then, to parody or "satirize the reception" (Hutcheon 16) of her novel by both white and African American readers alike.

In addition to confronting her readers with their racialization of class that culminates in a monolithic equation of "blackness" with working-class experience, Fauset

also indicts the black bourgeoisie for their attention to "good breeding," family connections, and proper behavior, as well as their restrictive ideals of womanhood. Laurentine is "the epitome of all those virtues and restraints which colored men so arrogantly demand in the woman they make their wives" (124). Her morality and conduct are above reproach: "She personally had been as pure as snow, as chaste as a nun . . . no girl whose mother had been married by a hundred priests before a thousand witnesses could lay claim to a more spotless life than she" (59). Yet despite her "ladylike" decorum, Laurentine is rejected by Red Brook's middle-class African American community because of her "bad blood." Laurentine may "pass" too successfully as a lady to suit critics who read "authentic blackness" as residing primarily in the folk, but she is not successful enough to pass into the black middle class depicted in the text.

Fauset's indictment of middle-class values takes on a gendered slant, for while the bourgeoisie as a whole demand of women certain "virtues and restraints," the black men of Red Brook are attracted to the very qualities in Laurentine for which she has been summarily rejected. Laurentine's physical appearance reflects, and serves as a constant reminder of, her parent's interracial relationship and her own "mixed blood." She is both admired and shunned for her appearance and what that appearance signals: "shining rippling hair, the rosy curve of her cheek . . . blended into the smooth lower plane of her apricot-tinted face" (100). Yet the basis of her alienation from the African American community also proves to be her greatest attraction for black men, a contradiction that Phil Hackett (a young black professional in Red Brook) cannot resolve: "She knew her beauty stirred him; he liked and yet dreaded the effect of her distinguished appearance. Incomprehensibly, he liked that into which her strange life had transformed her and yet it seemed as though he could never reconcile himself to its sources" (20). Fauset also critiques the black bourgeoisie's hypocrisy when it comes to "ladylike" conduct.

Laurentine recognizes that she must play both the lady and the vamp in order to secure a 190 marriage with Phil Hackett:

Laurentine stood before her long mirror putting the finishing touches to her costume. . . . She glanced at herself in the mirror smiling with an unwonted coquetry. As a rule she was distant to the point of haughtiness. No matter what her feeling, she did not . . . dare to exercise any of the "come-hither" quality employed by most young women. But she was beautiful, she knew it . . . and she would exercise the spell of her beauty on him to its fullest extent. (34-35)

Signifying, Gates theorizes, "turns upon repetition and difference" (79). Fauset invokes the myth of the "low down yella" in Laurentine's "unwonted coquetry" only to represent her as equally able to pass as a proper lady who dares not "exercise . . . [a] 'come-hither' quality." Larsen signifies on the belief that as a mulatto Laurentine is inherently either "high and mighty" -- "distant to the point of haughtiness" -- or a "low down yella" coquette. Larsen parodies these stereotypes of the mulatto in a scene that represents Laurentine as haughty and flirtatious, yet also fearful of behaving in an improper or "unladylike" manner.<sup>38</sup>

Like Helga Crane, Laurentine has been so influenced by the double standards of the black middle class that she sees herself as both inferior -- "Oh God, you know all I want is a chance to show them how decent I am" (36) -- and as "some one choice, unique, different," conducting herself with a "real queenliness" (20 and 56). If Helga's refrain is her "nameless" restlessness, arguably a dissatisfaction with the bourgeoisie's restrictive ideals of womanhood, Laurentine's is a fervent desire to comply with those ideals in order to belong: "Perhaps if I am very good, Lord . . . perhaps if I am very generous, I'll meet with generosity, -- Lord, Thou knowest. Give me peace and security, a home life like other women, a name, protection" (21).<sup>39</sup> Both Helga's and Laurentine's frustrations and aspirations stem from their social isolation. Larsen and Fauset clearly represent their heroines' alienation and conflicted sense of self as the result of reactions to their fabled

"blood." not an expression of that blood itself.

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While the black bourgeoisie's conservative and restrictive attitudes toward gender roles and women's behavior seem out of step with the Jazz Age and the liberated white "flapper," this may not in fact have been the case.<sup>40</sup> Caroll Smith-Rosenberg argues that the second generation of "New Women" repudiated "bourgeois sexual mores" and fought for "absolute equality": "They wished to be as successful, as political, as sexual as men . . . . Not one shred of the Cult of True Womanhood remained to cloak their life style in the symbols of respectability. . . . They, more than any other phenomenon of the 1910s and 1920s, signalled the birth of another era" (177-78). Conversely, Glenda Riley contends that the indices in which many historians read white American women's refusal of traditional gender roles do not accurately reflect their reality in the 1920s: "In a sense, the rising divorce rate was paradoxical, the ultimate object of beauty -- sexuality -- and consumerism for women was still traditional: to 'catch' men" (87).

Popular culture as represented in the "flapper films" of the 1920s also told a different story of women's liberation than did the "New New Woman" phenomenon. Leslie Fishbein notes that the heroines of these films were a combination of Victorian and New womanhood: "The twenties saw a spate of flapper films in which the heroines, at least superficially, had shed the inhibitions of their Victorian predecessors." The "flapper's revolt," argues Fishbein, was "a truncated one, her sexuality mostly a tease, her ultimate object no different from that of the Victorian virgin (namely matrimony). . . . [T]he flapper films ultimately upheld the sanctity of the home, with *Motion Picture* magazine in 1920 sanctimoniously branding De Mille 'the apostle of domesticity'" (67).<sup>41</sup> Riley cites a 1929 study of the impact of films on young American women: "[T]he chorus girls and dancing flappers . . . served as a standard of behavior and appearance for a generation of female movie-goers" (86). It seems that white Americans also combined



a liberal and conservative view of women, despite the political agitations of the "New 192  
New Woman." As scholars have observed, definitions of womanhood were indeed in  
flux during the early twentieth century.

One might argue, then, that with definitions of womanhood in flux an African  
American woman's ability to "pass" for a "lady" could potentially effect the change that  
Harper and Hopkins envisioned in their novels, and for which black club women agitated  
with their repeated defense of "noble black womanhood." Fauset and Larsen do  
underscore their mulatto heroines' affinity with the ideals of a womanhood believed to be  
exclusive to white women. While white and black citizens of Red Brook see Sal  
Strange's relationship with Colonel Halloway as so scandalous that it continues to offend  
them even after Halloway is dead, the white townsfolk are even more outraged that  
Laurentine not only *looks* like a Halloway, but also *behaves* like one:

Aunt Sal had for years been the storm center of the greatest scandal that  
had ever touched Red Brook. . . . Laurentine, with her beauty and her  
pride, her independence and above all her faithful reproduction of Colonel  
Halloway's other two daughters, line for line, feature for feature, had  
served to increase rather than decrease that scandal. . . . (251)

But Laurentine fails to see her "faithful reproduction" of ladyhood as a performance that  
undermines the ideal of true womanhood as a bastion of whiteness. Nor does she  
recognize that the myths of "bad blood" and "wanton" black female sexuality she has  
been battling all her life are just as much constructions as the white womanhood they are  
mobilized to support. Instead, Fauset foregrounds the fact that "true black womanhood"  
furthers the exclusive and elitist ideology of a black middle class that is more interested  
in attributing "exotic" and "primitive" behavior to working-class blacks, than in dispelling  
such notions of black sexuality altogether. Melissa, Laurentine's cousin, learns at a young  
age that the black bourgeoisie has adopted an ideal of womanhood that Fauset pointedly  
characterizes as "white": "[S]he might not appear so white, so desirable in her lover's

eyes. Malory, she knew, wanted his roses dewy, his woman's reputation, not to say her 193  
virtue, unblemished and undiscussed" (251-52). Fauset depicts the black middle class as  
preoccupied with values and standards of behavior that prove exclusive, rather than  
engaged in an inclusive African American politics. In the black bourgeoisie's notion of  
what it is to be a lady, there is no place for the nineteenth-century ideal of a noble black  
womanhood that incorporated African American female experiences of menial labor and  
physical assaults with ideals of virtue.

Both Fauset and Larsen are highly critical of a black middle class they have been  
judged to collude with. They critique both primitivism's iconization of the black female,  
and her commodification in an African American patriarchal economy. Fauset  
foregrounds the use to which women are put as symbols of black middle-class  
respectability. Laurentine quickly learns what black men of the middle class seek in a  
wife:

From some mysterious source she who knew so little of men knew that  
colored men liked their wives to have straight hair, "good" hair. They had  
to have these things for their children . . . their children must surpass them  
. . . poor colored people, they had so much to attain to in America  
. . . looks, education, morals, ambition, a blameless family life! (59)

Women are commodified by the black bourgeoisie (as they are by the white bourgeoisie).  
signs of their husbands' success and the triumph of the middle class in refuting racist  
stereotypes. Fauset represents the rituals Laurentine and Melissa enact to realize their  
class's goal for women -- a "respectable" marriage -- as a form of prostitution: "Melissa  
was the frank coquette; Laurentine could not imagine how in her environment she became  
possessed of a knowledge of these first aids to beauty . . . vanishing creams, bleaching  
creams . . . powders in several tints . . . strange combs and curling irons" (127).

Significantly, Laurentine wears red, a color African American mothers  
traditionally warned their daughters away from, when her hopes to marry Phil Hackett are

at their highest: "[S]he thought of the possibility of an engagement ring . . . its safety, 194 its security, its promise! Feverishly she began to dress. . . . The red dress was ravishing, her slippers, her thin smoky stockings. . . . Phil, she thought, her face hot and flushed . . . would be surprised and pleased" (58-9). Karla Holloway, recalling her grandmother's view of red, reads her warnings as lessons on the exploitation of black women by a dominant white culture that saw them as sexually accessible:

[T]he ethics my grandmother encouraged in her grandgirls followed her well-considered reflection on the history of gendered ethnic stereotype and abuse in United States history, and her determination about what could save us from the abuse that accompanies stereotype. When she warned us away from red, she reinforced the persistent historical reality that black women's bodies are a site of public negotiations and private loss. (21)

Fauset indicts the black middle class whose stress on impeccable virtue and conduct leads them to reject Laurentine on suspicion of the immorality carried in her "bad blood"; yet this same class encourages its women to play the vamp to gain a man's attention. Fauset critiques the marriage economy for commodifying women who are taught they must trade on their looks in order to achieve "security" and "respectability."

Helga, like Laurentine, also passes for a lady, despite what behavior whites believed her "blood" more prone to bring out in her. Her "fastidious" nature characterizes her as even more "ladylike" than Mrs. Hayes-Rore, a leading speaker in the black women's club movement: ". . . she [Helga] reached out and took her new friend's slightly soiled hand in one of her own fastidious ones" (41). Moreover, the fact that the "true" woman in Helga is more evident than any sensuality she believes she hides, is itself a challenge to a gender identity that turns on the "impossibility" of a virtuous black woman. As a lady, she not only finds it difficult to confront Robert Anderson about their mutual attraction, but nearly faints trying: "Helga Crane faced him squarely . . . . She was secretly congratulating herself on her own calm when it failed her. Physical weariness

descended on her. Her knees wobbled. Gratefully she slid into the chair which he 195  
hastily placed for her. Timidity came over her. She was silent" (106). However, just as  
Laurentine cannot recognize "ladyhood" as a construction, nor see the ways in which it  
furthers both white and black bourgeois ideology, so too is Helga largely blind to, and  
limited by, definitions of womanhood.

Helga may successively resist being defined as a lady, respond to situations in  
"true womanly" fashion, and be mistaken for a "scarlet 'oman," but she never seems to see  
these as constructed and therefore performable identities. Instead, she fears others detect  
either a primitive essence in her, or a failure on her part to cover it with a veneer of  
decorum. It takes only a red dress for the congregation of a storefront church in Harlem  
to mistake Helga for a "Jezebel":

Without warning the woman at her side . . . in wild, ecstatic fury jumped  
up and down before Helga clutching at the girl's soaked coat, and  
screamed: "Come to Jesus, you pore los' sinner!" Alarmed for the fraction  
of a second, involuntarily Helga had shrunk from her grasp, wriggling out  
of the wet coat when she could not loosen the crazed creature's hold. At  
the sight of the bare arms and neck growing out of the clinging red dress, a  
shudder shook the swaying man at her right. On the face of the dancing  
woman before her a disapproving frown gathered. She shrieked: "A  
scarlet 'oman. Come to Jesus, you pore los' Jezebel!"  
(112-14)

In turn, it takes only their call to her as an "errin' sistah" for Helga to marry the reverend  
Pleasant Green as a salvation that only proves to trap her.

Larsen foregrounds the limitations Helga faces in attempting self-definition and  
self-determination through marriage in the final chapters of *Quicksand*. Helga has felt  
restricted by both poles of Western femininity: in Naxos she resists being defined as a  
lady; in Copenhagen she refuses to be taken for a "sensual creature." Helga's "solution" is  
to marry a Southern preacher with whom her "emotional, palpitating, amorous" sexuality  
can grow "like rank weeds" in the safety and respectability of their matrimonial home

(122). However, Larsen depicts Helga's marriage as anything but safe for her, as closely-spaced pregnancies weaken her body and endanger her health. Helga's "respectable" sexuality becomes both a prize and the only weapon she wields against her husband:

Helga was lying on her back with one frail, pale hand under her small head, her curly black hair scattered loose on the pillow. . . . The day was not, her breasts were covered only by a nightgown of filmy *crLpe* . . . which had slipped from one carved shoulder. He flinched. Helga's petulant lip curled, for she well knew that this fresh reminder of her desirability was like the flick of a whip. (129)

Passing for the exotic stereotype of the black female, performing as a lady, and playing the part of dutiful wife bring Helga no closer to expressing and deriving pleasure from her sexuality. Instead, Helga barter her sexuality only to exchange one form of restriction for another.

Helga's and Lauretine's ability to be both ladies and vamps subverts the notion that they are naturally one or the other. Yet these gender identities were defined by the "nature" of those they excluded. Ladyhood was maintained by its dialectical relationship with a black female sexuality that was thought to epitomize the "primitive" in the Jazz Age. Fauset's and Larsen's novels are notable for their explorations of primitivism, offering its staple exoticism as a counter-culture to the black bourgeoisie. Yet their indictment of the effects a patriarchal gender economy has on their characters is further intensified by its similarity to the market primitivism generated -- both thrive on a definition of the black female that is reductive and restrictive, and both markets are driven by the iconization of the black female whether it be as the ultimate symbol of erotic sexuality or of social position. Fauset and Larsen explore these polarized notions of womanhood and sexuality, their points of intersection, and their sites of vulnerability.

Neither Helga nor Lauretine seems able to move beyond the bounds of

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supposed "essence" to see the liberatory possibilities of performing true and fallen womanhood, performances that would thereby challenge the hegemony of racialized identities. However, I would not regard this as a limitation of Fauset's and Larsen's work, a foreclosure of radical possibilities in novels that are hampered by a conservative bourgeois ethos. Rather I would argue that their characters' failure to see beyond constructions of gender and race is a greater critique of their cultural moment than endowing them with a postmodern sense of identity as provisional would be. Fauset and Larsen speak to the contradictions of the New Negro Renaissance through their heroines' limitations. In an era in which whites and blacks alike marketed images of "blackness" that were complex mixes of African American cultural expressivity and blatant stereotype, it was, and continues to be, difficult to entirely separate construct from reality, performance from identity. The overdetermination of things black in Harlem proved empowering and limiting, profitable and exploitive, for African Americans, a reality that Fauset and Larsen make abundantly clear through their use of the mulatto figure.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> This phrase is Claudia Tate's; in *Domestic Allegories of Political Desire* she argues that "[b]lack women's post-reconstruction domestic novels used bourgeois gender conventions as an emancipatory text" (97).

<sup>2</sup> The Tenderloin encompassed the Twenties through 64th Street west of Broadway; San Juan Hill, previously known as Columbus Hill, ran from 60th to 64th Street on the West Side. These areas were composed of distinct black and white neighborhoods, and landlords were notorious for charging African Americans significantly higher rents for housing that whites considered substandard.

<sup>3</sup> For a detailed account of the events that incited these riots see David Levering Lewis, *When Harlem Was in Vogue* (New York: Knopf, 1981), pp 18-23.

<sup>4</sup> Lewis notes that by 1923 African Americans "represented no more than 30 percent of the total Harlem population. Whites evacuated Harlem as reluctantly as Afro-Americans flocked to it. Slicing almost the full length of the district, Eighth Avenue cleanly severed black from white" (27). The area west of Eighth Avenue was predominantly white, while black Harlem lay east of Eighth.

<sup>5</sup> In 1930 the *New York Herald Tribune* estimated that "ninety per cent of the cabarets in Harlem were owned by whites, ninety-two per cent of the speakeasies were operated by white racketeers" (Sylvander 79).

<sup>6</sup> In an essay entitled "Negro Character as Seen by White Authors," Sterling Brown argued that the white writer's "New Negro" was "a jazzed-up version" of the happy, contented slave "with cabarets supplanting cabins" (qtd in Sylvander 11).

<sup>7</sup> Langston Hughes said the same of Charles S. Johnson, Urban League's national director and editor of *Opportunity* magazine, who "did more to encourage and develop Negro writers during the 1920's than anyone else in America" (qtd in Worth 466). It is not unlikely that James Weldon Johnson's assessment of Van Vechten was influenced by his awareness that Van Vechten had proven himself to be a great resource to young black writers, a resource Johnson must have recognized as worthy of cultivation. Moreover,

Johnson quite likely felt indebted to Van Vechten, who was influential in Knopf's decision to re-issue *The Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man* in 1927 (Goellnicht 17). James Weldon Johnson's gratitude is expressed in a personal letter to Van Vechten, whereas Hughes wrote of Charles S. Johnson in his autobiography *The Big Sea*. To be sure, as an autobiography Hughes's *The Big Sea* is necessarily subjective, but I would argue it is also a more distanced assessment than Johnson's could have been under the circumstances.

<sup>8</sup> Van Vechten's relationship with Nella Larsen is illustrative of this point. He not only encouraged her writing but formed a friendship with her as well. She dined frequently at the Van Vechtens' Park Avenue apartment and corresponded regularly with him. However, in letters from Van Vechten to Dorothy Peterson, a close friend of Larsen's, dated from November 1939 to October 1941, Van Vechten becomes increasingly interested in the private details of Larsen's divorce from Elmer Imes, in Imes's health and whether Larsen visited him in his final days, and in the accusations of plagiarism that surrounded Larsen's publication of a short story entitled "Sanctuary." Even though Larsen had by this time disappeared, Van Vechten seems far less interested in the whereabouts of his "friend," than in the sensation associated with her personal difficulties. In fact, in a 1941 postcard to Peterson he refers to what Thadious Davis has taken to be Larsen's disappearance and her response to her ex-husband's death as "both funny and tragic" (Carl Van Vechten, letter to Dorothy Peterson, 28 December 1941, James Weldon Johnson Small Collections, Bienecke Library, Yale University, New Haven). See Thadious Davis, *Nella Larsen, Novelist of the Harlem Renaissance*, p. 438.

<sup>9</sup> Singh's contention summarizes contemporary assessments of the era: W.E.B. Du Bois's "Criteria for Negro Art" (1926); James Weldon Johnson's "The Dilemma of the Negro Author" (1928); Sterling Brown's "Negro Character as Seen by White Authors" (1933) and "The Negro Author and His Publisher" (1942).

<sup>10</sup> See also Michele Wallace, "Modernism, Postmodernism and the Problem of the Visual in Afro-American Culture," *Out There: Marginalization and Contemporary Cultures*, Eds. Russell Ferguson, et al. (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1990): 39-50.

<sup>11</sup> Jessie Redmon Fauset, letter to Jean Toomer, 17 February 1922, James Weldon Johnson Small Collections, Bienecke Library, Yale University, New Haven.

<sup>12</sup> Toomer's *Cane* was published in September, 1923.



- <sup>13</sup> Jessie Redmon Fauset, letter to Langston Hughes, circa 1920-1926, James Weldon Johnson MSS Hughes Papers (Correspondence), Bienecke Library, Yale University, New Haven.
- <sup>14</sup> Jessie Redmon Fauset, letter to Langston Hughes, 6 January 1925, James Weldon Johnson MSS Hughes Papers (Correspondence), Bienecke Library, Yale University, New Haven.
- <sup>15</sup> Nella Larsen Imes, letter to Carl Van Vechten, 14 June 1929, James Weldon Johnson Collection, Bienecke Library, Yale University, New Haven. "Ofays" was a derogatory term for whites derived from the Pig Latin for "foes." See Geneva Smitherman, *Talking and Testifyin': The Language of Black America* (Detroit: Wayne State UP, 1977), 47.
- <sup>16</sup> For example, Larsen writes: "Sunday night we had dinner at Carl's . . . . Last night we all went to the opening of Ethel Water's show, "Africana". Very good it was too. Eddie, Carl, Elmer, Harry, Fania, Muriel Draper, Isa and I made a party. Some of it was excruciatingly funny. I thought Harry would have to be carried out" (Nella Larsen Imes, letter to Dorothy Peterson, 12 July 1927, James Weldon Johnson Small Collections, Bienecke Library, Yale University, New Haven).
- <sup>17</sup> Nella Larsen Imes, letter to Carl Van Vechten and Fania Marinoff, 22 May 1930, James Weldon Johnson Collection, Bienecke Library, Yale University, New Haven.
- <sup>18</sup> For accusations that Fauset accepted "white values," see also Hiroko Sato, "Under the Harlem Shadow: A Study of Jessie Fauset and Nella Larsen"; for assessments of Fauset as mediating black and white cultures, see also Mary V. Dearborn, *Pocahontas's Daughters*. Again, it is noteworthy that Fauset is more frequently the object of such critique than Larsen.
- <sup>19</sup> Jessie Fauset attempted to convince W.E.B. Du Bois to devote *The Crisis* to Renaissance writing, but Du Bois wanted to continue the magazine's concentration on social and political issues.
- <sup>20</sup> Johnson had been arguing the value of artistic representation and accomplishment to the

African American struggle since 1921; see his preface to *The Book of American Negro Poetry*.

<sup>21</sup> In "Caliban's Triple Play," Houston A. Baker, Jr. refers to race as "an 'old' discursive formation predicated on gross features" (387). To this I would add that we should also identify "race" as a formative discourse -- formative of not only identities, but also of bodies and what they come to mean when a need to "justify" a white system of oppression arises.

<sup>22</sup> Several scholars have noted that the school is modelled on Booker T. Washington's Tuskegee Institute, and that Naxos is an anagram for Saxon. Larsen clearly indicts Washington's solution to "the race problem" as a sell-out to whites who have a decided self-interest in keeping African Americans economically disadvantaged and working as tradespeople, rather than pursuing higher education and employment in the professions.

<sup>23</sup> Nella Larsen Imes to Dorothy Peterson, undated, James Weldon Johnson Collection, Bienecke Library, Yale University, New Haven. See also Thadious Davis, *Nella Larsen, Novelist of the Harlem Renaissance*.

<sup>24</sup> The mulatto character in fiction has also been read by leading black feminist critics as a mediating figure that facilitates the exploration of cultures and races, as well as the relationship between them. See: Hazel Carby, *Reconstructing Womanhood*, and "'On the Threshold of Woman's Era': Lynching, Empire, and Sexuality in Black Feminist Theory," in *"Race," Writing, and Difference*; Barbara Christian, *Black Women Novelists*; and Hortense Spillers. "Notes on an Alternative Model -- Neither/Nor."

<sup>25</sup> In her introduction to *The Sleeper Wakes: Harlem Renaissance Stories By Women*, Marcy Knopf notes that Du Bois and Fauset "together . . . published the literature of the 'Talented Tenth.' In fact, Fauset was most responsible for this, although Du Bois received most of the credit" (xxi).

<sup>26</sup> Locke may have been impressed with Hurston, but she certainly wasn't with him. Jervis Anderson quotes Zora Neale Hurston's scathing remarks regarding Locke, who in her opinion was "a malicious, spiteful little snot that thinks he ought to be the leading Negro because of his degrees. . . . So far as the young writers are concerned, he runs a mental pawnshop. He lends out his patronage and takes in ideas which he soon passes off as his own. And God help you if you get on without letting him represent you" (201).

- <sup>27</sup> Locke's reference to "the Negro" and "his artistic endowments and cultural contributions" seems not to have been merely a matter of writing style -- of thirty-five contributors to the landmark anthology *The New Negro*, including poets, prose writers, essayists, playwrights, folklorists, and artists, he included the work of only six women.
- <sup>28</sup> Sterling Brown, *The Negro in American Fiction* (1937); David Littlejohn, *Black on White* (1966); Robert Bone, *The Negro Novel in America* (1968); Hiroko Sato, "Under the Harlem Shadow: A Study of Jessie Fauset and Nella Larsen" (1972); Arthur P. Davis, *From the Dark Tower: Afro-American Writers 1900-1960* (1974); Addison Gayle, *The Way of the New World: The Black Novel in America* (1976); Judith Berzon, *Neither White Nor Black: The Mulatto Character in American Fiction* (1978); Barbara Christian, *Black Women Novelists* (1980); Mary Dearborn on Fauset, *Pocahontas's Daughters* (1986); Carby on Fauset, *Reconstructing Womanhood* (1987); Dickson D. Bruce, Jr., *Black American Writing From the Nadir* (1989); Houston A. Baker, Jr., *Workings of the Spirit* (1991); Vashti Crutcher Lewis, "Mulatto Hegemony in the Novels of Jessie Redmon Fauset" (1992).
- <sup>29</sup> Deborah E. McDowell, "New Directions for Black Feminist Criticism" (1980). "The Neglected Dimension of Jessie Redmon Fauset" (1981), "'That nameless, shameful impulse': Sexuality in Nella Larsen's *Quicksand* and *Passing*" (1988), and her introduction to *Plum Bun*. "Regulating Midwives" (1990); Cheryl Wall, "Passing For What? Aspects of Identity in Nella Larsen's Novels" (1986); Carby on Larsen in *Reconstructing Womanhood* (1987); Ann Hostetler, "The Aesthetic of Race and Gender in Nella Larsen's *Quicksand*" (1990); Ann duCille, *The Coupling Convention* (1993); Deborah Silverman, "Nella Larsen's *Quicksand*: Untangling the Webs of Exoticism" (1993); Pamela Barnett, "'My Picture of You is. After All. the True Helga Crane': Portraiture and Identity in Nella Larsen's *Quicksand*" (1995); Jacquelyn McLendon, *The Politics of Color in the Fiction of Jessie Redmon Fauset and Nella Larsen* (1995).
- <sup>30</sup> See also Hazel Carby, "'It Jus Be's Dat Way Sometime': The Sexual Politics of Black Women's Blues."
- <sup>31</sup> The same critics who condemn Fauset and Larsen for their concentration on the black bourgeoisie see their treatment of black female sexuality as conservative. See note 28.
- <sup>32</sup> Deborah McDowell, "'That nameless . . . shameful impulse': Sexuality in Nella Larsen's

*Quicksand and Passing*"; and Hazel V. Carby, *Reconstructing Womanhood: The Emergence of the Afro-American Woman Novelist*.

<sup>33</sup> I would argue that the power balance shifted when all-black shows developed a following in the early twentieth century. Out of these shows the first Broadway productions to feature African American actors and performers developed, which then in turn created a market for drama that was written, staged, performed, and produced by African Americans.

<sup>34</sup> See John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972).

<sup>35</sup> White Americans believed mulattoes to be sexually licentious to a degree greater than "pure blacks," a convenient way to excuse white male desire for biracial women. See John G. Mencke, *Mulattoes and Race Mixture: American Attitudes and Images, 1865-1918*; and Edward B. Reuter, *The Mulatto in the United States*.

<sup>36</sup> In "Policing the Black Woman's Body in an Urban Context." Carby analyzes the stereotype of Southern African American women who migrated to New York as "sexually degenerate" in Van Vechten's *Nigger Heaven* (1926) and Claude McKay's *Home to Harlem* (1928). Her observation regarding a correlation between the middle class and conservative attitudes toward sexuality is applicable to Fausset's and Larsen's novels as well.

<sup>37</sup> See also Mary Jane Lupton, "Bad Blood in Jersey: Jessie Fausset's *The Chinaberry Tree*." *CLA Journal* 27(1984): 383-92. Lupton quotes Robert Bone's dismissal of the novel as chronicling the life of "the first colored woman in New Jersey to wear lounging pajamas," noting that "Celie makes loose and colorful pants rather than lounging pajamas [in *The Color Purple*]. Both types of garment are liberating for women" (390-91).

<sup>38</sup> As Barbara Christian documents, the "low down" mulatto is figured in African American work songs like the following:

If 'twant for de ter'pin pie  
and sto-bought ham,  
Dese country women  
Couldn't git nowhere.

Some say, give me a high yaller,

I say, give me a teasin' brown,  
 For it takes a teasin' brown  
 To satisfy my soul.

For some folkses say  
 A yaller is low down,  
 But teasin' brown  
 Is what I's crazy about. (qtd in Christian 32)

<sup>39</sup> Although Fauset depicts Laurentine's mother Sal as strong enough to defy convention in her relationship with Holloway, Sal subscribes to bourgeois ideals when it comes to her daughter: ". . . if he gave her daughter, her precious baby, a name and protection she would lie down and let him walk over her body" (32). Sal's traditional aspirations for her daughter's future are quite likely a result of the rejection and isolation she herself faced for pursuing a life that violated social rules and conventions.

<sup>40</sup> Black women were still believed responsible for the race's morality, or lack of it, in the 1920s and 30s; moreover, their "place" continued to be thought of as the home and their "work" the encouragement of black men in the task of racial uplift. Black newspapers and magazines remained a popular forum for disseminating ideals of conduct for women. One such magazine *The Messenger*, ran a monthly column entitled "Negro Womanhood's Greatest Needs." Deborah McDowell notes that the majority of the column's contributors "emphasized that a woman's place was in the home," as did one writing in 1927 that it was a woman's duty "to cling to the home [since] great men and women evolve from the environment of the hearthstone" ("New Directions" 192). *The Messenger's* editors, Charles Owen and Asa Randolph, were "the only Afro-Americans to be arrested and tried for violating the Espionage Act" and were considered by J. Edgar Hoover to be "among the most dangerous radicals in America" (Lewis 17). Owen's and Randolph's radicalism evidently did not extend to an enlightened view of women, nor did that of their readership who, presumably, were radical enough in their political views to buy *The Messenger* but remained conservative in their view of gender roles.

<sup>41</sup> Fishbein argues that those 1920s films -- of the "white slavery genre" -- that treated rescued fallen women as "the equals or even superiors of true women," as Harper and Hopkins had done in *Iola Leroy* and *Contending Forces*, were more revolutionary and posed a greater challenge to sexual mores than the flapper films, but were less popular.

**Transgressions and Excess: Passing as Parodic Performance  
in Jessie Fauset's *Plum Bun* and Nella Larsen's *Passing***

In her foreword to *The Chinaberry Tree*, Jessie Fauset writes that "[t]o be a Negro in America posits a dramatic situation" (xxx). Such a characterization of African American lived experience resonates on a number of levels: not only does it acknowledge the extremes of racial violence and the harsh inequities of the color line, but also the reality of life lived under the pressure and restriction of stereotyped "blackness." The American drama in which "the Negro" was cast in the early twentieth century was a complex one involving white identity and power, as well as African American identity, culture, and lived experience. As Ralph Ellison observes in his 1958 essay "Change the Joke and Slip the Yoke," while the "blackness" generated by minstrelsy was initially *performed* by white showmen and later by African American vaudeville entertainers, the stereotype was thrust upon all African Americans who were expected to *embody* it:

These entertainers . . . in order to enact a symbolic role basic to the underlying drama of American society assumed a ritual mask and role taken on by white minstrel men when *they* depicted comic Negroes. Social changes . . . have made for certain modifications (Rochester operates in a different climate of rhetoric, say, than did Stepin Fetchit) but the mask, stylized and iconic, was once required of anyone who would act the role. . . . [I]t was our Negro "misfortune" to be caught up associatively in the negative side of this basic dualism of the white folk mind, and to be shackled to almost everything it would repress from conscience and consciousness. (47-48)

Ellison theorizes the dualism of "race" in America as underpinning white desire and subjectivity -- white Americans may live "unmarked" by race, but white identity is inextricably bound up in constructions of the "other." In order to reaffirm their identity as controlled, logical, and civilized, white Americans created a bodied, sensual, uninhibited

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"blackness"; however, as Ellison goes on to point out, the result proved unsettling rather than reassuring: "Here another ironic facet of the old American problem of identity crops up. For out of the counterfeiting of the black American's identity there arises a profound doubt in the white man's mind as to the authenticity of his own image of himself" (53). If minstrel caricatures of "blackness" caused an uncertainty in white Americans regarding the stability and contingency of their identity, what effect might an increasing awareness that "whiteness" was performable have had?

Certainly, anyone who read the numerous articles on "passing" in newspapers and journals, as well as novels of "passing" written by white and black Americans alike, was aware that "passing for white" was not only the subject of narrative but an American reality. African American entertainers able to "change the joke and slip the yoke" of stereotyped blackness made their living selling a demeaning caricature that they nevertheless successfully manipulated to mask their own identity and culture. We have recognized that even while performing a stereotype, African American minstrel and vaudeville entertainers exercised a degree of control over, and distanced themselves from, the caricature of blackness, but we seem to be more hesitant to read the performance of whiteness or "passing" in a similar register. We have not read African Americans playing the "darker" as assimilating to a white racist notion of "the Negro." Rather, critics like Eric Lott are careful to distinguish between "a structured set of white responses" to African American culture and African American culture and expressivity itself (101), as well as between levels or layers of imitation in such performances: "[I]t was possible for a black man in blackface, without a great deal of effort, to offer credible imitations of white men imitating him. . . . The primary purpose of the mask, then, may have been as much to maintain control over a potentially subversive act as to ridicule" (113).



However, as I have noted in previous chapters, many critics have read African American women's novels centering on mulatto heroines who may, and sometimes do, choose to pass for white as sell-outs to white audiences. In turn, critics have read passing as a "dishonorable" act that indicates the character's lack of "integrity" (Wall, "Passing?" 109).<sup>1</sup> Moreover, narratives of passing have been largely understood to be assimilationist in nature and intent:

The narrative trajectories of classic passing texts . . . . depend . . . upon the association of blackness with self-denial and suffering, and of whiteness with selfishness and material comfort. The combination of these points -- passing as betrayal, blackness as self-denial, whiteness as comfort -- has the effect of advocating black accommodationism, since the texts repeatedly punish at least this particular form of upward mobility. (Smith 44)

This recurrent interpretation of passing narratives may prove limiting for certain texts, however. Instead, I would argue that some novels of passing signify on, rather than uncritically reinscribe, the American racial dialectic Valerie Smith elucidates here. In Jessie Fauset's *Plum Bun* (1929) and Nella Larsen's *Passing* (1929), Angela Murray, Irene Redfield, and Clare Kendry don masks of whiteness; it is my contention that passing for white as Fauset and Larsen represent it in these novels is an act of masking that may be read much like Ellison reads what he calls "the 'darker' act":

[T]hat which cannot gain authority from tradition may borrow it with a mask. Masking is a play upon possibility and ours is a society in which possibilities are many. When American life is most American it is apt to be most theatrical. . . . We wear the mask for purposes of aggression as well as for defense . . . . the motives hidden behind the mask are as numerous as the ambiguities the mask conceals. (54-55)

In an era in which white Americans were indulging a renewed fascination with watching "the Negro." Fauset and Larsen figured whites as objects of an African American gaze that parodied whiteness, saw it as another mask to don, another position to occupy, and played upon the possibility of identity as a performative.

In *Plum Bun* and *Passing*, Fauset and Larsen revise the mulatto trope from a fixer of racial boundaries establishing the point of passage between white and black, to a figure that calls these boundaries into crisis. In "Who Cuts the Border?" Hortense Spillers considers Faulkner's characterization of African Americans as "'outside' the bar defin[ing] precisely that moment of negation from which meaning can work" (11); the meaning to which she refers is that of white identity. Rather than fixing the limits of white identity, Harper's, Hopkins's, Fauset's, and Larsen's heroines destabilize the dialectic of American womanhood by shifting the black female -- white womanhood's "outside" -- from "fallen" to "true" woman and positions in between. These writers locate in the mulatto figure "a site of cultural and political manoeuvre" in response to the very uses to which Spillers argues the mulatto has been put in defining white American identity. Rather than reaffirming white "sameness" by inscribing black female "otherness" as impure, these novelists represent their mulatto heroines as moving within "the bar." or passing as true women, in order to clear a space for black women to be considered the subjects of a noble womanhood. This gender identity is a self-defined one that acknowledges the experiences of African American women, and accommodates their values and goals. The mulatto figures in these novels, then, no longer define the borderlines of womanhood, but transgress and blur them. The politicization of the mulatto figure is further amplified in Fauset's and Larsen's narratives of passing. In addition to transgressing the bounds of womanhood, the mulatto heroine passing for white transgresses racial lines, travelling between and across the lines dividing black from white. Once the mulatto moves from the boundary and her banished space "'outside' the bar" into an unsanctioned position as both white and black, she no longer consolidates or stabilizes racial difference. I contend that the mulatto figure as Fauset and Larsen revise

it does not mediate between whiteness and blackness, and thereby consolidate racial hegemony and define racial boundaries. Instead, Angela Murray, Irene Redfield, and Clare Kendry challenge the mobilization of "race" in America as a "natural closed category."<sup>2</sup>

In 1921 Hornell Hart published the results of the first study to attempt to estimate the number of "legal Negroes who have . . . permanently passed into the white group" (Burma 18), a study considered to be definitive until the mid-1940s. Hart based his study on census figures of "native whites of native heritage" from ages one to twenty-four years, which he tracked in consecutive census reports as the study groups aged. These groups would quite likely decrease due to emigration and death, but they should not increase substantially in number given that they excluded immigrants. He found that between 1910 and 1920 this group of "native-born whites" had in fact increased by 165,000 to 170,000 people, and attributed "the bulk of the increase . . . [to] the passing of the legal Negro upon reaching maturity" (qtd in Burma 19). In 1937 T.T. McKinney estimated that 10,000 African Americans a year pass permanently for white, but by 1946 *Colliers* published an article entitled "Who is a Negro?" which surmised that 30,000 African Americans passed annually (Eckard 498). These various figures clearly interested, and perhaps even alarmed, white sociologists who investigated the studies supporting them, concluded that the census figures on which they were based were unreliable, and argued that estimates ranging between 2,500 and 2,800 were more accurate (Burma 21; Eckard 500). Of course the very nature of passing would render estimates such as these unreliable, if not impossible to arrive at. Yet white Americans were obviously concerned with this phenomenon, so much so that many of the studies conducted, and reviews of existing literature, concluded with "reassurances" that permanent passing was far less

common than temporary passing (Burma 22); that while the studies estimated the number of African Americans passing for white to be as high as "2,600 per year . . . the author believes that the number was actually much less" (Eckard 500); and that while some "Negroes" were fair-skinned enough to pass for white, there were certain "give-away features" by which concerned whites might detect the passer, "such as everted lips, broad nose, dark eyes, [and] kinky hair" (Kephart 338). As Thadious Davis has observed, the passer's body was believed to be "the repository of evidence negating itself as a refigured 'white' person" (316), such that whites could be assured that few African Americans who could pass would attempt to do so any more than casually, and if they did they would soon be detected.

This interest on the part of white Americans in determining definitively "how many negroes pass" not only fuelled sociological studies from the 1920s through the 1940s, but was also expressed as a voyeuristic fascination with the "tragic mulatto" and the titillating act of passing for white related in "passing" narratives. Judith Berzon's 1978 study of the mulatto in American fiction, *Nether White Nor Black*, observes that Anglo-American and African American authors focused on passing for white in "mulatto fiction" from 1900-1930, but with a distinct difference:

The Negro version of the unhappy passer or the middle-class mulatto who denies his or her people is essentially a Harlem Renaissance phenomenon. In the white version, the mulatto usually dies; in the black version, he is "summoned back to his people by the spirituals, or their full throated laughter, or their simple sweet ways." (63)<sup>3</sup>

While Berzon delineates the racial difference she perceives between white and black writers' representation of passing, Valerie Smith argues that a gender difference surfaces in the resolutions of passing novels as well:

Passing male characters can either be re-educated and returned to the bosom of home and community to uplift the race, or they can remain in the

white world and be constructed with some measure of condescension, ambivalence, or even approval. (Consider for instance, Charles Chesnutt's John Walden Warwick, James Weldon Johnson's unnamed protagonist, or Willard Savoy's Kern Roberts.) Passing women characters, on the other hand, are either re-educated and returned to the bosom of home and community, or they receive some extreme form of punishment such as death or the sacrifice of a loved one. (I have in mind here Hurst's and Stahl's Peola, Sirk's Sarah Jane, and Larsen's Clare Kendry, for example.) (45)

This punishment of the biracial female who chooses to pass for white may serve, as Smith observes, to "restrain the options and behavior of black women" (45), or to mount a critique of those very restrictions. I have argued that Fauset and Larsen critique and parody middle-class notions of female propriety in *The Chinaberry Tree* and *Quicksand*, and I believe they have, in part, a similar purpose in *Plum Bun* and *Passing*. In addition to mounting a critique of gender relations, Fauset and Larsen may also have used the "punishment" of their heroines who pass for white to placate their white readership, who undoubtedly would have felt threatened by such a transgression of the color line. By killing off Clare Kendry and relocating Angela Murray to France, Larsen and Fauset effectively reassure white readers that even those passers who seem difficult to detect will never the less be "found out" or removed to the margins one way or another. *Plum Bun* and *Passing* foreground issues of class, race, and gender, representing the borders between these various identities as permeable, their sites of power and authority as shifting, and the "punishment" that "crossing racial lines usually results in" (Julien 263).

Just as Helga Crane and Laurentine Strange pass for true women and thereby undermine the racialization of womanhood in America, so too do Angela Murray of Fauset's *Plum Bun*, and Irene Redfield and Clare Kendry of Larsen's *Passing*. Even as a young girl Angela actively pursues traditional definitions and attributes of femininity. Even though she has approached very few tasks in her life with diligence, Angela applies

herself to studying French out of a certain Victorian sense of "ladylike accomplishment": "As for French. . . . languages did not come to her with any great readiness, but there was an element of fine ladyism about the beautiful, logical tongue that made her in accordance with some secret subconscious ambition resolve to make it her own" (37).<sup>4</sup> Moreover, Fauset characterizes Angela as "naturally" chaste, contrary to stereotypes of the "exotic" black female and the "vicious" mulatto: "She was naturally cold . . . in the last analysis her purity was a matter not of morals, not of religion, nor of racial pride; it was a matter of fastidiousness" (199). In addition to Angela's chaste character and feminine accomplishments, Fauset further invests her with a "womanly" reaction to a period of separation from her "true love": "[T]he strain under which she had been suffering for the past week broke down her defence. Swaying, she caught at his hand" (283). Angela may grow faint in periods of emotional crisis, but she is calculating in her analysis of conventional "femininity" and her ability to play this role when it profits her: "[S]he wanted to be a beloved woman, dependent, fragile, sought for, feminine . . . she would be 'womanly' to the point of ineptitude" (296-7). Fauset invokes the notion of a lady's "natural" propensity to sexual purity and physical weakness under strain in her African American heroine during a period in which black women were still believed to be prone to sexually illicit behavior, and images of black women as Sapphire -- strong-willed, independent, unfeminine, and emasculating matriarchs -- that had held ascendancy since slavery continued to be reinforced as late as 1965 with the publication of the Moynihan Report.<sup>5</sup>

Like Harper and Hopkins before her, Fauset does not equate true womanhood with either skin color or class position: Angela's darker-skinned sister Virginia and their housekeeper Hetty Daniels are represented as more "womanly" than Angela herself. As a

young girl Virginia devotes herself to domestic duties: "She was only twelve at this time, yet she had already developed a singular aptitude and liking for the care of the home" (20). Moreover, in true "womanly" fashion and with a sentimental show of emotion, Virginia's devotion extends to her faith: Sundays bring her "a sensation of happiness which lay perilously near tears" (21). Unlike Angela, whose materialistic motivations are always at the fore, Virginia aspires only to a happy and fulfilling family life:

She envied no one the incident of finer clothes or a larger home; this unity was the core of happiness, all other satisfactions must radiate from this one; greater happiness could only be a matter of degree but never of essence. When she grew up she meant to live the same kind of life; she would marry a man exactly like her father and she would conduct her home exactly as did her mother. . . . And on Sundays they would all go to church. (22)

However, naive Virginia's aspirations may be they nevertheless underscore a certain irony in Fauset's representation of Virginia as more of a "true woman" than her fair-skinned sister. Fauset also invokes stereotypes of working-class African Americans as an uneducated and unsophisticated mass leading drab lives when she introduces Hetty Daniels, the Murray's housekeeper who "loved to pose" for Angela: "It satisfied some unquenchable vanity in her unloved, empty existence. She could not conceive of being sketched because she was, in the artist's jargon, 'interesting,' 'paintable,' or 'difficult.' Models, as she understood it, were chosen for their beauty" (65). However, while Hetty might initially conform more to a white readership's stereotypes of African Americans than does the middle-class Murray family, she is also characterized as an upstanding woman of "untarnished" virtue:

"Then young fellars was always 'round me thick ez bees, wasn't any night they wasn't more fellows in my kitchen then you an' Jinny ever has in yore parlour. But I never listened to none of the' talk, jist held out agin 'em and kept my pearl of great price untarnished. I aimed then and I'm continual to aim to be a verjous woman." (66)

Rather than inscribe stereotypes that correlate class position and race to certain behavior and conduct, Fauset invokes, only to subsequently refute, such notions.

Fauset, then, employs what Houston A. Baker identifies as a common narrative strategy in turn-of-the-century African American fiction, "mastery of form": "The mastery of form conceals, disguises, floats like a trickster butterfly in order to sting like a bee" (*Modernism* 50). Fauset's African American female characters master the form of true womanhood, masking African American experiences and values within their performances, but she figures some performances as disguising more than others. While Hetty's and Virginia's behavior is highly moral and their values lie with the interests of family and their community at large, Fauset characterizes fair-skinned Angela as deviating subtly from the standards of true womanhood. Angela shows a somewhat domestic concern for household affairs, but this concern centers on finances rather than housewifery, and effectively masculinizes her in a society still largely divided between the gendered public and private spheres: "[I]t was nice to be independent, to be holding a lady-like, respectable [teaching] position . . . to be able to have pretty clothes and to help with the house, in brief to be drawing an appreciably adequate and steady salary" (49). Indeed, Angela's foremost concern is with the salary she earns teaching and the independence it will afford her; she does not enter this career with an altruistic desire to teach and guide future generations, but with the goal of financing and pursuing her artistic talents in a racially segregated society that denies African Americans equal access to educational opportunities. Angela's necessary labor as an African American woman, her equally necessary concern for her personal finances as well as those of her family, and the limitations she experiences, historicize black female experience in the 1920s, and mark its differences from the more privileged life of the majority of white women.



Fauset marks Angela's concerns and experiences as similar to those of African American women during this period, but her desire for a largely passive life in which her chief occupations will be exerting a "womanly" influence, entertaining lavishly, and marrying well are thought to characterize women of another class and race -- bourgeois to upper-class true white women:

Power, greatness, authority, these were fitting and proper for men; but there were sweeter, more beautiful gifts for women, and power of a certain kind too. Such a power she would like to exert. . . . If she could afford it she would have a salon, a drawing-room where men and women . . . should come and pour themselves out to her sympathy and magnetism. To accomplish this she must have money and influence . . . she would need even protection; perhaps it would be better to marry . . . a white man. (88)

However, embedded in Angela's traditionally feminine and sentimental aim to marry and exert a "sweet" and "beautiful" influence upon family, friends, and acquaintances are her decidedly unladylike aims for power, money, and independence: "[I]t would be . . . great fun to capture power and protection in addition to the freedom and independence which she had so long coveted" (88-89). Paradoxically the protection Angela seeks also necessitates a very "womanly" dependence that would effectively limit the freedom she desires. Angela's experiences as an African American woman have taught her the realities that result from the intersection of racial and gender hierarchies in American society, where "men had a better time of it than women, coloured men than coloured women, white men than white women" (88). Angela knows only too well that black women must fight for freedom, independence, and the right to self-determination along both race and gender lines, and within both the dominant culture and the African American community. Echoing black feminists of the nineteenth-century club movement, Fauset underscores the asymmetry of "protection" accorded white women but denied African American women.<sup>6</sup>

Not only does Angela pass to gain the protection and privilege denied her as a black woman, but Fauset's text passes as a combination of fairy-tale, romance, and novel of manners in order to gain her a publisher and audience. More importantly, Fauset's novel passes to gain a hearing for her subversive and political contention that racial and gender identities are constructed along, and perpetuate, an imbalance of power in America. Just as Angela's performance of true white womanhood is a hybridization of black female experience and white American notions of femininity, of masculinized aims veiled by feminized means, Fauset's narrative holds in tension both a black feminist subtext that critiques racial and gender hegemony, and the sentimental and romantic pretext of a young woman seeking a fairy-tale life of a happy marriage and home.<sup>7</sup> On the surface, then, white audiences would see *Plum Bun* as conventional -- a novel in the vein of the romances and novels of manners to which they were accustomed. Angela's search for a handsome, wealthy young man with whom to share a luxurious home and lead a leisured life would seem familiar to white readers, even more so since Fauset accesses the well-worn formula of a heroine, often orphaned, succeeding on her own in the world -- a formula used by women writers since the early nineteenth century, and by male authors like Henry James and Theodore Dreiser near the turn of the century.<sup>8</sup> Nor would white readers have been shocked at, or rejected *Plum Bun* for, its explorations of female sexuality and "free love," for they would have been familiar with novels from Chopin's *The Awakening* to Hemingway's *The Sun Also Rises*. More significant than these similarities to white-authored novels that a white readership would have found reassuring, however, are the differences they veil, differences that would have conversely forged a connection with African American readers.

A white audience would read Angela's search for freedom and protection in

marriage as conventional enough. Further, the idea that a mulatto would consent to a sexual relationship with a wealthy white man would certainly prove titillating, but would reaffirm rather than subvert their stereotypical notions that "mixed-blood" women "everywhere seek sex relations with the men of the superior race" (Reuter 93). An African American readership, on the other hand, would identify with Angela's experiences of racial inequity and share her primary concerns for freedom, economic stability, and some semblance of power to redress their communal dispossession at the hands of white Americans. The fact that Angela seeks what should rightfully be hers as an American citizen by passing for white, would also accord with African American lived experience. Since Reconstruction, African Americans had come to be only too familiar with a refusal on the part of white Americans to willingly relinquish the power and privilege that were slavery's legacy; consequently, what white Americans would deny them, some African Americans fair-skinned enough to pass for white determined to gain by deception. Passing for white was not just the stuff of fiction, and many black Americans knew friends or relatives who passed to gain employment, better living conditions, and social freedoms.

Angela's repeated references to attaining "freedom" and "protection" in marriage were by 1929 standard in both white and black authored novels of manners, as Mary Sisney notes: "Until she is married, a lady in the novel of manners has no security, no freedom, no identity" (172). Her search for protection in a relationship with a white man would be in keeping with a white readership's understanding of the conventional goal for a young woman, and the expected aim of a so-called degenerate mixed-blood; however, African American readers had a far different experience of "relationships" between white men and black women. Protection was the last thing an African American woman could

reasonably expect from a white man who saw her as always already sexualized. White women barter for protection in a gendered economy. However, Angela must wager her performance of white womanhood for protection in both a gendered and racialized marketplace, a marketplace that continues to commodify African American women well after slavery has ended. These varied readings by two very different audiences center on Angela's performance of true white womanhood as an act of signifying. Gates maintains that "Signifyin(g) . . . negotiates the language user through several orders of meaning" (79). Fauset uses the "language" or ideals of bourgeois womanhood and the shared "language" of African American lived experience to negotiate her text between two readerships that attend to several different "orders of meaning" in Angela's performance. Fauset further develops and extends the polyvalency of her narrative in her exploration of female sexuality in the 1920s.

In her introduction to the novel, Deborah McDowell notes that even though Fauset repeatedly refused throughout her writing career to pander to primitivist tastes, she none the less "took pleasure, at least in *Plum Bun*, in teasing commercial expectation. Although there are no explicitly sexual scenes in the novel, it brims with innuendoes. Fauset capitalizes on the multivalent sexual implications of her title. The suggestions in 'bun' or 'tail' are clear, as are those in Roger's name" (xxvii). McDowell is referring to the metaphorical association between sex and food in classic blues lyrics popular at the time, citing "jelly roll" as a familiar example. Fauset plays on the sexual connotations of "plum bun," which in blues parlance translates to "a fine piece," and the expectations for a sexually explicit narrative that her audience would have drawn from both the title and the nursery rhyme epigraph:

To Market, to Market  
To buy a Plum Bun;

Home again, Home again,  
Market is done.

Ann duCille points out that the epigraph's association with "the sexual vernacular announces the text's concern with the mature, blues themes of sex as a consumable commodity and the female body as a bargaining chip" (*Coupling* 101). I would argue that many of Fauset's white readers as well as her African American audiences would be familiar with the sexual metaphors of the blues, since the classic blues in which they were most prevalent were not only performed widely, but had also been recorded by both white and African American female blues singers at this time.<sup>9</sup> But Fauset "teases" only to disappoint: the white women she meets, not Angela nor any of Fauset's African American characters, are well-versed in the game of "free love" and the use of their bodies in a sexual marketplace; Greenwich Village rather than Harlem, the salons of New York's rich bohemians not a smokey, cellar cabaret, are the sites of Angela's education in sexuality.

Significantly, Angela's education in sexual politics is narrated in the novel's mid-sections entitled "Market" and "Plum Bun"; moreover, these sections are set in the predominately white area of New York's Greenwich Village, which African Americans had left at the turn of the century for the West Side and eventually Harlem: "The blacks living on the middle West Side in the eighteen-nineties had moved up there from Greenwich Village -- from the blocks of Canal, Mulberry . . . Bleecker, Macdougall, West Third, and West Tenth Streets. By 1900, only a few Negro households remained on these streets. . . . Many had been forced out by white immigrant groups" (Anderson 8). When Angela first arrives in New York from Philadelphia, she lives "just at the edge of the Village"; her geographical positioning parallels her racial positioning -- she lives neither inside this once black but now white area nor wholly outside it (92), but her friendship

with Paulette Lister later brings her into the Village and white bohemian life. Angela, whose experience, thoughts, and language are the epitome of propriety, encounters a new lifestyle that Fauset represents as centering on sexuality and the commodification of women.

While living in the Village, Angela's best paintings are of what she calls her "Fourteenth Street 'types,'" portraits of working-class men and women, the homeless, and prostitutes. The primitivist proclivities of the age popularize any and all representations of life outside white bourgeois circles, in turn creating a seller's market for such work, but Angela can barely bring herself to even name her subject: ". . . the smiling despair of a harlot. Even in her own mind she hesitated before the use of that terrible word, but association was teaching her to call a spade a spade" (111). Fauset conflates the primitivist marketplace and its sexualized icons with a gender economy in which men are figured as buyers controlling the market and its female commodities. In both markets the benefits accruing to the seller are fraught with difficulties and often prove precarious at best. "Free love" is possible for men, but becomes an oxymoron for women. Fauset repeatedly underscores the inevitable commodification of women whether they explore and express their sexuality, or pursue the traditional goal of marriage. By the novel's end, Angela -- with hard-won savvy -- comes to regard relationships between men and women as marketplaces in which women have no purchasing power and can only barter their ideals and bodies. She has become disillusioned with the ideal of marriage, characterizing it as "an effort on our part to make our commerce decent" (320). As an artist, Angela refuses to mortgage her talent to patrons she must "flatter," whose "condescension" she must accept along with payment (111), but as an African American woman she realizes her access to "position, power, wealth" and a name is limited at best in American society.

and determines to get them through passing for white and marrying a white man:

"[M]arriage is the easiest way for a woman to get those things, and white men have them" (112).

Angela repeatedly reflects upon the distribution of power in American society, but, as McDowell points out, even with the knowledge that white men hold a monopoly on power Angela mistakenly "tries to 'buy' in a society that only allows her to 'sell'" ("Regulating" xix). Angela tries to barter for marriage with Roger Fielding, but Roger knows his value as an eligible bachelor and contrives to buy her body with gifts and promises not of marriage, but of a "permanent" and "freely" giving relationship. Even though Roger believes Angela is a white woman, Fauset represents his desire for her as similar to that which white men historically have had for mulatto women -- the paradoxical desire for accessible virtue. When Angela realizes he is asking her to take him as a lover not a husband, she cannot believe he would want her to live a "promiscuous" life as her white bohemian friends do. Roger's reply would not be unfamiliar to either Angela or Fauset's white and black readerships: "Of course I don't. It was precisely because you weren't like [them] that I became interested. You were such a babe in the woods. Anyone could see you'd had no experience with men" (185). Just as Southern plantation aristocrats before him had done, Roger lavishly courts a woman he wants only as a mistress, promises Angela a long-standing relationship but not marriage, and leaves her to pursue a woman of whom his family and social circle would approve.

While Fauset critiques the imbalance of power that has given white men controlling interest in both a gendered and racialized sexual economy through her representation of Angela and Roger's relationship, she again undermines the racialized dialectic of womanhood in America that predicates true white womanhood upon its

polarized opposite, fallen black womanhood. In other words, Fauset subverts the tendency of her white readers to assume that Angela, an African American woman, has sought and only deserves to be sexually used by a white man. Roger's courtship of Angela may echo Southern quadrone balls, which were based on the differences between reality and carefully constructed appearance -- elaborate courtships of women who could not refuse, concubines who were often treated as wives, beautiful, educated and virginal young women who appeared to be white used by so-called gentlemen for the titillation of accessible purity -- but Fauset inscribes these similarities only to subvert them in a clever parody of white womanhood. Angela's performance of true white womanhood is represented as most successful when she agrees to Roger's proposition, when she stakes her body and sexuality on her belief that he is a gentleman and will eventually marry her. Significantly, Fauset describes Angela as conspicuously "los[ing] . . . her colour" when she decides to become sexually involved with Roger (179). An independent young woman who bravely leaves home, family and friends to pass for white in a strange new city. Angela takes on a ladylike passivity soon after her first sexual encounter with Roger:

Without him life meant nothing; with him it was everything. . . . Now for the first time she felt possessive; she found herself deeply interested in Roger's welfare . . . . [H]is wishes, his pleasure were the end and aim of her existence; she told herself . . . that men had other aims, other uses but that the sole excuse for being a woman was to be just that, -- a woman. Forgotten were her ideals about her Art; her ambition to hold a salon . . . . (203-4)

Fauset's tone is unmistakably ironic, with its melodrama and excessive romanticizing of what is effectively Angela's entrapment. Angela is never more a "true woman," forsaking her wants and aims to care for Roger's every whim, than when she has "fallen"; never more convincingly a "white" woman than when she is Roger's mulatto mistress or *plaHee*. In "Trajectories of Self Definition," Barbara Christian reads in African



### American women's novels

. . . from *Iola Leroy* (1892) to Dorothy West's *The Living is Easy* (1948) . . . an incredible tension between the "femininity" of the heroines and their actual behavior. On the one hand, the writers try to prove that black women *are* women, that they achieve the ideal of other American women of their time. That is, that they are beautiful (fair), pure, upper class, and would be nonaggressive, dependent beings, if only racism did not exist. At the same time, they appear to believe that if Afro-American women were to achieve the norm, they would lose important aspects of themselves. The novels, especially those about passing, embody this tension. (235)

Yet Christian does not read these novels, *Plum Bun* among them, as parodying rather than endorsing and inscribing the ideal of true white womanhood, as holding both the stereotype of black female sexuality and the ideal of white female purity in tension with the reality of African American women's lived experience. Fauset, in fact, parodies both the notion of the African American woman as lascivious and the white woman as virtuous. Paulette, one of Fauset's "New" white women characters, speaks of using her sexual attraction as a power to wield over men: "'I've learned that a woman is a fool who lets her femininity stand in the way of what she wants. . . . I see what I want; I use my wiles as a woman to get it, and I employ the qualities of men, tenacity and ruthlessness, to keep it. And when I'm through with it, I throw it away just as they do'" (105). Ironically, in an era which invested African Americans with eroticism, Angela reflects that no African Americans she had known lived a sexually free lifestyle like Paulette's; and if they had, "she could not think of one who would thus have discussed it calmly with either friend or stranger" (107). Fauset parodies white sexual repression and the projection of untrammelled sexuality onto the racial "other" in her characterization of Paulette as sexually free, while Angela, conversely, can consider sex only under the sanction of marriage. In fact, the white women who befriend Angela all lead unconventional and "unwomanly" lifestyles. Like Paulette, Martha Burden resists the feminine script of

marriage, believing that in marriage "spontaneity is lacking. She wants to give without being obliged to give; to take because she chooses and not because she's supposed to" (196). While Fauset's white female characters take up experimentations in "free love," her women of color like Angela, Virginia, and Rachel Salting -- Angela's Jewish neighbor -- all believe in marriage and true love.

Fauset also parodies the racialized constructs of womanhood through Angela's prolonged resistance to Roger's sexual proposition. But she extends this parody by making Angela's performance more closely approximate the ideals of true white womanhood when it is staged in the midst of an illicit affair. Fauset's most severe and incisive critique of gender and racial hierarchies is launched from the site of their intersection in the polyvalent identity and experiences of a biracial woman passing for white. Angela is neither white nor black but both, she is a "fallen" woman with the most "ladylike" of devotions and motives, and at her most "unwomanly" when self-reliant, independent, yet virtuous. She is both genuine and deceptive, engaged in performance and true to herself, at once. Fauset defies the construction of both race and gender identities as closed and natural by demonstrating their fluidity in a complex parody; moreover, that same parody confronts her audience with the very stereotypes she in turn plays on and subverts.

Although Fauset parodies racialized gender identities through her African American characters' performance of true white womanhood, she does not treat issues of class in as much depth as Larsen does in *Passing*. In her reading of *Passing*, Lauren Berlant has argued that "Passing for nonblack allows these women [Irene Redfield and Clare Kendry] to wear their gender according to a particular class style" (111). I would qualify this point by contending that there are significant differences between Irene's

passing and Clare's; these differences go further than the fact that Irene passes for white only occasionally and only for convenience, while Clare has "passed over" into the white race. Irene passes more than occasionally and more than for white -- she carefully regulates her life, her behavior, and her appearance in order to solidify her bourgeois class position, an act of passing which also entails her performance of true womanhood. Clare, on the other hand, stages a much more "daring" and "having" performance that flouts conventions and boundaries; she refuses to keep in her "place" as either white or black, true or "fallen" woman.

I would argue that Larsen revises the passing narrative, and that in her revision we can read an example of what Houston Baker has called African American "expressive modernity": ". . . the black artist's awareness that his or her only possible foundation for authentic and modern expressivity resides in a discursive field marked by formal mastery and sounding deformation" (*Modernism* 91). In Larsen's *Passing* I think we find a radical combination of what Baker identifies as "mastery of form" and "deformation of mastery" -- two techniques of "signifyin(g)" on the master's essentialist, racist nonsense. Irene's performance of true womanhood is an example of "mastery of form," whereas Clare's daring decision to play it both ways within and between gender and racial identities may be read as a combination of mastery and deformation.

To note that Irene's passing is not limited to her occasional masquerades as a white woman is not a new reading of the text. Mary Mabel Youmans has argued, in "Nella Larsen's *Passing*: A Study in Irony," that Irene is the character who actually passes in the novel because she turns her back on her racial heritage for the sake of bourgeois security. More recently, Jacquelyn McLendon has read Larsen's use of ambiguous pronouns in the narrative as an indication that both Clare and Irene pass, noting that

Larsen critiques "the bourgeois class" and her characters' "misdirected and self-defeating" values ("Self-Representation" 162). Counter to both Youmans and McLendon, I would contend that Larsen does not critique Clare or Irene as "self-defeating," or for "betraying" their racial heritage. Rather, I read Larsen's critique as enabled by, not directed at, Clare's and Irene's choices to engage in a performative of bourgeois white womanhood. Like Fauset, Larsen parodies the notion of race and womanhood as natural identities or categories of description inhering in the body, and ideas of the body as governed by a set of essential behaviours that correlate to an individual's class position, race, or gender. Consequently, rather than giving up their racial heritage or pursuing self-defeating and alien values, Angela, Clare and Irene challenge the essentialist assumptions implicit in such readings. Bourgeois values and behaviors once signalled white middle-class hegemony, and notions of "racial character" certainly fuelled white racial hegemony, but to represent what were taken to be indices of white identity as performable by African Americans challenges that hegemony. I argue for a reading of both Fauset's and Larsen's work that attends to the ways in which they were actively engaged in analyzing and critiquing their era's construction of race, class, and womanhood.

Larsen, then, aiming to undermine the racialization of gender and class identities, represents Irene Redfield as mastering and ultimately parodying bourgeois standards of womanhood. Irene, faithful to true womanhood's tenet of virtue, does not sleep in the same bedroom as her husband; indeed, only her sons betray Irene's asexuality. Moreover, she wishes sex to be a silent subject in her home, and cannot bring herself to even use the word when she expresses concern over her eldest son to her husband: "'I'm terribly afraid he's picked up some queer ideas about things -- some things -- from the older boys, you know'. . . 'Queer ideas?' he repeated. 'D'you mean ideas about sex, Irene?'" (189).<sup>10</sup> As

further proof of her true womanhood, Irene takes a certain pride in her skilful domesticity: "Pouring tea properly and nicely was an occupation that required a kind of well-balanced attention" (218). Moreover, she extends her "womanly" skills from the teatable throughout the house in the bourgeois pursuit of a well-appointed home, a home Larsen significantly describes as "furnished with a sparingness that was almost chaste" (219). Irene is a consummate hostess, arranging "successful" parties as carefully as she arranges a home life for her family. As the curator of domestic matters and her family's morality, Irene "wanted only to be tranquil. Only, unmolested, to be allowed to direct for their own best good the lives of her sons and her husband" (235).

Throughout the novel, Larsen invites her readers to see Irene's bourgeois domesticity and propriety as a mastery of true womanhood. Larsen's employment of this strategy is complicated by the fact that her novel has two audiences which would read Irene's performance in rather different ways. Baker maintains that mastery of form is often misrecognized or missed altogether by readers coming to texts with certain preconceived notions and expectations: ". . . such masking carries subtle resonances and effects that cannot even be perceived (much less evaluated) by the person who begins with the notion that recognizably *standard* form automatically disqualifies a work as an authentic and valuable Afro-American national production" (*Modernism* 86, emphasis in original). Historically, this has been the case in scholarship on both Fauset's and Larsen's work. To an audience missing Larsen's parody, Irene's performance would be read as mimetic, as an attempt to accurately re-present the behaviors and values of white bourgeois ideology in an assimilationist manoeuvre. While there is no way Larsen could have known how critics would read her novel today, I do believe that in her representational strategies there are indications that she was actively engaged in

signifying on the reception of *Passing* by her contemporary readership. In a literal reading, Irene's version of true womanhood might be seen by some white readers as a thin veneer of civilization "concealing and "disguising" her "wild" essence. Larsen seems to play on such a reading -- fuelled by her white readers' expectations that, like all "Negroes," Irene risks regressing to some "primitive" state -- in the scene in which Irene "discovers" Clare and her husband are having an affair. Larsen represents Irene's preoccupation with the mechanics of hosting a tea party, and her sense of proper behavior, as the only controls preventing her from indulging in "an almost uncontrollable impulse to laugh, to scream, to hurl things about. She wanted, suddenly, to shock people, to hurt them" (219). Indeed, *Passing's* ambiguous ending is an invitation to readers to believe Irene has lost control and has murdered Clare. In such a reading, Irene fulfils rather than challenges white racist expectations, and reproduces or re-presents the stereotype of primitive blackness as an essence she "conceals" or "disguises" beneath her bourgeois propriety.

However, an audience familiar with the "trickster" figure that recurs in African American literature might also recognize in Irene's performance of bourgeois womanhood an aspect of the trickster: "the violator of boundaries who . . . eludes banishment" (Baker, *Blues* 183). Such an audience, then, would read Larsen's representation of Irene as a parody on two levels. Irene's racial identity as an African American woman, combined with her performance of a gender identity reserved for white bourgeois women to mark their difference from women of "inferior" races and classes, results in a parody that disputes the notion that "ladies" are naturally white and at least middle class. Similarly, Irene's "ladylike" values and behavior, combined with her occasional "impulses" to behave in an "uncontrolled" manner, parody and refute both the idea that African

American women are naturally and wholly "primitive," and that ladies are inherently refined and civilized. Irene's "difference" as an African American woman performing true white womanhood, and her combination of "womanly" behavior and "impulsive" desires in that performance, become the parodic "sting" Larsen imparts to her mastery of form. Irene may be read as a trickster who "violates" the boundary between true and fallen womanhood, and is so successful in doing so that she "eludes banishment" from both the bourgeoisie and this gender identity.

It is Irene's carefully constructed and maintained gender identity that Clare Kendry threatens to disrupt with her insistent presence in Irene's life. Clare passes both for white and for a lady; she too, for fear of giving birth to a child touched by the "tar brush," appears to have silenced her sexuality. However, Clare's "peculiar caressing smile" disturbs Irene who finds it "just a shade too provocative" (149), and indicates that she will not be silenced in the interests of maintaining the gender identity she has adopted. Counter to the selflessness required of a true woman, Clare is said to behave in "a having way" (153), at the expense of anything and anyone: "'Can't you realize that I'm not like you a bit? Why, to get the things I want badly enough, I'd do anything, hurt anybody, throw anything away'" (210). Irene recognizes that Clare's challenge to the inhibiting prescriptions of ladyhood threatens the stability of her own carefully constructed bourgeois gender identity, as much as Clare seems to threaten the stability of Irene's marriage itself. By undermining the security of Irene's gender identity, Clare simultaneously unsettles her class identity; as I have noted earlier, true womanhood and the ideal image of the lady were mobilized to police and further secure the bounds of the white bourgeoisie. If Clare turns her provocative smile upon a waiter rather than reserving it for her husband, if she can confess a lack of morality to Irene -- "'It's just that

I haven't any proper morals or sense of duty, as you have, that makes me act as I do" -- but still retain her class position, Irene is forced to acknowledge that no amount of prudery will secure her identity as a bourgeois lady (210).

Irene's passing is not limited to her performance of true womanhood. While Irene fiercely claims an allegiance to "her race," she distinguishes herself from the "disagreeably damp and sticky crowds" of working-class blacks that threaten to "damage . . . her appearance" (147). Irene's colorism perpetuates white racial hegemony and the belief that white or light is right. Further, this colorism differentiates class for Irene, who employs dark-skinned maids: "Zulena, a small mahogany-colored creature brought in the grapefruit" (184). Irene denies she passes for white "except for the sake of convenience. restaurants, theatre tickets, and things like that" (227); however, since social segregation was but one arm of systematic racism at this time, Irene's "convenient" passing is no less an attempt to escape the restrictions of "blackness" than the passing in which Clare engages. Perhaps the most obvious example of Irene's adoption of whiteness is the nature of her participation in "racial uplift." Irene, by selling tickets for the Negro Welfare League dance to whites who attend to "get material to turn into shekels . . . to gaze on those great and near great while they gaze on the Negroes" (197), sells blackness as spectacle. And in participating in a commodification of "the race," Irene must distinguish herself as somewhat apart from it, for she would be mortified to be seen as a spectacle herself.

Both Irene and her husband Brian undertake what they call racial uplift primarily to further distinguish themselves as members of the middle-class and to further distance themselves from working-class blacks in Harlem: "'Uplifting the brother's no easy job. . . .' And over his face there came a shadow. 'Lord! how I hate sick people, and



their stupid, meddling, families, and smelly, dirty rooms, and climbing filthy steps in dark hallways" (186). By characterizing Brian as indulging in classist stereotypes of the "ignorant" and "dirty" masses just as Irene does, Larsen again effects a double accented parody. She parodies and critiques the elitist notion of "Talented Tenth" uplift that in the name of elevating the image of African Americans as a whole, often attempted instead to raise the image of bourgeois blacks by arguing for their similarity to middle-class whites and their difference from the urban working classes and poor. Further, Larsen parodies stereotypes of the mulatto: "[T]he mixed-bloods despise the lower race with a bitterness born of [a] degrading association with it. . . . They everywhere endeavour to escape it and to conceal and forget their relationship to it. . . . They envy the white, aspire to equality with them, and are embittered when the realization of such ambition is denied them" (Reuter 103). Ironically, it is Brian -- whose skin is a "deep copper colour" (184) -- not the fair-skinned Irene, who is characterized as habitually "unhappy" and "restless." Brian would rather live in Brazil, a country less racist than America but also one in which his profession as a doctor would accord him middle-class status and effectively "whiten" him. Carl Degler notes that wealth and color are co-determinants of social acceptance and social position in Brazil, but even a middle-class income and position can "whiten someone of African descent in Brazil" (102). Larsen parodies stereotypes of the mulatto as a restless individual aspiring to be "white" by ascribing such characteristics and possible motives to Irene's darker-skinned husband Brian. Moreover, Larsen further ironizes Brian's desire to move to Brazil; by the end of the 1920s, Brazil had come to virtually deny blacks entry into the country through a series of visa denials to applicants of African descent (Little 182, note 2).

Brian apparently fails to recognize that his bourgeois elitism and distaste for his

work, which brings him into the homes of Harlem's working class, amount to an act of "passing" of sorts, but Larsen represents Irene as all too aware of what it takes to maintain her identity. Far from criticizing whites who visit Harlem in such numbers that "Pretty soon the coloured people won't be allowed in at all, or will have to sit in Jim Crowed sections" (198), Irene actively cultivates the shared society and attention of Manhattan's elite, like *"the Hugh Wentworth."* Irene flatters Hugh, a thinly disguised portrait of Carl Van Vechten, as though he were the one exception to the "purely predatory" or merely "curious" white men who frequent social events in Harlem: "'Not you, Hugh . . . you're too sincere'" (207).<sup>11</sup> Moreover, concerned that the whiteness she has adopted remains secure, Irene views passing with disdain in order to deny both the passing she enacts and the danger she is well aware accompanies all forms of it: "'Tell me, honestly, haven't you ever thought of 'passing'?" Irene answered promptly: 'No. Why should I?' And so disdainful was her voice and manner that Clare's face flushed" (160).

Irene is obsessed with securing both herself and others to the place in which they belong, and is frightened by Clare because she can neither place her nor be certain that Clare will keep to her place. Irene is uncomfortable when Clare initially recognizes her, for she cannot return the recognition: "'I can't seem to place you'" (151). And because she continues to be unable to place Clare -- "Clare's incredibly beautiful face . . . was unfathomable, utterly beyond any experience or comprehension of hers" (176) -- Irene desperately tries to keep Clare at a distance: "Actually they were strangers. Strangers in their ways and means of living. Strangers in their desires and ambitions. Strangers even in their racial consciousness. Between them the barrier was just as high, just as broad, and just as firm as if in Clare did not run that strain of black blood" (192). Irene must deny affinity with Clare and her actions in order to deny her own passing. Irene is unable

to keep Clare in place, however, despite her warning that returning to Harlem "isn't safe."

Clare refuses to occupy a marginal position as a mulatto, outside both white and black, nor does she seem to be willing to continue to choose one racial identity at the expense of the other. Clare comes to threaten Irene's security and the "purity" of whiteness because she views identity as performable and therefore fluid, rather than a fixed essence.

Through characters' conversations, Larsen foregrounds various notions of "race" popular during the early twentieth century. Brian holds a Du Boisian belief that "race" is mystical to a certain extent, that "passers" are almost always drawn back to "the race" for some inexplicable reason: "'If I knew that, I'd know what race is'" (185). Irene also expresses a similar view, arguing that African Americans can always determine an individual's race, if "not by looking," then by some almost sixth sense: "'I'm afraid I can't explain. Not clearly. There are ways. But they're not definite or tangible'" (206). Whites, on the other hand, cling to the belief that an individual's appearance will always betray his or her race, a notion which Larsen and her African American characters mock and play on. For a moment, Irene fears that she has been found out at the Drayton, but she quickly dismisses the possibility because whites can never "tell": "White people were so stupid about such things for all that they usually asserted that they were able to tell; and by the most ridiculous means, finger-nails, palms of hands, shapes of ears, teeth, and other equally silly rot" (150). However much Brian and Irene believe race cannot be determined by relying on the body as decipherable text or repository of racial difference, they nonetheless insist that blacks can recognize an individual passing for white, while whites cannot: "'We know, always have. They don't. Not quite. It has, you will admit, its humorous side, and, sometimes, its conveniences'" (185). Irene and Brian, then, have more in common with whites like Hugh Wentworth who suspect there is a "trick" to learn

when it comes to race; they seem equally unwilling to view race as a performative, a constructed identity or subject position, and prefer instead to believe they can somehow detect an individual's race or who is passing for what.

Larsen's and Fauset's "passing" novels are noteworthy because they interrogate both stereotypes of the mulatto and the theories of race popular during their cultural moment. Fauset and Larsen foreground race itself as a constructed effect of political, economic, and social imbalances of power, rather than their cause. Well before the current interest in identity politics and "deconstruct[ing] 'race' as a dominant conceptual category" (Fuss 77), Fauset and Larsen were writing within an African American tradition of survival and expressive strategies that recognized the potential of performing not only "blackness," but "whiteness" as well. Minstrelsy and its performances of "blackness" reached their greatest popularity from the 1840s through the 1850s (Lott 9). By the turn of the century, minstrelsy had evolved into vaudeville, and the parodies of minstrel blackface that African American performers had engaged in all along became decidedly more pronounced and pointed challenges to white power and authority. Through the popular success of vaudeville shows from the 1890s into the twentieth century, African Americans moved from controlling their individual performances and collaborating with whites in the creation of shows, to writing, producing and staging their own shows.

Bert Williams and George Walker, who initially performed in blackface in minstrel productions, became instrumental in the development of black musical comedies like their own *Bandana Land*, *Sons of Ham*, and *In Abyssinia*. In the 1890s Williams and Walker were performing their parody of minstrel shows in New York, advertising themselves as "Two Real Coons"; by 1903 their *In Dahomey* was one of the first black comedy revues to play on Broadway (Anderson 36-8). Bob Cole and Billy Johnson

staged *A Trip to Coontown* in 1897 -- "the first musical farce written, produced, and owned by Afro-Americans" (Krasner 318). David Krasner argues that these early black comedies facilitated both the presence of African Americans in American theatre and the development of an African American dramatic tradition: "Black theatre emerged in a state of opposition, creating a form of 'hidden transcripts' . . . . Parody surfaced as a performative subversion of white authority, undermining and destabilizing racist stereotypes" (318). For example, Cole and Johnson's *A Trip to Coontown* ended with a finale entitled "No Coons Allowed!" which parodies American racism while dramatizing African American lived experience under its effects:

No coons allowed  
 No coons allowed  
 This place is meant for white folks that's all  
 We don't want no kinky-head kind  
 So move on darky down the line  
 No coons allow'd in here at all. (qtd in Krasner 318)

While African Americans performed and parodied white notions of "blackness" in minstrel and vaudeville shows and later in black musical comedies, African Americans also undertook performances of whiteness. Ralph Ellison asserts that survival strategies rather than self-denigration formed the foundation of the "'darky' act": "Very often, however, the Negro's masking is motivated . . . by a profound rejection of the image created to usurp his identity. Sometimes it is for the sheer joy of the joke; sometimes to challenge those who presume, across the psychological distance created by race manners, to know his identity" (55). Literal survival also motivated African Americans who masked their identities or performed alternative identities during slavery. A number of African American women escaped from slavery by performing whiteness and/or masculinity so well that they were never suspected of being runaways. William Still's *The Underground Railroad* (1879) tells of Maria Weems's decision to disguise herself as

a boy and successfully escape from her master. In *Running a Thousand Miles for Freedom* (1860), William Craft narrates his escape from slavery with his wife Ellen. Ellen Craft's father was her master, and as she was often "mistaken for a child of the family" (qtd in Carby 36), Ellen successfully passed for white to gain her freedom and that of her husband. Ellen masqueraded as a young white gentleman, and travelled North by train with her husband who posed as her slave. Together they escaped, undetected by their fellow white passengers. Harriet Jacobs's narrative relates her two performances as a sailor, performances so successful that "the father of my own children came so near that I brushed against his arm; but he had no idea who it was" (172).

These strategies of performing alternate identities to gain physical freedom, or donning the mask of "blackness" to protect one's identity while earning a necessary living, can arguably be seen as a tradition of performance in which passing for white participates -- a tradition that undermines white authority and works to redress an imbalance of power. Passing for white may not correlate to a lack of "race loyalty" as it has often been interpreted. Mary Church Terrell -- a black feminist active in anti-lynching campaigns and the black women's club movement -- was so vocal in her opposition to Booker T. Washington's policies that one of his supporters suggested that "someone ought to muzzle Mary Church Terrell" (Sterling, "Terrell" 132). Washington's opponents, like Terrell, took issue with what they believed were policies designed to reassure whites that "the Negro" would stay in "his place." In fact, Terrell's public politics and her personal ethos had much to do with stepping out of "place"; a woman was considered "out of place" if she gave public lectures or spoke on political issues as Terrell did, but Terrell also encouraged her daughter and niece to claim their rights and place as Americans by passing for white: "I impressed upon them that they would perpetrate a great injustice if

they failed to take advantage of anything which they had a right to enjoy because of arbitrary laws" (Sterling, "Terrell" 144). Fauset and Larsen play on the idea of keeping "the Negro in his place" in novels centering on characters who transgress the bounds of race, class and gender identities, politicizing identity as a matter of positionality.

Considering minstrelsy in "To Move Without Moving: Creativity and Commerce in Ralph Ellison's Trueblood Episode," Houston Baker suggests that "there is, perhaps, something obscenely -- though profitably -- gut wrenching about Afro-Americans delivering up carefully modified versions of their essential expressive selves for the entertainment of their Anglo-American oppressors. . . . There are always fundamental economic questions involved in such uneasy Afro-American public postures" (*Blues* 194). Passing for white in a society in which all non-menial and well-paying employment was reserved for whites certainly involved economic issues; moreover, passing is also an "uneasy . . . public posture" so ambivalent that it can be said to be as problematic and complex as minstrel masking. Passing for white may be figured by Fauset and Larsen as a strategy for redressing an imbalance of power in America, but the passer must necessarily access and thereby reinscribe that power imbalance to a certain degree in order to pass successfully. Moreover, this is an act that is limited in scope by the fact that only fair-skinned African Americans can possibly pass for white. Fauset and Larsen dramatize an individual act which few African American can choose to perform as potentially subversive of constructions of difference that structure an entire society. In passing for white, Fauset's and Larsen's heroines are simultaneously complicit with the racial, class, and gender hierarchies they also subvert. Such ambivalence, however, is the very nature of parody, as Margaret Rose notes: ". . . parodists may be *both* critical of *and* sympathetic to their 'targets'. . . . In both its general and specific forms, parody . . . is

ambivalently dependent upon the object of its criticism for its own reception" (47 & 51, emphasis in original).

Fauset's *Plum Bun* treats passing with just such ambivalence; while Fauset foregrounds the subversive potential in Angela's decision to pass for both white and black, she seems more critical of Angela's mother's acts of passing. Mattie Murray occasionally passes for convenience, but Fauset is careful to point out that this is a convenience in which the majority of African Americans cannot partake: "Much of this pleasure, harmless and charming though it was, would have been impossible with a dark skin" (16). Mattie repeatedly reassures herself that her brief acts of passing violate no "genuine principle" (19 & 32); but passing does lead her to situations in which she must let her husband and daughter Virginia pass by her unacknowledged. Moreover, her passing ultimately brings about her husband's death by pneumonia contracted on a bitter winter day while waiting outside a whites-only hospital to which Mattie has been rushed after fainting while passing for white. Fauset seems both critical of passing and interested in its subversive potential in *Plum Bun*; yet this is, again, characteristic of parody as Bakhtin maintains:

To the extent that the objectification of another's discourse is decreased . . . there tends to occur a merging of the author's and the other person's voice. The distance between the two is lost. . . . In vari-directional discourse, on the other hand, a decrease in objectification and a corresponding heightening of activity on the part of the aspirations of the other discourse lead inevitably to an internal dialogization of discourse . . . . [S]uch a discourse . . . loses its composure and confidence, becomes agitated, internally undecided and two-faced. Such a discourse is not only double-voiced but also double-accented. (*Problems* 198)

Fauset's ambivalence regarding passing signals the "internal dialogization" of her parody. Far from weakening or undermining Fauset's challenge to "race" and gender identities, such ambivalence enables a complex rather than simplistic interrogation of the parody's



"target." The minstrel mask of "blackness" may be said to be ambivalent as well, and even though it is different from the passer's mask of "whiteness," I would argue that both masks were directed toward very similar ends -- parodying and profiting from white Americans' notions of racial difference, as well as refuting racial stereotypes and pushing understandings of identity beyond them. There are certainly rich and proven possibilities for reading these performances in such a way.<sup>12</sup>

I contend, then, that passing for white interjected an element of what Baker calls "non-sense" in "the master's discourse" on racial difference, just as minstrelsy had done (*Modernism* 20-22). Reading Fauset's and Larsen's narratives of passing through existing theories of an African American tradition of masking is facilitated by the novels' deliberate foregrounding of performance. Early in *Plum Bun* Fauset characterizes her heroine as enjoying the opportunity to step out of character. Angela revels in "dressing up" long after childhood: ". . . she did care about her appearance and she liked the luxuriousness of being 'dressed up'" (21). And even as young women, Virginia and Angela continue to act out a childhood game in which Angela plays a woman passing for white:

Usually . . . [they] made a game of their preparations, recalling some nonsense of their early childhood days when it had been their delight to dress up as ladies. Virginia would approach Angela: "Pardon me, is this Mrs. Henrietta Jones?" And Angela drawing herself up haughtily would reply: "Er, -- really you have the advantage of me." Then Virginia: "Oh pardon! I thought you were Mrs. Jones and I had heard my friend Mrs. Smith speak of you so often and since you were in the neighbourhood and passing, I was going to have you in to have some ice-cream." (35)

Later, Angela will use this form to prevent her sister from unknowingly exposing her act of passing for white; a childhood game of play-acting becomes a necessary part of maintaining Angela's performance of whiteness.

Throughout *Passing* Irene Redfield contemplates her desire "to keep her life fixed, certain" (235) while arranging her hair and make-up at a vanity table. Though the novel directs our attention to Clare as the character engaged in an enduring masquerade, Larsen repeatedly situates Irene in front of a mirror in the act of "repair[ing] the damage . . . done to her appearance" (147). Intent on delivering a convincing performance, Irene is perpetually making herself up for the role that is her bourgeois and very proper life. Similarly, as Mary CondJ observes, "Clare is always depicted as beautifully dressed, beautifully produced, on show" (96). Indeed, Larsen invites the reader's gaze to linger on Clare, inscribing layers of spectatorship that work to objectify her via Irene's sensual descriptions:

. . . that pale gold hair, which, unshaved still, was drawn loosely back from a broad brow. . . . Her lips, painted a brilliant geranium-red, were sweet and sensitive and a little obstinate. A tempting mouth. The . . . ivory skin had a peculiar soft lustre. And the eyes were magnificent! dark, sometimes absolutely black, always luminous, and set in long, black lashes. Arresting eyes, slow and mesmeric. . . . They were Negro eyes! mysterious and concealing. . . . [T]here was about them something exotic. (161)

The reader is positioned as voyeur and drawn in to participate in Irene's objectification and exoticization of Clare. Such a narrative strategy plays on and critiques the consumption of African American performance and expressivity in Harlem during the twenties and thirties, a critique Larsen weaves through the novel with references to Josephine Baker, Florence Mills, Noble Sissle and Eubie Blake's musical comedy *Shuffle Along* (219), and the white attraction to the exotic black "other" (205). Josephine Baker's highly eroticized performances in Paris were originally far less sexual, but managers of the Théâtre de Champs-Élysées, where Baker performed in the *Revue Nègre*, insisted she alter her act and their pressures resulted in the famed "Danse Sauvage," or banana dance as it is more commonly known (Silverman 599). African American musical comedies

provided black performers with access to Broadway, but they also grew out of vaudeville performances that played to and on white caricatures of African Americans. Larsen invokes the problematics of the Jazz Age which saw African Americans profiting from their very commodification, and of a white voyeurism that African Americans successfully manipulated but which objectified them nevertheless.

Ironically, however, Clare seems to be most objectified, more an ornamentation than a human being, when her performance of whiteness is set in the hotel suite she shares with her rich white husband. In other words, while Clare's eyes may be "Negro" and "exotic," her mask of whiteness renders her as much of an icon when "white" as she would have been regarded as a "black" woman: "Entering, Irene found herself in a sitting-room, large and high, at whose windows hung startling blue draperies. . . . And Clare was wearing a thin floating dress of the same shade of blue, which suited her and the rather difficult room to perfection" (165). While the register in which Clare is read as an ornament in matching setting is quite different from that in which she would conventionally be read as a black female -- aesthetic versus exotic, bourgeois domestic versus illicitly sexual -- her masking of whiteness brings her no closer to being regarded as a self-determined subject. In fact, in a parody of reified white womanhood, Clare is the only woman in the novel represented as both sexual and aware of her status as a commodity in the sexual marketplace: "'You couldn't possibly go there alone. It's a public thing. All sorts of people go, anybody who can pay a dollar, even ladies of easy virtue looking for trade. If you were to go there alone, you might be mistaken for one of them. . . .' Clare laughed again. '. . . . I suppose my dollar's as good as anyone's'" (199). Larsen parodies pure white womanhood by suggesting that Clare, who most certainly will be "mistaken" for white at the Negro Welfare League Dance, runs the risk of also being

mistaken for a prostitute.

I have argued that in several late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century African American women's novels we encounter African American heroines who "pass" for true women. While I have argued that these heroines enact a parodic performance of true womanhood -- parodic because their performances both share an affinity with, and mark significant differences from, a gender identity established to ensure their exclusion -- we might also read in these parodic performances a "mastery of form." In novels like Frances Harper's *Iola Leroy*, Pauline Hopkins's *Contending Forces*, Jessie Fauset's *The Chinaberry Tree*, and Nella Larsen's *Quicksand*, the mulatto figure masters the form of true womanhood. Yet these authors also employ the mulatto figure to invest true womanhood with a critical difference -- African American female experience -- that, in turn, functions to revise this gender identity and clear a space for black women as subjects of a noble or true black womanhood. In *Plum Bun* and *Passing*, however, Fauset and Larsen not only inscribe the mulatto figure as masking true womanhood to master and refunction this form or gender identity, but also revise the mulatto figure to function far more subversively. By passing for white and for true women in convincing yet excessive performances, Angela Murray and Clare Kendry engage in a combination of mastery and deformation -- narrative strategies that Houston Baker has theorized as key elements of African American literature from the nineteenth through the mid-twentieth century. Larsen's and Fauset's novels differ from conventional narratives of passing by moving beyond a representation of passing as an act in which the goal is to be mistaken for white.<sup>13</sup> Rather, their novels challenge readers to see the fundamental error in understanding passing as an act of performing or masquerading as the racial "other." Both *Plum Bun* and *Passing* subvert American understandings of racial difference by

centering on characters who refute the either/or of "race" not only in their genealogical heritage as biracial individuals, but also in their determination to pass for both black and white, to move between and within both cultures and communities, and to transgress or exceed racial boundaries.

Significantly, Angela realizes that "race" is asymmetrically inflected with power in the novel's opening section, "Home." Her experiences as an African American teach her that whiteness is a "badge of power," but her experiences as a fair-skinned biracial woman also teach her that for some Americans racial identity is malleable rather than stable: "All the good things were theirs . . . because for the present they had power and the badge of that power was whiteness. . . . She possessed the badge, and unless there was someone *to tell* she could possess the power for which it stood" (73-4, my emphasis). Angela also realizes that "race" is predicated on a belief in the body as a repository of racial "traits" and "instincts," and is thereby rooted in a politics of visibility. Consequently, by establishing and policing the boundaries of race armed only with a conviction that one can "tell" white from black, white Americans created the possibility that "race" could be subverted. Angela chooses to play "race" against itself by "telling" only her white heritage: "' . . . I am both white and Negro and look white. Why shouldn't I declare for the one that will bring me the greatest happiness, prosperity and respect?'" (80).

Even when Angela has chosen to pass for white, Fauset represents her performance as a combination of constructed identities -- both the reified white woman and the sexualized black female. Depicting Angela dressing for her first date with Roger -- a man she soon discovers is a racist, making the credibility of her performance all the more necessary yet also ironically subversive -- Fauset subtly plays on polarized gender

identities and their racialization, as well as beliefs in the body as an index of "racial character":

There was never very much colour in her cheeks, but her skin was *warm and white*, there was *vitality beneath her pallor*; her hair was *warm*, too, . . . there were little tendrils and wisps and curls in front and about the temples which *no amount of coaxing could subdue*. . . . Her dress was *flame-colour*. . . . The neck was high in back and *girlishly modest* in front. (122, my emphasis)

Fauset plays on the idea of "race" read in the body by invoking the notion that "blackness" cannot be "subdued," and will betray the passer even if only in very subtle ways. Fauset represents Angela's "blackness" as a "warm . . . vitality" lurking beneath her fair skin, a blackness expressed in hair that cannot be completely straightened, and in Angela's choice of a red dress (a color that "nice girls" do not wear). Yet Fauset simultaneously represents Angela's "whiteness" as a "pallor" that finds expression in a high-necked and "girlishly modest" dress. Again, these representations form a parody that can be read in two very different directions. Fauset's white audience would quite likely read Angela as the embodiment of racial theories they were all too familiar with in the twenties that posited exterior or bodily characteristics as measurable indices of a racial essence. However, this scene is also an early exploration of the theory of race Fauset puts forward in *Plum Bun*: race is neither a self-contained polarization of white and black, nor a stable, reliable text written on the body. Angela, in an ironic parody of the mulatto as an effete hybrid, is represented as making herself up for a performance that is neither stereotypically "white" nor "black," but a hybridization of the two. Bakhtin theorizes parody as an "intentional stylistic hybrid":

Every type of intentional stylistic hybrid is more or less dialogized. This means that the languages that are crossed relate to each other . . . there is an argument between languages, an argument between styles of language. But it is not a dialogue in the narrative sense, nor in the abstract sense; rather, it is a dialogue between points of view, each with its own concrete

language that cannot be translated into the other. (*Dialogic* 75-76)

Fauset, in representing Angela as undertaking a hybridized performance incorporating both stereotyped whiteness and blackness, effects an "intentional dialogic hybrid" in this scene, or a "parody" of racial difference in the Bakhtinian sense (*Dialogic* 76).

It is important to note Bakhtin's qualification that the dialogized "languages" or "styles" of the "intentional hybrid" as parody "cannot be translated into" each other. Angela neither "becomes" white nor "remains" black; rather, Fauset holds these constructed racial identities in tension within the mulatto figure. Angela's performance is comprised of both identities, and while Roger and the novel's other white characters do "mistake" Angela for white, there is evidently a certain "blackness" to her performance of "whiteness" that an African American teacher seems to notice at a party given by Angela's bohemian friends: "The young woman [was] perfectly at ease in her deep chair . . . with a slightly detached, amused objectivity . . . which she had for everyone in the room including Angela at whom she had glanced once rather sharply" (115). Rather than "betraying" her "race," these indications that Angela's act of passing is a hybridized performance politicize and render subversive what has often solely been regarded as a manoeuvre complicitous with racial hegemony. In *Colonial Desire: Hybridity in Theory, Culture, and Race*, Robert Young argues that it is the double-voicedness of hybridity that makes it an effective challenge to race as "pure, fixed, and separate":

. . . hybridity once again works simultaneously in two ways: "organically," hegemonizing, creating new spaces, structures, scenes, and "intentionally," diasporizing, intervening as a form of subversion, translation, transformation. This doubleness is important both politically and theoretically; without the emphasis on the active, disjunctive moments or movements of homogenization and diasporization, it can easily be objected that hybridization assumes . . . the prior existence of pure, fixed and separate antecedents. . . . Hybridization as creolization involves fusion, the creation of a new form, which can then be set against the old form, of which it is partly made up. Hybridization as "raceless chaos" by

contrast, produces no stable new form but rather something closer to . . . a racial heterogeneity, discontinuity, the permanent revolution of forms.  
(25)

Angela's performance fuses stereotypes of true and fallen womanhood, whiteness and blackness, to create a hybrid identity that calls "race" and womanhood into a state of crisis by destabilizing these supposedly fixed identities. Fauset goes on to explore more fully the political potential of hybridization in Angela's act of passing for white, and in doing so creates a new form in the "passing" novel tradition.

Critics have argued that Fauset's *Plum Bun* is a "conventional" novel of passing, a genre in which "the passer learns that, regardless of the motivations for passing, such a choice has overwhelming costs" (Little 173).<sup>14</sup> However, in the novel's third section, entitled "Home Again," Fauset in fact violates the convention of returning the repentant passer to the black community, and disappoints the expectations aroused by this section's title. Throughout the novel, Fauset inscribes various notions of "race," but in this section she proffers, through Angela, her own theory of race as "a cultural construct" (McDowell, "Introduction" xxiii), or a subject position amenable to an individual's or a group's identity politics. Contrary to the section's title, Fauset presents a theory of race that leaves it homeless, shifting, unstable, and a heroine who is most at home when on the move between Harlem and Greenwich Village, between black and white, and between the New World of America and the Old World of Europe.

In "Home Again," Fauset invokes the formula of the repentant passer but, significantly, she "reforms" Angela in a way that only makes her performance of white womanhood all the more credible. Angela is characterized as having a "strong, independent nature" that is only briefly tamed into a "womanly" passivity and dependence when her relationship with Roger becomes sexual (206). I have already examined the



parodic possibilities in this reversal; again, Fauset uses a similar narrative strategy when dramatizing Angela's redemption. Fauset "redeems" Angela's transgression against her family ties and "race loyalty," conventional consequences of choosing to pass for white, in a sentimentalized fashion that paradoxically brings her closer to the ideals of true white womanhood, and further from the return to "home" we have been given to expect. Angela comes to see her life as a "white" woman as "pale"; and coupled with the melodrama of her love for Anthony Cross (who is engaged to her sister Virginia), these outcomes of her decision to pass are represented to the reader as fitting "punishments." Angela contemplates death "more than once" as an escape from her suffering, but her "blackness" and heritage of survival are credited with her determination to "set up a dogged fight. . . . She thought then of black people . . . and of all the odds against living which a cruel, relentless fate had called on them to endure. And she saw them as a people powerfully, almost overwhelmingly endowed with the essence of life" (309). In romantic racialist rhetoric and sentimental form, Fauset represents Angela as saved from death by the "essence of life" and willingness to endure all cruelty that black people share, a "racial essence" that since the mid-1800s was used by whites to excuse their abuse and dispossession of African Americans. Angela's redemption, however, also entails the adoption of more "womanly" values and behaviors, including a "newly developed sympathy and under-standing" that makes her think of others in an ideally selfless manner. Angela may will herself to live by accessing some "essence" of blackness, but the acts of penance she takes up make her more "ladylike" than ever before.

Angela is certainly "re-educated," but rather than "return[ing] to the bosom of home and community," she follows a different trajectory than the conventional passing plot that Valerie Smith outlines (45). Angela's return "home again" is Fauset's attempt to

"re-educate" her readers in their understanding of "race." Angela decides to live "a double life, move among two sets of acquaintances. . . . when it seemed best to be coloured she would be coloured; when it was best to be white she would be that" (252-53). Moreover, Fauset represents Angela's life within and passing between white and black as both a performance and the "natural" consequence of her being neither white nor black but both. Angela accepts what most white Americans in the twenties never could, and many arguably cannot today: ". . . 'my people' she repeated, smiling, and wondered herself which people she meant, for she belonged to two races" (265). While Angela's biraciality places her within both races, she also realizes that much of her life will be a performance of both the identity she chooses to adopt in different circumstances, and that determined for her by others: ". . . I can't placard myself, and I suppose there will be lots of times when in spite of myself I'll be 'passing'" (373).

Fauset exceeds the confines of conventional narratives of passing, just as Angela exceeds racial boundaries to move not only between white and black, mediating their limits as the mulatto figure has traditionally been read, but also within both racial communities. This inscription of excess is characteristic of mimicry as a political strategy, as Homi Bhabha argues: ". . . the discourse of mimicry is constructed around an *ambivalence*; in order to be effective, mimicry must continually produce its slippage, its excess, its difference. . . . [M]imicry is therefore stricken by an indeterminacy: mimicry emerges as the representation of a difference that is itself a process of disavowal" (86). Fauset's novel disavows the narratives of passing it mimics, largely by invoking similarities only to inscribe difference, or evoking reader expectations only to disappoint them. Angela's performance of true white womanhood repeatedly exceeds the bounds of this gender identity by incorporating what is often a stereotypical "black difference" into

an identity constructed to preserve the purity of whiteness. Those moments at which Fauset invites us to read Angela as stereotypically "black" rather than "white" are also unstable due to the hybridity of both Angela's "identity" and its performance. Consequently, Angela's racial identity is represented as so ambivalent that it is difficult to determine what is performance and what is "genuine," what is constructed and what is "natural." Fauset represents racial difference as so overdetermined that such distinctions become as indeterminate as Angela's identity itself.

This exploration of mimicry as parodic excess is a shared aspect of Fauset's *Plum Bun* and Larsen's *Passing*; moreover, mimicry and imitation are also central to African American expressivity. Gates quotes Zora Neale Hurston on imitation in *The Signifying Monkey*:

"The Negro," she admits, "the world over, is famous as a mimic. But this in no way damages his standing as an original". . . . "Mimicry," moreover, "is an art in itself". . . . Negroes, she concludes, mimic "for the love of it." rather than because they lack originality. Imitation is the Afro-American's central art form. (118)

While Hurston notes that mimicry is a pleasurable end in itself for African American artists, it is also an avenue to hybridizing literary traditions to create a uniquely African American tradition combining both ancestral and new world forms as Gates argues, and a strategy of politicized critique as I argue these writers employ it. Fauset and Larsen, then participate in an African American expressive tradition of mimicry or "signifyin(g)" at a generic level, by signifying on narratives of passing; and at a representational level, by signifying on constructions of racially inflected gender difference and their era's understanding of race. Further, Fauset and Larsen also signify on the expectations of their audience and the reception of their novels.

Like Angela Murray, Clare Kendry mimics white womanhood. In fact, Clare

mimics whiteness so well that while her white husband jokingly teases that Clare's complexion is "gettin' darker and darker" and that one day he might "find she's turned into a nigger" (171), he never once suspects she has gone the other way and only discovers she's "turned" white when Irene gives her away. Larsen underscores Clare's convincing performance by representing it as virtually undetectable -- Clare visits Harlem with increasing frequency but neither Irene's African American nor white friends seem able to tell if Clare is as white as she seems, or if she is black. Larsen represents Clare as unmanageable in this notion of race as that which is at times difficult to discern but never the less quite black and white. As Irene so accurately perceives, Clare is "some creature utterly strange and apart" determined to live neither wholly within white or black circles (172). Unlike Irene and the mulatto heroines of Harper's *Iola Leroy*, Hopkins's *Contending Forces*, Fauset's *The Chinaberry Tree*, and Larsen's *Quicksand* who, as mulattoes, represent what Mary Dearborn asserts is "a 'grey' area in which limits are tested" (139), Clare does not simply test racial boundaries but calls their limits into crisis. Clare will not be restricted to either pole of the racial axis, and she demands legitimate status despite her refusal to stabilize identities by fixing her own as either white or black. Although those who see her in Harlem believe she is white, her very presence there assures her husband that she is not, and Clare seems to deliberately court his discovery to satisfy her "having" nature. In demanding to "have her cake and . . . nibble at the cakes of other folks as well" (182), Clare does not allow any one racial identity to constitute her, but rather sees whiteness and blackness as constructions that she can legitimately position herself within or outside at will.

Clare is able to pass within and between racial identities and communities, but the excessive aspects of her performance signal Larsen's revision of the mulatto figure as

engaged in a "deformation of mastery." Clare's excessive performance spills over limits such that Irene perceives it as a threat to her own carefully contained position. In fact, the excesses of Clare's performance, and the ways in which she is decidedly "unwomanly," account not only for her ability to disturb Irene, but also signal Larsen's revision of the mulatto figure and the narrative of passing. Narratives of passing are largely driven by the fear of detection, a fear that is often expressed through the notion of "atavism" -- the belief that blood will tell eventually. Many novels of passing conclude in one of two ways: either the passer discovers her or his "error" and returns, enlightened, to family and the African American community; or, the passer is discovered (or that discovery imminent) and is forced to resume living as black. Larsen invokes this formula in order to play on it. and Clare, it seems, is in on the game. Irene repeatedly discourages Clare from coming to Harlem under the pretext of concern for her "safety." However, Irene, as I have argued, is clearly more concerned with her own safety than Clare's. Clare, conversely, is so unconcerned with her safety that she seems to take a certain delight in placing herself in situations of potential jeopardy. She is not obsessed with the fears traditionally associated with passing and flirts with the possibility of being "found out" -- out of the character she has adopted.

Just as Clare's smile is what Irene "would have classed, . . . coming from another woman, as . . . just a shade too provocative" (149), so too is Clare's "manner of expression": "The letter . . . was, to her taste, a bit too lavish in its wordiness, a shade too unreserved in the manner of its expression. It roused again that old suspicion that Clare was acting, not consciously, perhaps -- that is, not too consciously -- but, none the less, acting" (182). I read Irene here as contemplating Clare's passing as a deformation, and whiteness as a performative identity. Baker defines deformation of mastery as an

"advertising" form of masking: "*Deformation* is a go(ue)rilla action in the face of acknowledged adversaries. It produces sounds radically different" from a mastery of form (*Modernism* 50). Deformation "distinguishes rather than conceals. It secures territorial advantage. . . . The gorilla's deformation is made possible by his superior knowledge of the landscape and the loud assertion of possession that he makes . . . that remain incomprehensible to intruders" (*Modernism* 51).<sup>15</sup> Both Irene and Clare use their "superior knowledge" of the landscape of true white womanhood to claim and secure that territory for themselves through their act of passing as "ladies"; moreover, since they are African American "true" women they, like Harper's and Hopkins's heroines, secure and redefine that territory to suit the needs and experiences of African American women. Clare and Irene "pass" in different ways: whereas Irene is bent on "concealing" the fact that she is anything but a true woman, Clare loudly "advertises" a certain difference or excess that unsettles the identity she has mastered so well. Clare "step[s] always on the edge of danger. Always aware, but not drawing back or turning aside" (143).

Unlike the very proper and ladylike Irene who would never "deliberately court attention," Clare delights in excessive and "advertising" behavior as well as dress.<sup>16</sup> Irene warns Clare that attending the Negro Welfare League Dance unescorted may invite speculations that she is a "woman of easy virtue." Rather than dressing "inconspicuously" to avoid attracting attention and such speculation, however, Clare chooses to "flaunt" herself:

Clare, exquisite, golden, fragrant, flaunting, in a stately gown of shining black taffeta, whose long, full skirt lay in graceful folds about her slim golden feet; her glistening hair drawn smoothly back into a small twist at the nape of her neck; her eyes sparking like jewels. Irene. . . . regretted that she hadn't counselled Clare to wear something ordinary and inconspicuous. What on earth would Brian think of deliberate courting of attention? (203)

Irene's concern and the reaction she imagines her husband will have are solidly bourgeois. Irene certainly dresses in a "dowdy" fashion (203), and behaves in a "womanly" manner; Clare, on the other hand, in her flaunting and daring way draws attention to herself and to the excesses that rouse suspicion that she may be "acting." Irene is not alone in her suspicions, for Clare attracts the attention of Hugh Wentworth as well, and with it his speculation that there is something in Clare that must be "found out": ". . . I'm trying to find out . . . the name, status and race of the blonde beauty" (205). Clare's "difference" causes Wentworth to wonder if she is the white woman she appears to be.

Clare's flaunting "display" -- which Baker argues is an element of deformation -- not only runs the risk of exposing her "passing," but also works to expose and transgress the very limits of the identities she performs. Clare negotiates but also pushes the limits of stereotypes of bourgeois, white, ladylike behavior and stereotypes of black female behavior. While pushing and transgressing limits jeopardizes Clare's ability to continue her performance. Homi Bhabha argues that both are integral elements to a performative of identity that goes beyond an essentializing understanding of identity:

What is at issue is the performative nature of differential identities: the regulation and negotiation of those spaces that are continually, contingently, "opening out," remaking boundaries, exposing limits of any claim to a singular or autonomous sign of difference -- be it class, gender, or race. Such assignations of social differences -- *where difference is neither One nor the Other but something else besides, in-between* -- find their agency in . . . an interstitial future. . . . (219, emphasis in original)

Reading Clare's "passing" through Bhabha, one might argue that its power lies in those self-jeopardizing moments, in "its *performative deformative* structure that does not simply revalue . . . or transpose values 'cross-culturally'. . . . It . . . introduce[s] another locus of inscription and intervention, another hybrid, 'inappropriate' enunciative site" (241-42, emphasis in original). Clare's skin color becomes neither a mark of inclusion

nor victimage, but "an ivory mask" (157) with which she accesses and challenges notions of race as embodied and fixed in the body. Clare's skin is both "ivory" and "gettin' darker and darker"; rather than "concealing" a mastery of whiteness, Clare's "ivory face was what it always was . . . . *a little masked*" (220, emphasis mine). Clare, in her determination to have it both ways, uses her body and that body's acts -- the supposed indices of her identity -- as masks that both conceal and display, are both ivory and dark. While Angela's decision to pass as white or black is arguably passive because it is dependent on situations and the perceptions of others which are beyond her control, Clare's daring and flaunting performance seems to be more aggressive and, thereby, more disruptive and subversive. Clare, rather than being satisfied to be who others take her for, or what might be most beneficial in a given situation, seems bent on displaying a difference in her performances that will unsettle categories of identity.

In *Gender Trouble*, Judith Butler asserts that gender is a performative that "constitut[es] the identity it is purported to be. In this sense gender is always a doing. . . . There is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very 'expressions' that are said to be its results" (24-5). Clare's performance of whiteness or blackness is not a conformity to those identities and, therefore, an affirmation of their stability and a contribution to their regulation. Whiteness and blackness do not pre-exist in some "original" state that Clare re-presents. Instead, whiteness and blackness are continually reconstituted over time, a reconstitution I have argued might effectively be traced in legal decisions regarding racial identity, and in racial theories advanced by a variety of "sciences" throughout the history of race as a concept. Moreover, it is important to note that this reconstitution of "race" plays out asymmetrically, with blackness continually the focus while whiteness circulates



"unmarked," as it were. Rather than reading Clare's "passing" as re-presenting whiteness and blackness, then, we might translate Butler's notion of "gender trouble" to a racialized context, and argue that Clare transforms whiteness and blackness to include something "other" that renders them impure and unstable. If Clare, a mulatto, can pass for white, what is whiteness; and is blackness the only repository for everything "other" than white as sameness? Clearly, if Clare can mask herself as a member of the racial identity of her choice and "flaunt" or "display" the ways in which she transgresses racial boundaries, we might need to rethink our idea of "race."

Clare's performative identities also challenge us to rethink our understanding of "passing" as well. Passing has conventionally been understood as an act of deception taken up by a "black" individual, an act in which the individual conceals or sacrifices his or her "authentic" identity. However, in order to be physically able to "pass" for white an individual must be of both African- and Anglo-American heritage, must "be" both black and white. Narratives of passing like Fauset's *Plum Bun* and Larsen's *Passing*, challenge our understanding of identity and its representation. Clare further places race in a state of crisis by confusing any distinction between original and copy. Clare's copy of "natural" whiteness in passing confuses both the "authenticity" of the whiteness she performs and the blackness she supposedly conceals. Larsen foregrounds this confusion in an exchange between Irene and Clare:

"What about background? Family, I mean. Surely you can't just drop down on people from nowhere and expect them to receive you with open arms, can you?"

Clare cast a glance of repressed amusement across the table at her. . . .  
 "[I]t wasn't necessary. There were my aunts, you see, respectable and authentic enough for anything or anybody."

"I see. They were 'passing' too."

"No. They weren't. They were white." (187)

Irene "mistakes" passing, not the supposed original of whiteness it imitates, as "authentic enough for anything or anybody"; consequently, the existence of an authentic "natural" is called into question with Irene's "error." Samira Kawash argues that "the passing narrative . . . is about the *failure* of blackness or whiteness to provide the grounds for a stable, coherent identity. Blackness and whiteness as they emerge in the passing narrative belie the possibility of identity or authenticity that would allow one to be unequivocally black or white" (63). While I agree in large measure with such an assertion, I would hesitate to say that all narratives of passing destabilize the power we have invested in race as a "coherent" category of identity; moreover I would argue that some passing narratives, like Larsen's *Passing* and Fauset's *Plum Bun*, subvert more than "race."<sup>17</sup>

Clare unsettles received understandings of "race" as natural and fixed by passing between blackness and whiteness; she subverts the exclusivity of true womanhood by not only performing as a true white woman even though she is African American, but also by "contaminating" that performance with "unwomanly" acts and improper behavior; moreover, Clare also unsettles sexuality as identity. Clare lives as heterosexual with her white husband, yet she also flirts with homosexuality in a number of "encounters" with Irene that Deborah McDowell has convincingly argued form a homosexual subtext to Larsen's novel.<sup>18</sup> However, reading Clare's sexuality as homosexual "passing" for heterosexual, as McDowell's reading suggests, elides the possibility that Clare is in fact passing between heterosexuality and homosexuality. Clare does "caress" Irene with her smile, her touch, and her kiss in flirtations that seem to appeal to Irene, who is repeatedly struck by how "lovely" Clare is. However, Larsen is careful to point out Clare's flirtatious behavior with men as well; Clare turns "provocative" smiles and her "husky voice" on waiters, her husband, and the husbands of other women as well (220-21). Martha J.

Cutter has also noted that "Clare insists on being an object of attraction to *both sexes*" (90), and that she consistently incites interest to successfully further her own aims. This act of passing for and between heterosexual and homosexual is yet another instance of the subversive disruption Clare's performance presents, for it challenges our notions of sexuality as "natural" and fixed rather than another performative identity. Clare figures sexuality as yet another performance in which she can engage to get what she wants and to have it both ways.

Clare effects a "category crisis," as Marjorie Garber defines it, that unsettles racial distinctions, gender identities, and sexuality: "a failure of definitional distinction, a border line that becomes permeable, that permits of border crossings from one (apparently distinct) category to another" (16). Angela Murray of Fauset's *Plum Bun* crosses the color line as well, but also confounds distinctions between the true white woman and the fallen black woman by combining stereotypical aspects of both these constructed gender identities in her performance. Angela, too, dares others to distinguish copy from original, though to a lesser degree than Clare. Irene, though she limits her performance to a singular identity as a bourgeois lady, nevertheless also poses a challenge to distinctions between identities, and to our ability to distinguish copy from "authentic." Angela, Irene, and Clare all master the form of true white womanhood and deform that mastery in parodic performances that deconstruct the dialectic of racialized womanhood, and challenge us to reconceive race, gender, class, and sexuality as performative rather than essential or fixed.

Fauset and Larsen, then, revise the mulatto figure in *Plum Bun* and *Passing* from a mediator of racial boundaries to a transgressive "trickster" figure who violates their limits. While their tricksters "elude banishment" for the greater part of these narratives,

Fauset and Larsen do not deny or ignore that such transgression carries with it punishments. Valerie Smith speculates that she finds "discussions of the performativity of race and gender . . . of limited usefulness precisely because . . . I resist the evacuation of historical experience from the construction of raced and gendered bodies" (Smith 51). I would argue that Fauset's and Larsen's novels work throughout to inscribe the historical experience of African American women in their explorations of race and womanhood as identities open to a destabilizing, parodic performance. Nor do Fauset and Larsen ignore what historically has been the outcome of transgressing the color line in America. Angela's "punishment" is a form of banishment from the society whose hierarchical identities she threatens. Fauset removes Angela to Paris as both a way of placating a white audience who may have become very uncomfortable with Angela's declaration to pass for who and what she wishes, and as a form of acknowledging the realities of racism in America at a time when African Americans were still being lynched on the mere suspicion that they had stepped "out of place." Fauset suggests that while her parody has political potential, the potential of passing for both black and white in America is severely limited and imminently dangerous. Clare's "punishment" is far more extreme -- she falls to her death from a sixth floor window. While Larsen leaves the cause of Clare's death ambiguous, inviting readers to imagine that her husband or Irene may have pushed her or that Clare jumped, she clearly underscores that Irene's bourgeois femininity and John Bellew's whiteness will not go unsettled for long. The security of Irene's and Bellew's identities is re-established with Clare's death. In their endings, then, Fauset's and Larsen's novels acknowledge the very real material effects of "passing" or performing white bourgeois womanhood on the lives of their characters.

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> In "Passing for What? Aspects of Identity in Nella Larsen's Novels," Cheryl Wall distinguishes between Helga Crane of *Quicksand* and Clare Kendry of *Passing*: "Helga is an admirable character because she recognizes early on that 'passing' is not worth the price. Her integrity earns her no victory; her rebellion is as ineffectual as the dishonorable Clare's" (109).
- <sup>2</sup> I refer here again to Colette Guillaumin's analysis of the naturalization of race in her article "Race and Nature: The System of Marks."
- <sup>3</sup> Berzon quotes Sterling Brown, who argues that African American authors "urge his unhappiness" until the mulatto reaffirms "a mystical bond" to the black race, while white novelists attribute "the mulatto's unhappiness . . . [to] a divided inheritance. . . Both are examples of race flattery" (144-45).
- <sup>4</sup> Jessie Fauset, *Plum Bun: A Novel Without a Moral*, ed. Deborah E. McDowell (Boston: Beacon P. 1990). All subsequent references will be to this edition.
- <sup>5</sup> See Barbara Christian, *Black Women Novelists, 177-79*; Paula Giddings, *When and Where I Enter*, Chapter XXII; and Angela Y. Davis, *Women, Race and Class* (New York: Random House, 1981), Chapter I.
- <sup>6</sup> Anna Julia Cooper identified the greatest task of "Negro womanhood" as gaining "title" to and protection of their own bodies and those of their daughters. Fannie Barrier Williams said of African American women that "there has been . . . no protection against the libelous attacks upon their characters, and no chivalry generous enough to guarantee their safety against man's inhumanity to woman" (qtd in Lerner 575).
- <sup>7</sup> Several critics have noted that Fauset uses the conventions of the fairy-tale, romance, and novel of manners for purposes contrary to their traditional functions. However, this is a largely unexplored dimension of her work that time and space do not permit me to develop fully here, but a dimension that is certainly worthy of further study. See: Deborah

McDowell, "The Neglected Dimension of Jessie Redmon Fauset" and her introduction to *Plum Bun*, "Regulating Midwives"; Gabrielle Foreman, "'Looking Back from Zora, or Talking Out Both Sides My Mouth for Those Who Have Two Ears,'" *Black American Literature Forum* 24 (1990): 649-666; Ann duCille, *The Coupling Convention*, Ch. 5; and Jacquelyn McLendon, *The Politics of Color in the Fiction of Jessie Fauset and Nella Larsen* (Charlottesville: UP of Virginia, 1995), pp 30-49.

<sup>8</sup> See Nina Baym's *Woman's Fiction: A Guide to Novels by and about Women in America 1820-70* (Urbana: University of Illinois P, 1993). In referring to James and Dreiser, I am thinking of James's *Portrait of a Lady*, and Dreiser's *Sister Carrie*.

<sup>9</sup> See Ann duCille, *The Coupling Convention*, pp 72-73.

<sup>10</sup> Nella Larsen, *Passing*, *American Women Writers Series*, ed. Deborah E. McDowell (New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 1994). All subsequent references will be to this edition.

<sup>11</sup> Her letters to Van Vechten, and the insight into her life Thadious Davis provides in her biography of Larsen, would seem to support a reading of Irene as a self-parody in which Larsen may be momentarily indulging.

<sup>12</sup> On minstrelsy and performance of "blackness" see Eric Lott's *Love and Theft*; Baker's reading of Ellison's Trueblood character in *Blues, Ideology, and Afro-American Literature*; Ralph Ellison's "Change the Joke and Slip the Yoke": and David Krasner's "Parody and Double Consciousness in the Language of Early Black Musical Theatre." On "passing" and identity as performative, see especially the essays in Elaine K. Ginsberg (ed.) *Passing and the Fictions of Identity*; and Volume 24(1994) of *diacritics*.

<sup>13</sup> I find *Plum Bun* and *Passing* unique in their representation of characters who choose to "pass" for both black and white, often combining stereotypical aspects of both identities in their hybrid performances. It is against this innovation that I position other novels of passing as "conventional," and I have in mind (to name a few) William Dean Howells' *An Imperative Duty* (1891), Mark Twain's *Pudd'nhead Wilson* (1894), Charles Chesnutt's *The House Behind the Cedars* (1900), James Weldon Johnson's *Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* (1912), Fannie Hurst's *Imitation of Life* (1933), Dorothy Lee Dickens's *Black on the Rainbow* (1952), and "Reba Lee's" *I Passed for White* (1955).

<sup>14</sup> See also Cheryl A. Wall, "Poets and Versifiers, Singers and Signifiers: Women of the Harlem Renaissance," *Women, the Arts, and the 1920s in Paris and New York* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction, 1982); and Valerie Smith, "Reading the Intersection of Race and Gender in Narratives of Passing."

<sup>15</sup> Baker reads zoological analyses of gorilla behavior, playing on racist images of peoples of African descent to argue that African American modernism engages in a "deformation of mastery [that] is fully at work in gorilla 'display'" (*Modernism* 50).

<sup>16</sup> Jennifer DeVere Brody also reads Clare as inviting detection: "Clare has never been afraid of being 'found out' --- that is Irene's fear. Indeed, Clare might have looked forward to the moment when Bellew would realize that he had been duped by his wife . . . a triumphant trickster" (1064).

<sup>17</sup> There are a number of narratives of passing that reinscribe rather than challenge the notion that race is stable and a determinant of behavior and identity. I am thinking specifically of white-authored novels like Twain's *Pudd'nhead Wilson*, in which Twain "blacks up" Tom to kill his master/father; Howells's *An Imperative Duty*, in which Howells imagines African Americans to be so unsophisticated that his refined mulatto heroine cannot live as "black"; and Faulkner's novels *Light in August* and *Absalom! Absalom!*, in which the elusive mulattoes Joe Christmas and Charles Bon must be respectively castrated and murdered in attempts to shore up a ruined Southern order.

<sup>18</sup> See her introduction to the *American Women Writers Series* edition. A somewhat different version, entitled "'That nameless . . . shameless impulse': Sexuality in Nella Larsen's *Quicksand* and *Passing*," appears in *Black Feminist Criticism and Critical Theory*, eds. Joe Weixlmann and Houston A. Baker, Jr. (Greenwood: Penkevill, 1988), 139-167. Judith Butler, in a chapter of her recent book *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex* entitled "Passing, Queering: Nella Larsen's Psychoanalytic Challenge," also attends to the homosexual subtext of the novel but does not explore the possibility that Clare may be passing between sexualities.

### **New Trajectories of Self-Definition<sup>1</sup>**

Sandra Richards notes that "thanks to feminism, we have apparently come to understand that gender is performative. However, race -- or, more properly stated, visible difference in skin color -- remains tied to a metaphysics of substance" (47). Currently, race theory speaks of "race" as a power-effect and ideological construct that has been naturalized or grounded through appeals to the body and bodily differences. Both gender and racial identities have been historically steeped in valuations of the body; both subject the body to restrictions and limits. In *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism*, Elizabeth Grosz urges that "the body must be regarded as a site of social, political, cultural, and geographical inscriptions, production, or constitution. The body is not opposed to culture . . . it is itself a cultural, *the* cultural product" (23, emphasis in original). British cultural studies theorists like Stuart Hall, Isaac Julien, and Kobena Mercer conceptualize "black performance as construction of identity" (Diawara 203), and several African American critics and theorists maintain that "blackness must now be defined as a mediated, socially constructed, and gendered practice" (Wall, "Response" 188).<sup>2</sup>

Yet there remains a certain resistance to conceiving of race as performative, as an accretion of behaviors and stylizations on the body's surface that, to quote Judith Butler again, produces "the effect of an internal core or substance . . . or identity" (*Gender Trouble* 136). African American performance artist Adrian Piper, in an essay relating her personal experiences of being repeatedly taken for white, maintains that the American definition of "race" is asymmetrical, in which being black is "a social condition, more than an identity. . . . Racial classification in this country functions to restrict the



distribution of goods, entitlements and status as narrowly as possible, to those whose power is already entrenched" (232). However, while Piper argues that racial categories are too "rigid and oversimplified to fit anyone accurately" (246), she is also careful to acknowledge the importance of what Karla Holloway calls "privately authored" identities that have taken a dispossessed "social condition" and made of it an identity of self- and communal-affirmation:

. . . for others, it is the mere idea of blackness as an essentialized source of self-worth and self-affirmation that forecloses the acknowledgment of mixed ancestry. . . . Having struggled so long and hard to carve a sense of wholeness and value for ourselves out of our ancient connections with Africa after having been actively denied any in America, many of us are extremely resistant to once again casting ourselves into the same chaos of ethnic and psychological ambiguity our diaspora to this country originally inflicted on us. (234)

Piper speaks here of the "ambiguity" of a mixed racial ancestry and of a descent from, if not a "belonging" to, two different and historically opposed communities and cultures, but I read her insights as applicable to the idea of race as a performative and the possible limits to conceiving of it as such. While identity as performance may be rooted in communal and cultural traditions that inform that performance, it may also be perceived by some to be a profoundly rootless instability that does not adequately address the lived experience or serve the interests of a good many people. Its very chaotic ambiguity, to borrow Piper's phrasing, may prove liberating for some, and lacking in historical and material specificity for others, thereby proving its very failing.

While this study pursues the possibility of figuring "race" as a performative that resists and subverts the naturalization of racial difference forming the ground of an imbalance of power in the United States, I want to be careful to acknowledge the potential limitations of this notion of "race." The novels on which this study has focused have been read by different critics as either integrationist in intent, and wilfully blind to

the material and historical realities of black female lived experience; or as oppositional and subversive in their treatment of "race" and identity, and resistant to the homogenization of "the" black community as working-class "folk." These very different readings seem to me to reflect the contestation over notions of "race" as a performative. I believe it is important to keep this debate in sight because it challenges us to ground analyses in the historical and material realities of living as an African American in the United States. Moreover, this debate demands that we consider both the site and nature of definitions of identity as central to our understanding of "race"; in other words, we must consider both "privately authored" and "publicly constructed" identities, as well as consider what these definitions of identity may develop from or respond to. The texts on which I focus foreground the public constructions of "blackness," "whiteness" and womanhood, as well as the subversive potential of performing what was thought to be a "natural" identity. Consequently, these novels explore the notion of "race" as a performative as one possible response to their era's definition of racial identity. The site of these definitions is public -- couched in legal and scientific rhetoric, and given great currency in the public imagination of this historical moment -- and the notion of race as performative forwarded by these authors responds to, and works to subvert, those public constructions. In their attention to public constructions of racial identity, these texts have been read as eliding those privately authored African American identities that are informed by both ancestrally African and uniquely African American cultural forms and experiences. I have argued that, in fact, these novels attend to both definitions of "blackness" circulated by white Americans, and those lived experiences and cultural forms that in part comprise privately authored African American identity. In a sense, then, these texts are both points around which the debate over what "race" means has

been pursued, and illustrations or enactments of that debate in narrative form.

I want to conclude this study of mulatto heroines who "pass" for white and/or true women by looking briefly at two additional texts published by African American women in the 1950s, texts that mark both continuities and discontinuities with my reading of the mulatto figure in selected black women's novels from the late 1890s through the early 1930s. Dorothy Lee Dickens's novel *Black on the Rainbow* (1952) and Reba Lee's autobiographical writing *I Passed for White* (1955) center on mulattoes passing for white bourgeois women, but rather than exploring racial liminality to the extent that Fauset and Larsen did in *Plum Bun* and *Passing*, these authors return the passer to the African American community where they choose identities as black women. Hilda Ann Parker and Reba Lee choose the rootedness of their families and African American communal traditions over the rootlessness they have found passing for white to be. While these authors do figure race and womanhood as performative and unstable, they also stress the self-affirming identity in community that can still be "privately authored" in the fixity of a unified racial identity.

Like Harper's *Iola Leroy* and Hopkins's *Contending Forces*, both *Black on the Rainbow* and *I Passed for White* center on mulattoes who are born and raised in the South, and later travel North seeking greater opportunities. Both Hilda Ann Parker and Reba Lee travel from rural Georgia northward paralleling the three great black migrations: the first saw African Americans in the late 1870s through the 1880s leave Louisiana and Mississippi for the plains of Kansas; during the second, spanning 1916 through the 1930s, African Americans travelled north to the promised lands of Chicago and New York; the third, between 1940 and 1966, was underway when these works were written and published. A constancy among the texts of this study is their publication

during one of these three waves of black exodus from the South, a fact that may in part account for their attention to issues of identity, as well as to both the definitions thrust on one from outside one's community and the agency of determining one's own identity. However, while Harper and Hopkins figure the South as a site of redemption or commitment to a life dedicated to "the race" for their heroines, the South is absent in Fauset's fiction and is problematized as a site of increasing restriction, physical weakening, and impending death for Larsen's Helga Crane. Dickens and Lee both return to the notion of the South as redemptive that we encounter in early black women's novels, and look forward to the centrality of the South and Southern roots in the current renaissance of black women novelists.<sup>3</sup>

In works centering on mulatto characters, a common narrative strategy used to indicate their "difference" from both Anglo- and African Americans is a childhood education in racial identity through a form of "othering" at the hands of either African American or white children.<sup>4</sup> Hilda Ann's education is to be ostracized for her color by a group of boys in her school:

"Who, me . . . respect her? Hell, no! Never in my life will I be found respecting the likes of a dern old mulatto gal. . . . [W]here in the devil did she hail from anyway? Shuh! She certainly don't blend with any of us. Look! Look! She's too doggone pale! And supposed to be colored, too. . . . She ain't nothing but a pink toe, passing as a Negra. . . . God don't own such and Satan wants no part of you. So where is your place . . . ?"  
(13)

Hilda Ann is confronted with her color, with her schoolmates' opinion that as a mulatto she is too white and not black enough to be African American. Not only is Hilda's fair skin proof that at least two ancestors in her family's past have not "stayed in their place," but also that she is out of and without "place." This childhood accusation that Hilda Ann is "passing" for a "negra" in her rural Southern African American community,

foreshadows her later decision to pass for white in the urban north and foregrounds the biracial individual as often looked upon as an outsider by both white and black Americans. Reba Lee, after moving to a new neighborhood and beginning at a new school, is "mistaken" for white by one of her classmates. Shortly after, the class "discovers" she is African American and ridicules her: "'Oh, you Brownie, is you-all lonesome for your ole Virginia?'. . . . Everybody was laughing about the smartie little nigger cutie who had tried to be white. A boy yelled at me, 'Yah, you smoke!'" (43-44). Reba learns that while "whites seemed to have as many shades as the coloreds ever had" (33), many white Americans see "race" as an absolute distinction between white and black, rather than a matter of degree. "Race" as a mark of difference is associated with blackness: "People got tired of talking after the novelty [of Reba's unintentional "passing"] wore off but I knew I was marked" (46). Both Dickens and Lee foreground race as based on a politics of visibility or, as Judith Butler puts it, "a matter of being able to read a marked body in relation to unmarked bodies, where unmarked bodies constitute the currency of normative whiteness" (*Bodies* 170-71). Even though the visible may be an "unreliable" index of "blackness," Dickens and Lee -- like Fauset and Larsen before them -- represent both white and black Americans as concerned with "marking" the mulatto's racially ambiguous body.

Like Harper, Hopkins, Fauset and Larsen, Dickens and Lee also ground their exploration of identity as malleable and multiple in the historical and material specificity of black lived experience. Dickens represents Hilda Ann's family as Southern farmers who, apart from Hilda Ann, have had to forgo an education to work. Like thousands of Southern blacks who migrated North to Chicago and New York, leaving the back-breaking field work that barely sustained them for the "promised land" of better paying

factory work, her cousin Elis leaves Georgia for greater opportunities in New York. He has heard he can find work as "a junk man or a bootblack" and eventually earn enough "t' 'stablish a lit'l business of my own . . . an' above all things, learn how t' read an' write my own name" (7-8). In the opening chapter of *I Passed for White*, Lee details limited employment opportunities for African Americans, as well as union boycotts and white exploitation of poorly paid African American workers. Reba's adoptive father works as a painter during the 1930s:

Men walked the streets looking for work. Pa . . . said he was lucky that the union didn't take colored men so he could cut union prices and get jobs . . . . Pa talked about the [white] families he worked for, how some . . . were bossy and mean, finding fault, making him put on more coats of paint than agreed on because they knew he needed the work and couldn't kick.  
(6)

Her grandmother "went out dressmaking, making five dollars a day," while her mother cooked and served in white homes for "fifty cents an hour . . . never [working] for less than four hours. . . . When she cooked the dinner, she made five dollars" (6-7). While Lee and Dickens investigate both race and gender identities as constructed, mediated, and performable, they do not elide the ways in which such ideological constructs impinge on the lives of African American men and women.

Lee also foregrounds the exploitation of African American women by white men, a characteristic her narrative shares with Harper's *Iola Leroy* and Hopkins's *Contending Forces*, as well as with Fauset's *The Chinaberry Tree* and *Plum Bun*. Lee represents the danger white men represent to African American women both during slavery and well after emancipation. Reba's great-great-grandmother was freed by her master, and given a house and a small tract of land; however, she also bore him children in a relationship necessarily fraught with the power imbalance between master and slave. One wonders if the house and land he gave her was as much a measure to keep quiet his "indiscretions"

and remove her from the vicinity of his own home, family, and other slaves, as it was an effort to provide and care for her and their children: "'My own grandfather was one of the richest white men in the county -- till the war ruined him. He made my grandmother a freedwoman, she and her baby that became my father, and he gave her a nice piece of land with a house to herself. That was in eighteen-fifty-seven,' said Gran precisely" (4). Reba's mother, this slaveowner's great-granddaughter, experiences a twentieth-century version of this kind of relationship: while waiting tables at a restaurant near a university, she attracts the attention of a white student from an affluent family and is left pregnant and alone after he learns she is African American. Lee implies that it is quite likely he knew her race all along, invoking the exoticization of the black female in the white mind and the consequences of such stereotypes for African American women:

The boy was a white student . . . from a rich family. . . . The way Gran heard it he didn't know at first that Mom was colored, but I don't see how that could have been because you could spot Mom. . . . She [Gran] never knew whether he was really crazy about my mother and his parents had taken him away or whether he got scared and ran off, or whether he'd been fooling Mom from the start. Anyway, he was gone . . . and Mom didn't know where he lived and if she had known what could they have done about it? (14)

Reba is the daughter born of her mother's encounter with a white male abuse of power. Lee inscribes this history of sexual exploitation in her narrative in a way that both problematizes her own marriage to a white man while passing, and affirms the African American community as a site of safety and well-being over and against the privilege and so-called "protection" of life with her white bourgeois husband.

Hilda Ann and Reba perform "whiteness" so well that they are never suspected of "passing" by those they come to know, work and live with. Dickens and Lee represent passing as an enactment of whiteness and underscore the dramatic or performative aspect of character and identity in different ways. Lee links "being" white with the credibility of

its performance, as well as the meanings produced by and read in both the body's appearance and behavior: "On the beach I wore a big shade hat and rubbed cream into my skin to protect it. I wasn't going to get any brown look. . . . I *was* white. I had a place and a position. I was as thrilled as an actress who sees her name in lights for the first time" (156-7, emphasis in original). If identity is both performed by and visible in the body, as Lee represents it here, she must also guard against *being* "black." Not only does she stay out of the sun to keep her complexion pale, but she also worries about the "authenticity" of her performance of true womanhood, fearing that her husband might detect a "blackness" in her: "Once he even drew away when I turned to him in bed, saying something about we mustn't overdo -- and I realized I'd have to watch myself, that perhaps I was more loving than a white girl would be. I had to watch my words, too. Living so close, so relaxed and intimate, it was hard to be careful" (155). Lee represents black female sexuality as the dialectical opposite of white "womanly" virtue and chasteness. While she passes for a white woman -- a performance which in itself unsettles constructions of true and fallen womanhood, as well as blackness and whiteness -- like Fauset's Laurentine Strange and Larsen's Helga Crane, Reba internalizes the very stereotypes her performance refutes. Rather than seeing the erotic black female as an icon of manufactured "blackness," Reba polices her behavior hoping to keep hidden a sexualized "black" essence.

Dickens seems to underscore identity as performative by representing Hilda Ann as a performer in revues and musical comedies staged in New York. Ironically, Hilda Ann's greatest success is landing a part in a musical comedy set in the South, scripted in "Negro dialect," and performed by an "all-white" cast: "'Harvest' was indeed a gay, spirited play. Many weeks were spent practicing and trying to adapt parts of it to typical



Negro dialect. In this regard, Georgiana's kitchen became an auxiliary studio, where we heard Negro dialect in its natural environment. *This was a great help to me*" (119, emphasis mine). Hilda Ann passes as a white woman acting the part of a rural Southern black woman. In this particular scene Dickens creates layers of racial identities all of which are enacted by, not inherent in, her heroine. Rather than fearing her "blackface" performance will betray her "true" racial identity, Hilda Ann's sustained act of passing for a white woman seems to have the effect of erasing any "blackness" in her. Hilda Ann is raised in the South by her extended family, all of whom are rural African Americans who speak in Dickens's interpretation of the vernacular. Yet Hilda Ann needs schooling in "Negro dialect in its natural environment" while passing for white in the North. Unlike Harper. Hopkins. Fauset and Larsen, who represent passing for a true woman and/or white as hybridized performances, Dickens represents her heroine's act of passing across the color line as functioning more to consolidate, rather than blur, racial identities in her performance. Her passage into whiteness is so complete as to virtually cancel out her experiences as a "black" child in the South.

On the level of conceptualizing "race," such a representation is decidedly less radical and poses less of a challenge to how we understand race as a unified binary than the ambivalent, ambiguous, and hybrid performances of Fauset's Angela Murray and Larsen's Clare Kendry. However, Dickens's white audience may have been quite disturbed by the thought that her heroine could "become" so white as to forget being raised "black." "Negro dialect" was such a powerful marker of "blackness" to white Americans that Hilda Ann's need to learn it would be tantamount to a near-complete racial transmutation. In fact, white readers may have been far more unsettled by the possibility of Hilda Ann "becoming" white through passing, than they were by narratives

like Fauset's and Larsen's in which their heroines' blurred performances might be read as proof of a black racial essence that no amount of care could conceal. Those African American readers, on the other hand, who believe passing for white to be a betrayal of the race, might have read this scene as evidence of Hilda Ann's lost sense of self, her loss of place within African American community, and her loss of access to African American traditions and forms of cultural expressivity. Dickens could very well be working in this scene, then, toward unsettling her white readers' sense of identity and security, while forging a connection with African American readers who conceive of individual identity as embedded in a strong sense of, and loyalty to, community. Dickens's form of address is further complicated, however, by the fact that Hilda Ann is characterized as never having spoken in the vernacular. She speaks throughout the novel in standard English, thereby confounding any sense of the vernacular as "authentically" black or of standard English as a marker of whiteness. If the vernacular is a cultural form of expressivity that approaches a "black" essence in white minds, and is regarded as uniquely African American by blacks, Hilda Ann's "race" should enable her to access it through more than studied imitation. Her inability to do so works to critique such essentializing notions of "blackness." Dickens's strategy of representation may at first seem to consolidate "race" as a unified binary of white to black, but her form of address complicates and challenges such an understanding of "race."

Dickens not only shares complex forms of address with the other black women writers in this study, she also signifies on notions of white womanhood in such a way that racial distinctions are called into question. When passing for white in Paris, Hilda Ann is sexually propositioned by her show manager, and falls into a relationship with him that she characterizes as "illicit." In fact, Mingo Diogenes is reputed to have had many illicit

affairs with white women who vie for his attention regardless of Hilda Ann's presence. Contrary to stereotypes of the black female as lascivious, Dickens pointedly characterizes her heroine as "an old-fashioned girl" who maintains her values and morality (if not her chastity), as well as a certain dignity and difference from the white women she calls "painted Jezebels" (181 & 188). Hilda Ann "falls," then, as a "white" woman, reversing racialized gender identities of true white and fallen black womanhood: "I just fell, a victim of circumstances" (225).

Similarly, Reba Lee is propositioned during her early and intermittent acts of passing for white while window shopping on Michigan Avenue in Chicago. White men stop and ask her to dinner or coffee in hotels, believing she'll "start with ginger ale and end upstairs":

At first, when a man tried to pick me up, I was embarrassed and got away from him quickly. But it happened again and again. . . . I'd be looking in a window . . . and a man would stop beside me. Always a white man, it was, never a colored, and that told me what I looked like. Generally he'd say "Pretty hat, isn't it?" . . . or more intimately, "See anything you like?" Sometimes I'd look startled or haughty, sometimes I'd give him a little smile, but I always moved away. (80)

While Reba always moves away from such men, their persistence indicates that the white women they approach do not always do so. Like Dickens, Lee stresses that not only are black women far from highly sexualized and immoral, but they are more chaste and virtuous than white women. Harper, Hopkins, Fauset and Larsen may have represented their mulatto heroines as passing for true women and thereby challenging racialized gender identities, but they stopped short of stating that white women might fail to approach the ideal of true womanhood. Dickens and Lee openly critique the reification of white women at the expense of African American women, a critique that is indirect in the novels of their predecessors.

These points of continuity and difference signal, for me, an intertextuality among these texts from the 1890s through the 1950s that develops out of the employment of the mulatto figure to signify on and critique constructions of race and gender. Later writers build on and extend the signifying strategies and forms of address developed by their literary foremothers in a continuing project of challenging received understandings of racial difference as they intersect with notions of womanhood. Having drawn such a line of descent, I would like to end by suggesting further connections that may alter our understanding of a black woman's literary tradition. In order to look forward to contemporary African American women writers, I suggest we look back to the 1890s and the ways in which the South figures in Frances Harper's *Iola Leroy* and Pauline Hopkins's *Contending Forces*.

Hopkins's Sappho Clark returns to New Orleans and takes up a maternal devotion to the son she had kept hidden and to the children she cares for while employed as a governess. Hopkins characterizes these choices as a form of sentimentalized redemption that enables Sappho to both come to terms with her victimized past, and find true love and a home with the Smith family. Sappho's initial "salvation" from rape at the hands of her white uncle and the racial violence that claims the lives of her family is administered by an African American order of nuns; her later redemption is begun in this same nunnery. Similarly, Hilda Ann's redemption from lost virtue entails being reunited with her lost sister who has become a nun. In a chapter entitled "Bowels of the Deep," Hilda Ann promises her sister she will "'seek God . . . [b]eginning now'" (202). Her sister Violet ushers Hilda into punishment and contrition as well as redemption: "'That scar on your face is the price of extreme folly; although there is happiness which may await you'" (203). But Hilda Ann's punishment for crossing racial lines extends to the loss of her

sister in an accident on board a ship returning them to the United States from Europe. Like Hopkins, Dickens redeems her heroine through events that seem contrived and melodramatic to contemporary audiences, but which access romantic conventions that were no less popular in the 1950s than they were at the turn of the century.

Reba Lee salvages a disappointing and unfulfilling life as a "white" woman married to an affluent white man by choosing to identify herself as African American and return to her family. Like Fauset's Angela Murray, Reba chooses her "warm," "kind," and "unfailingly loyal" family over the "less genuine, less understanding, less tolerant" whites she has lived among. Dickens not only returns her heroine to her family in the South, but marries her to a minister with whom she works on behalf of the "race" promoting a Washingtonian ethic of education and industry. Hilda Ann's marriage is similar to Iola Leroy's and Melissa Paul's in this way. Iola Leroy chooses to return to the South and dedicate her life to racial uplift, choices Harper represents as the culmination of Iola's decision to identify as African American after having been raised as white. Significantly, this choice follows Iola's consideration to remain silent on the question of her African American background in order to gain employment in the North. Harper seems to figure the measure of her heroine's decision to affirm an African American identity as a return to the South and life in a rural African American community. Conversely, Larsen parodies and critiques this trope of marriage to a Southern preacher and a life devoted to racial uplift in *Quicksand*. Rather than freeing Helga from her search for identity and a sense of belonging, Larsen represents the South and her marriage as agents of Helga's entrapment.

Fauset and Larsen pursue the possibilities and potentials of the mulatto's identity as simultaneously both white and black, but also represent their heroines as experiencing their fluid identities both as liberating and, to quote Piper, a rootless "chaos of ethnic and

psychological ambiguity." Fauset and Larsen arguably dramatize the current concern over notions of "race" as a performative, and of identity as both "privately authored" and "publicly constructed." Their heroines lack and long for the rootedness of community, and the affirmation of blackness that a sense of belonging to an African American community could offer them. Consequently, these longings leave them unable at times to achieve a self-determined identity. For Fauset and Larsen, then, the subversive potential of performing the racial identity of one's choosing may entail a rootlessness that, in turn, exacts psychological costs. In these novels the question of publicly constructed versus privately authored identities goes unresolved, and a conclusion to this complex debate seems impossible to reach.

Dickens and Lee, like Fauset and Larsen before them, also represent crossing over racial boundaries as exacting a punishment of sorts. Moreover, like Fauset and Hopkins, Dickens represents her heroine as necessarily passing through a form of "redemption" before she is truly happy and feels a sense of belonging in the world. While such conclusions would seem to nullify or retract the challenges their narratives have posed to racial hegemony by returning the passer to her "place," I would contend that they are further explorations of identity that differ from those of Fauset and Larsen, but look back to Harper and Hopkins as well as forward to writers like Morrison, Walker, and Naylor. The black women writers who return their mulatto heroines to Southern African American communities and families are not simply "putting them in their place" or reinscribing "publicly constructed identities," but are conceptualizing African American identity as "privately authored" in the interweaving of communal and individual determinations of self.

The importance of one's roots and a sense of belonging, a knowledge of where

one comes from coupled with where one chooses to go, and the centrality of community and African American cultural traditions, are all central to contemporary African American women's literature, and can surely be traced back to Zora Neale Hurston. I would argue, however, that a similar trajectory, while by no means continuous, can also be traced back to the writers considered in this study. These writers represent a questioning and subversion of constructs of black womanhood, and an exploration of the potential of fluid identities and the importance of a rooted sense of self. While the path from the current African American women's literary renaissance back to their turn-of-the-century foremothers diverges at times along the way, it seems to me a rich one to travel that has possibilities yet to be explored.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> My title refers to Barbara Christian's essay "Trajectories of Self-Definition: Placing Contemporary Afro-American Women's Fiction," an essay that did much to define a "tradition" of fiction written by African American women.

<sup>2</sup> See also the contributions to *"Race," Writing, and Difference*; Henry Louis Gates, Jr., "'Tell Me, Sir,... What Is 'Black' Literature?'" *PMLA* 105 (1990): 11-22; Mae Henderson, ed., *Borders, Boundaries, and Frames: Cultural Criticism and Cultural Studies*; Gina Dent, ed., *Black Popular Culture, A Project by Michele Wallace*; and Michael Awkward's *Negotiating Difference*.

<sup>3</sup> Among others, see for example: Toni Morrison's *Sula* (1974), *Song of Solomon* (1977), and *Beloved* (1987); Alice Walker's *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* (1970), *Meridian* (1976), and *The Color Purple* (1982); and Gloria Naylor's *Mama Day* (1988).

<sup>4</sup> I have in mind especially Fauset's *The Chinaberry Tree*, Johnson's *Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*, and Larsen's *Passing*.



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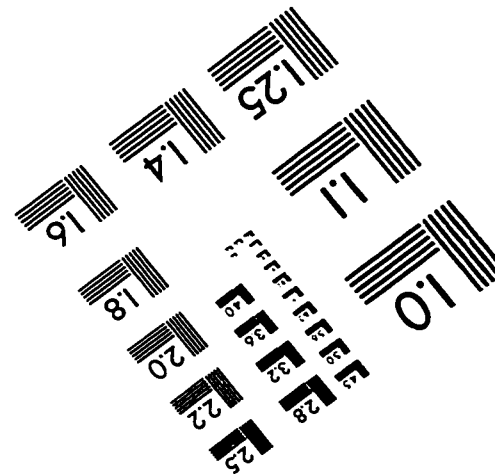
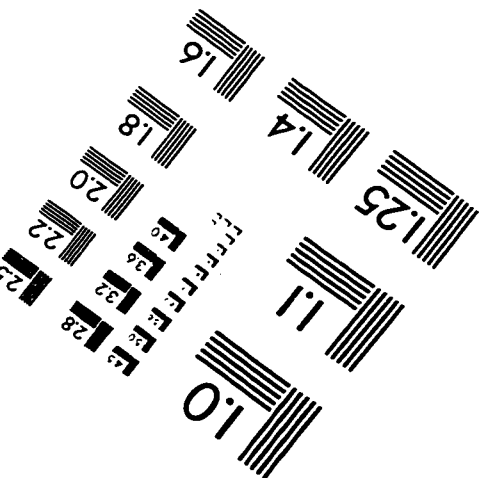
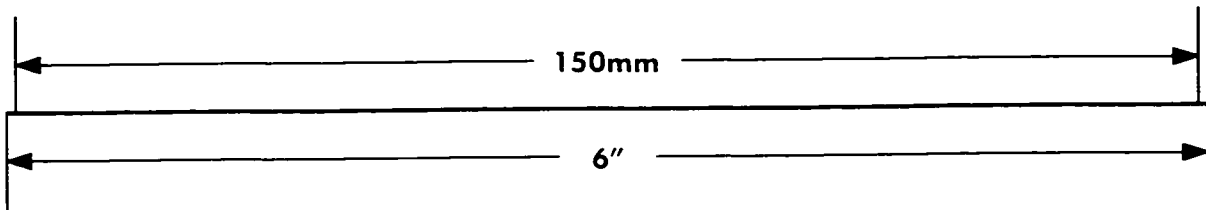
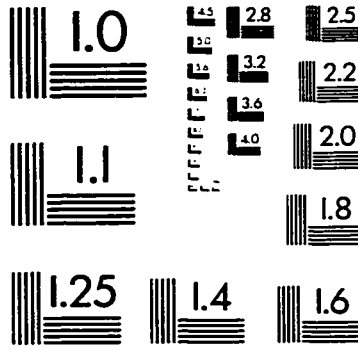
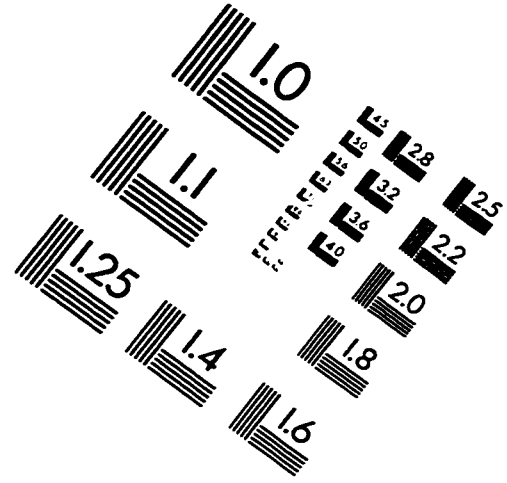
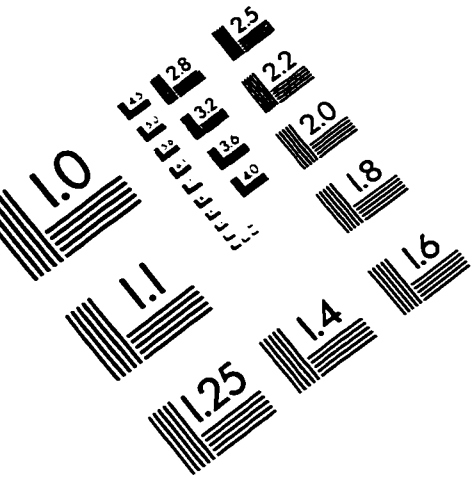
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