

“I THOUGHT OF *YOU* IN HER PLACE”: REPRESENTATIONS OF BLACK  
WOMANHOOD IN AMERICAN LITERARY REALISM, 1868-1900

BY

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## ABSTRACT

My dissertation explores postbellum texts that put African American womanhood at the heart of their narratives, both as an abstract symbol of race and gender and as embodied through female characters. I focus on realist texts that are specifically concerned with the representation of female subjectivity and set them into dialogue with the earlier, and often understood to be stylistically oppositional, genre of sentimentalism. My project explores the antagonistic dynamics around these two literary forms and challenges us to reconsider the symbolic function of the black woman from one formerly deemed outside the proper boundaries of womanhood to one that nineteenth-century writers saw as a truer and “realer” antidote to their refined white counterparts. What unites the diverse writers I analyze is that they offer alternatives to a normative model of upper-class white womanhood they deem, for various reasons, limiting, stale and outdated. Instead of claiming middle-class whiteness as normative womanhood, many of these texts suggest that white women are only understandable through the values connected to black womanhood who, in the vocabulary of the genre, constitute the real. Throughout the dissertation, I argue that it is precisely over the figure of the newly freed African American that realism intersects so profoundly with sentimentality and simultaneously becomes more like it. My approach to the role of race in realism is thus informed by an emphasis on literary form and social history, particularly as they interact in these texts’ deployment of African American womanhood. It is ultimately not the female characters themselves that are crucial to my argument but the concept of black womanhood: its social, cultural, and ideological implications drove the gender representations of realist, postbellum American literature.

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## Introduction

“White is Black” read the April 1926 review of the play *Lulu Belle* in *Opportunity: A Journal of Negro Life*. *Lulu Belle* was a highly successful Broadway play, featuring an African American blues singer and seductress, reminiscent of Georges Bizet’s *Carmen* in the popular opera. It was lauded for its “new type of realism,” showcasing African American life without the clichéd and demeaning stereotypes of black buffoonery (Harrison 228). Yet what made reviewers pass over the rather melodramatic plot of *Lulu Belle* in order to comment on its progressiveness was its integrated cast. While the main characters were still played by white actors in blackface, African American actors made up the majority of the speaking roles. *Lulu Belle* consciously played with racial identification through its mixed cast since many of the black actors were “visibly whiter than the two chief characters themselves,” leading the reviewer of “White Is Black” to conclude that director David Belasco’s handling “amounts almost to genius.” “For really,” the review continues, “as between light and dark Negroes, darkened whites and white whites, some of the white actors playing Negro roles and others just being themselves, the audience, whatever its racial philosophy simply had to trust the producer to keep the threads untangled until the end of the performance sanction [sic] breaking the illusion” (134-5).

The sentiment evoked by *Lulu Belle*’s casting indexes the dialectical relation between the desire for clear racial categories and their real-life absence that mark the years leading from the Civil War to the beginning decades of the twentieth century. While *Lulu Belle* with its burlesque take on racial identity and celebration of blackness amidst the heyday of the Harlem Renaissance stands at the end of this trajectory, the

Reconstruction and Post-Reconstruction era underwent major changes in rethinking and revising the relationship between white and black Americans. The instability of such identity categories maps in particularly visible and forceful ways onto the category of American womanhood. The aim of my project is to trace the changing, interrelated, and convoluted places white and black women inhabit on this spectrum. The narratives I analyze – Elizabeth Keckley’s *Behind the Scenes* (1868), Louisa May Alcott’s *Work* (1873), Sherwood Bonner’s “Gran’ mammy” stories (1875-1877), William Dean Howells’s *An Imperative Duty* (1892), Charles W. Chesnutt’s *The House Behind the Cedars* (1900), Victoria Earle Matthews’s “Aunt Lindy” (1889) and “Eugenie’s Mistake” (1891), and Frances W. Harper’s *Iola Leroy* (1892) – often envision the ideological core of womanhood as a space where black and white women are more alike than different, where hierarchies of color are reversed or even dissolved. The characters in these texts struggle with a construction of femininity that seems to them alternately unsettling, radical, and highly complex, but also liberating. I claim that these texts suggest that white female subjectivity is always reliant on the category of black women, who, in the vocabulary of the genre, constitute the real.

Although *Lulu Belle*’s female protagonist typifies the vamp-like qualities of a fame-hungry woman, it is important to note that white actress Lenore Ulric, “with her rich, tropical beauty,” enacted blackness among a cast that defied a mocking black- or whiteface mimicry. She played up the co-existence of racial identities, thus pointing to the changed value assigned to African American womanhood since midcentury (“White Is Black” 134). Examples like Ulric’s, coupled with a public, upbeat response to an embrace of racial ambiguity, seem to mark symbolically the new century’s break with an

outdated ideology of Victorian genteel womanhood. Part of my project, however, is to show that these are not unprecedented cultural turning points that are genuine to the twentieth century. Instead, I argue that they are part of a longer intervention by nineteenth-century intellectuals, writers, and artists to question the monolithic nature of upper-class white femininity and assign new value to minority women. I explore such cultural revisions of the script of gendered white normativity during the postbellum decades that led up to the early twentieth century. I focus specifically on the ways literary conventions between 1865 and 1900 portray black women as symbolic embodiments of a truer, realer, more authentic womanhood. The writers I consider were actively engaged in a cultural project of reimagining American womanhood against a changed postbellum landscape. As a result, they often used their fiction to assign value to an expression of raced femininity formerly deemed inferior, lacking, or outside of the proper boundaries of womanhood.

For scholars invested in analyzing the representations of womanhood in nineteenth-century American literature, it is hard, even over forty years after its inception, to escape Barbara Welter's landmark concept of "true womanhood." The phrase has achieved canonical status showing the restrictions under which many white, Anglo-Saxon, middle-to-upper-class, Christian women chafed in order to embody the cultural ideals of "piety, purity, submissiveness and domesticity" (Welter 152). Although Welter's argument has become a hallmark for feminist-materialist readings of nineteenth-century gender relations, its implications that the ideology of "true womanhood" was widely and monolithically accepted as *the* embodiment of femininity by contemporary Americans has stifled its productiveness. Since the publication of Welter's essay in

1966, critics have expanded the discussion around the “cult of true womanhood” by analyzing primary sources, both fictional and non-fictional, that measure the real-lived experiences of nineteenth-century women against this ideal and point to the manifold, competing expressions of raced and classed femininity. Hazel Carby’s influential study *Reconstructing Womanhood* (1987), for example, redirects our gaze from leisured white ladies to those women who served as the metaphoric backbone for upholding the pedestal of true womanhood: non-white women, especially African Americans, whose exclusion from the virtues of true womanhood points to the “dialectical relationship” between white and black women in “defin[ing] what those boundaries are” (30). Numerous studies following Carby’s have focused on social class, ethnicity, sexual identity, queerness, or combinations thereof in order to paint a fuller picture of the complexities of nineteenth-century gender identities, reflecting a broader feminist pledge to an intersectional analysis of identity.

Despite these developments, Welter’s concept remains imperative as a starting point, because it draws attention to the dynamics of normativity, including the way literary texts play up, adapt, and expose normativity as a form of power that can be subversive at the same time that it confirms a dominant order. Nancy Glazener identifies “grappl[ing] with the textures of normativity” as a new trend in literary studies, one that allows critics to investigate the role of authors and literary characters in “navigat[ing] gendered expectations” while in the process “transforming the fabric of normativity” (“Review” 423). Such work thinks through what literary representations of the time tell us about what it meant to be “normal” and “normative” and hints at how representations of these normalized relationships are built on a long and contentious history of white and

black women's interactions. My close readings of literary texts pay attention to and are informed by historical context in order to measure the role of cross-racial female relationships in defining the parameters of nineteenth-century American womanhood, and thus in steering the discourse around their individual complicity or resistance to the clout of normativity. The representation of black and white women in the dominant antebellum fictions about slavery are especially instructive since they use the figure of the African American woman as a testing ground for privileged white women to practice the genteel qualities of compassion, empathy, and benevolence.

I am interested in tracing how the political and socio-cultural rift of the Civil War and the abolition of slavery affects the dynamic of this cross-racial relationship, especially since the major literary genres that mark the ante- and postbellum decades – sentimentalism and realism – often seem to be understood as diametrically opposed in their formal aesthetics as well as their ideological tenor. The writers I analyze use what they perceive as black women's symbolic value to redefine female normativity. Yet these cultural discussions are only possible through an active engagement with literary genre. Consequently, each of these writers takes sentimentalism as a starting point and significantly reworks its antebellum script. In the process, they blur the lines between genres as they define American womanhood through, over, and against the body of the black woman. When sentimentalism serves as their primary site of conflict or antagonist, which it does often, the writers under consideration intervene in challenging the assumptions about the hierarchical relationship between white and black womanhood as they felt them to be stipulated in antebellum cross-racial bonds.

## Sentimentalism as a Framework for Racialized Womanhood

My dissertation started out loosely as a project about sentimentalism; it ended up becoming a more focused exploration of the unstable categories of womanhood during the period of American realism. The texts I analyze suggest that between the Civil War and the turn-of-the-century, black womanhood was used increasingly for its symbolic function to define authenticity and truth – as the “real thing,” to reference a catch-phrase of realism – against a stale norm of upper-class white femininity and against the backdrop of an increasingly diverse definition of late nineteenth-century womanhood. At its inception, my project reflected my interest in the affective powers of pain and suffering in negotiating the value of womanhood in a male-dominated society, as well as in exploring the function of empathetic emotions as conduits between different types of women, especially white and black women. This interest in the politics of suffering, what Lauren Berlant describes as the “centrality of affective intensity and emotional bargaining amid structural inequity” (*The Female Complaint* 20), was fueled by the growing field of affect studies that mark the late 90s and early 2000s and my own forays into trauma theory during my early years as a graduate student. I was continuously drawn to the parts of trauma theory that allowed me to ponder the ways seemingly pre-cultural, social, and linguistic forces like trauma lose “neutrality” (that is the seemingly random way with which the sublime force of trauma strikes certain people while sparing others) when they are translated into the social sphere of gendered, raced, and classed bodies. Wendy Brown’s *States of Injury* (1995) and Cathy Caruth’s edited volume *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* (1995) gave shape to my considerations of the limited agency women, and specifically women of color, are granted in the legal and social

sphere when they try to claim recognition of psychic traumatic sufferings, such as rape and abuse.

Crucial for my own research on nineteenth-century literature and culture were the moments in which women or other minorities try to give voice to their deep-seated injuries, the moment of translating pain into a vocabulary of suffering that marks specifically the slave narratives and female-centered sentimental novels that flourished between 1820 and the onset of the Civil War. Affect theory, with its exploration of how feelings are transmitted and how emotions can become social, cultural, and political messengers that manifest themselves in the flesh and over the bodies of people, became thus an invaluable part of my larger theoretical framework. Eric Shouse's concise essay on the distinction between the terms affect, feelings, and emotions, in which affect, like trauma, inhabits an abstract role not "fully realised in language" is helpful here. His claim that affect is thus "*prepersonal*," while feelings are "*personal and biographical*," and emotions, finally, are "*social*," provides a useful definition that draws attention to the process of translation at work in expressing one's private suffering to another, and ultimately to the public ("Feeling, Emotion, Affect"). But the progression from the visceral element of affect, the raw, bodily reaction it evokes, to the more mediated response of sharing these feelings in the language of culturally-accepted emotions also identifies how this triangle of sentiments can exert power over others we share our feelings with and who may become affected (or infected, like a virus) by them. Sara Ahmed's *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* and Teresa Brennan's *The Transmission of Affect*, both published in 2004, provide excellent frameworks for the power of emotions to cross cultural and interpersonal boundaries, and as such they further sparked my

interest in the cross-racial alliances between white and black women through their shared experiences of pain, indexed in the nineteenth-century sentimental lexicon, for instance, by the maternal trauma over the loss of a child.

The archive of scholarly work on nineteenth-century sentimentalism comes with its own historical baggage, especially regarding race. Any overview of the literary history of American sentimentalism cannot skirt the by now famous Douglas/Tompkins debate, even if, or maybe because, according to Laura Wexler, it “has tended to elide, the expansive, imperial project of sentimentalism” (101). Because of its prominence, this debate runs the risk of reducing the field of nineteenth-century sentimentality to an ideological dispute about the political value of a specific type of sentimental fiction. This subset of literature, which became increasingly popular during the first half of the century, was predominantly authored by women (the “damned mob of scribbling women” that Hawthorne bemoaned to William Ticknor in 1855) and focused on female development within a domestic sphere that was buffered by the cultural work of sympathy in producing gendered identities. These are the type of novels that Nina Baym deems concisely “woman’s fiction.” Ann Douglas’s 1977 analysis of Victorian sentimentality as a precursor for modern mass culture, pitched against a waning, elite Calvinist tradition, leads her to judge sentimental fiction as a feminized genre with a “failed political consciousness” (254), whereas Jane Tompkins’s 1985 rebuttal locates in these novels “a monumental effort to reorganize culture from the woman’s point of view” that, however thwarted, bespeaks rigorous political acumen (124). These scholar’s positions have become polarized into debates about sentimentalism’s proclivity to vest

women with either power or submission, in which an author's adaptation of sympathy becomes "a litmus test for assessing a text's politics" (Weinstein 1).

Yet scholarly work on nineteenth-century American sentimentalism during the 1990s and early 2000s expands the ideological rut of the Douglas/Tompkins debate in several ways.<sup>1</sup> The increasing attention to the specific workings of sentimental sympathy, that is the exploration of the philosophy of empathy and the psychological effects of transferred emotions between differently classed and raced bodies, emerged in tandem with affect studies' ideas about the transmission of feelings. Shirley Samuels's influential edited volume *The Culture of Sentiment* (1992), which features many of the scholars who would produce important monographs on sentimentalism in the years to follow, is written in this new spirit. In its introduction, for example, Samuels proclaims that nineteenth-century American sentimentality "appears not so much a genre as an operation or set of actions within *discursive models of affect and identification* that effect connections across gender, race, and class boundaries" (emphasis added, 6). While the ideological question of complicity still remains central to these scholars' approaches, they pay more attention to the politics of affect and identification, especially as they are expressed through the "movement of sympathy, in all its anxious appeals, across race, class, and gender lines" (Samuels 6).

My project is indebted to scholarship on affect, transmission, and identification in American literature, and my dissertation reflects its concerns with the racialized nature of

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<sup>1</sup> I would be remiss here to suggest that between and around Douglas's and Tompkin's interventions on sentimentalism and the early 1990s no important work on the intersections between women's culture, domesticity, sentimentalism, and nationality had been produced. Philip Fisher's *Hard Facts* (1985), Mary Kelley's *Private Woman, Public Stage* (1984), Nancy Armstrong's *Desire and Domestic Fiction* (1987), Cathy Davidson's *Revolution and the Word* (1986), Jean Fagin Yellin's *Women and Sisters* (1989), Gillian Brown's *Domestic Individualism* (1990), and Richard Brodhead's *Cultures of Letters* (1993) deserve mention here for their pivotal role in steering the field.

sentimentalism that seems to revolve around a white, normative referent. My analysis relies on an understanding of nineteenth-century literature in which affect, feeling, and emotion (to again evoke Shouse's connection between these terms) attach themselves to differently gendered, classed, and raced bodies with the potential to either transcend these identificatory boundaries or reinforce their normative center. Often, as I will argue later, they do both simultaneously. The lines of movement they reveal in the process become cartographies of feelings that map out the intricate ways nineteenth-century writers negotiate their characters' development towards a gendered sentimental consciousness, the way in which these writers reveal to their readers a postbellum female interiority.

Sentimental philosophy about the movement of feelings between different social actors – expressed over its core element of sympathy – rests on the idea that emotions function as conduits between people able to bridge and temporarily overcome their differences. Yet such instances of sympathetic identification can also quickly reach their limit. As Glenn Hendler argues, sentimental sympathy's mantra to feel "like" another while also feeling "with" the other one comes with the danger of the individual's loss of identity through the tendency to "conflate two aspects of identification" in the process (5, 121). Such instances of potential conflation are particularly volatile when the two subjects involved in the sentimental transaction belong to different races and classes, leading to racialized hierarchies of suffering that often reinforce difference rather than eradicating it. Laura Wexler charges that the sentimental tenor of the women's culture between 1820 and 1870 made it prone to racism. Thus it carried out the same normative and oppressive ways towards minorities with which these women charged a patriarchal culture that dominated anybody who was not white and male (124). The political alliance

between white female abolitionists and enslaved women, as well as the literary representation of the emotional connection between white and black women in sentimental fiction, are certainly rife with racialized tensions regarding agency and hierarchy. In *Touching Liberty* (1993), Karen Sánchez-Eppler probes into the politics of identification between black and white women, emphasizing the “bodily nature of the genre” that allows sentimentalism to effectively invite identification through corporeal rituals and symbols, such as the white reader’s shedding of tears over the hardship of the female slave (26). Yet these metaphoric moments of equality are precarious and can turn any moment into “acts of appropriation” that exploit black experience at the service of white interiority (20).

Saidiya Hartman and Laura Wexler have shown the racism internal to the logic of sentimental sympathy, linking the complicity of white women in upholding hegemonic power structures to the lopsided hierarchies of cross-racial sentimental identification. Describing antebellum scenarios in which whites are confronted with the horrors of black suffering through slavery, Hartman charges that such moments of cross-racial identification intended to “counteract the commonplace callousness to black suffering,” yet “requires that the white body be positioned in the place of the black body in order to make this suffering visible and intelligible” (19). The unchallenged white agency in lending black pain a voice becomes thus an act of empathetic transference that risks obliterating black suffering altogether. I take the charges of the racist nature of sentimental sympathy by critics like Wexler, Sanchez-Eppler, and Hartman seriously. My reading of sentimentalism, however, resists their negative interpretation of this genre’s racist complicity. Instead, my analyses show that the moments of racial tension

in sentimental sympathy allow for greater self-reflexivity on the part of both white and black women than these scholars credit them.

My dissertation also participates in the project of expanding sentimentalism's scope from the particular type of woman's fiction between 1820-70 to which it has often been reduced into a more comprehensive consideration of the pre- and after-life of antebellum sentimentality. June Howard's 1999 essay "What Is Sentimentality?" helped propel the scholarly debate out of its rather narrow genre focus of "woman's fiction" into a broader historical examination of the transatlantic, eighteenth-century roots of emotion and sensibility that rested on theories of sympathy and morality. Studies such as Julia A. Stern's *The Plight of Feeling* (1997) or Lori Merish's *Sentimental Materialism* (2000) have focused on the Enlightenment's influence on antebellum American notions about citizens' moral obligation to practice empathy, more broadly through the school of Scottish Common Sense (Merish 31-48), and more specifically through Adam Smith's immensely popular dictums in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759), where he proposes a "dialectic of sympathy in which the object of compassion and the viewing subject exchange interiorities" (Stern 24). Howard's appeal to look to the Enlightenment for a comprehensive history of emotion has not only broadened the debate around the highly feminized nineteenth-century expressions of sentimentality in the direction of the past, but her claim that these historical roots also help us understand contemporary forms of sentimentality points to the ongoing project of locating and defining post-sentimentality (69-70). Lauren Berlant's extensive scholarship on the "unfinished business of sentimentality," tracing the legacy of nineteenth-century liberal and national invocations of sentimentalism into the twentieth and twenty-first century, is probably the

most prominent example of scholarly interest in the afterlife of a literary genre – antebellum sentimentalism – and the residual effects of an eighteenth-century philosophy of sentimentality on the modern and contemporary cultural American scene (*The Female Complaint* 2).<sup>2</sup>

My dissertation engages in the question of post-sentimentality in so far as I analyze the work of writers who published during the latter half of the nineteenth-century, a period shaped by the prominence of realism as *the* literary form. Realism defined itself against sentimentalism. Yet the narratives I explore all explicitly engage the value and longevity of sentimentalism, both as a literary form and a moral philosophy of empathy. My reading of these texts thus participates in the project of tracing if and how sentimentalism changes when it is transplanted out of its specific period. However, my approach to antebellum and postbellum forms of sentimentalism is less interested in confirming a temporal divide between these expressions through a comparison of each period’s changed and adapted qualities of emotional power. In the spirit of Cindy Weinstein’s *Family, Kinship, and Sympathy in Nineteenth-Century American Literature* (2004), I am eager to question a “monolithic and consistently pernicious account of sympathy” in nineteenth-century literature (3). Like Weinstein, my readings rely on recognition of context (especially in regards to gender and geographical identity) and an acknowledgment that the internal debate around sentimentalism during the antebellum period has always been diverse and ideologically varied, thus contributing to the “sheer

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<sup>2</sup> Of course, explorations into the question of post-sentimentality are not the only newer forays into the field of sentimentalism. One trend, for example, expands sentimentalism’s grasp on the feminine by investigating its role in the life of men and masculinity’s invocation into a nineteenth-century culture of sentimentality. Mary Chapman and Glenn Hendler’s edited volume *Sentimental Men* (1999) marks an important contribution to this growing new field. Similarly, Elizabeth Barnes’s recent study *Love’s Whipping Boy* (2011) suggests that the tandem of violence and sentimental sympathy in nineteenth-century culture affect a specifically white masculine identity (2).

variety and flexibility of the form” to which Howard attests (73). My first two chapters on Elizabeth Keckley, Louisa May Alcott, and Sherwood Bonner are prime examples of my approach. The literary marketplace positioned each of these women on account of their gender and race into the register of the sentimental despite the fact that their publications during the late 1860s and 1870s emerged alongside new trends, such as realism and regionalism. Yet the way these writers play with and critique cross-racial sentimental sympathy evolves out of their own immersion in the diversity of expressions regarding antebellum sentimentality that unfolds against a changed political landscape of Reconstruction. Their decisions to use elements of sentimentalism as a platform to think through the unstable categories of white and black womanhood speak to their profound desire to use the form for their own critiques of normative femininity.

In similar ways, the use of sentimentalism in the black uplift fictions produced by African American women during the 1890s, which I analyze in my last chapter, is more dynamically placed in dialogue with the realist present and sentimental past than the anachronistic view of African American literature within the larger framework of American belles lettres suggests. The sentiment that African American writers routinely adapt the trends of white literature after their original heyday, thus always lagging behind – as in the sentimental revival in black women’s writing during Post-Reconstruction or the emergence of a black realism/naturalism during the period of white modernism in black canonical works such as Richard Wright’s *Native Son* (1940) or Ann Petry’s *The Street* (1946) – has been forcefully corrected by Claudia Tate’s ground-breaking study *Domestic Allegories of Desire* (1992). In this work, Tate argues that the seemingly benign, domestic, and inward-oriented black women novels of the 1890s use sentimental

tropes in conscious ways that point to a more politically-charged subtext of citizenship and the call for equal rights. P. Gabrielle Foreman's recent study *Activist Sentiments* (2009) builds on Tate's, Hazel Carby's, and Ann DuCille's influential trio of works challenging the divide between, and the seemingly incongruent co-existence of, domestic context and political prose in black women's writing of the nineteenth and early twentieth century. As Foreman's title suggests, political activism and sentimental form can be productively merged in late nineteenth-century discourse on race and positively influence the conception of black womanhood. The seeming dissonance between black women artists' public, politically progressive persona and their seemingly tame, universalizing literary voices rather points to their awareness of multiple audiences and their artistry in addressing their cause in different registers through a commonly understood platform, a quality that Foreman deems "simultextual" (6-7).

Key to these writers' trust in the sentimental was the question of authenticity. They believed that a topic as volatile and racially charged as the image of the future African American woman needed a literary mode that could convey the intra-gendered alliances between light- and dark-skinned African American women, as well as cross-racial ones between white and black Americans, in historically recognizable terms. In other words, the representations of black womanhood could only be expressed authentically through the emotional bonds anchored in the sentimental past of the country. June Howard confirms that authenticity, "the spontaneity, the sincerity, and the legitimacy of an emotion," was at stake in the general discussions surrounding sentimentalism ("What is Sentimentality?" 65). But this emphasis on authenticity, on

moral fitness and the acknowledgment in the validity of inner truth, were also a key decisive factor at play in the philosophy underlying American literary realism.

#### Realism, Race, and “the Real”: Struggles Over Truth and Authenticity

I have outlined the theoretical underpinnings of nineteenth-century sentimentalism since they form the background against which I establish my close readings of the works of fiction under consideration. But the narratives I analyze were all written after sentimentalism’s heyday and published in a literary market place that was dominated by realism. Because realism emerged as the major literary genre during the latter half of the nineteenth-century, I want to spend some time illustrating the theory and culture of this literary movement, particularly its conflicted relationship to sentimentalism that informs many of the works I analyze. Much of realism’s antagonism towards sentimentalism can be traced to the integral role race plays in both genres’ conception of its own value and cultural work. Both genres pay special attention to minority subjects in their quest for truth. In doing so, they seize on the figure of the African American woman and transform her into an artistic battleground vis-à-vis her white counterpart. This tension around literary form and expression maps onto the representation of womanhood in the narratives I analyze.

The characteristics of realist writing that we now almost unanimously accept as typical – its mimetic representation, its care to portray characters authentically by emphasizing their interiority as well as their moral agency, its emphasis on enriching the literary inventory by focusing not only on white, genteel Americans but also on racial and ethnic minorities as well as the plain, rural, working class, and its sensitivity regarding

dialect and social milieu<sup>3</sup> – were often used by literary tastemakers of the day to set it apart from preceding popular literary genres, especially romance and sentimentalism. David Shi’s influential study on the development of a realist culture in America supports that what most forcefully united realism (a literary, philosophical, and artistic movement that was much less unified than we often make it seem) was its disdain of anything sentimental (6). Realist writers objected to sentimentalists’ tendency to distort the truth by embellishing their characters and exaggerating the power of emotions, in the process – realists maintained – eradicating the reality of social differences. Condensed into subjective mottos such as Harriet Beecher Stowe’s famous appeal to “feel right,” realists understood sentimental expression to stand in direct opposition to their belief in objective, scientific observation.

At the heart of realists’ objections to the sentimental is the ideological struggle over which genre has precedence to lay claim to truth and authenticity. William Dean Howells, one of the most influential realist tastemakers of the nineteenth-century, claimed that truth was his “prime test of a novel” (“Novel-Writing” 216). For realists writing during the 1870s and 1880s, “truth” gained such value because it entwined the genre’s two most important credos. First, it addressed the narratological intervention realism hoped to make since composing fiction in a truthful manner meant that one obeyed the laws of verisimilitude. “Let fiction cease to lie about life;” Howells famously declared in his editor’s study column from May 1887, “let it portray men and women as they are, actuated by the motives and the passions in the measure we all know; [...] let it speak the dialect, the language, that most Americans know” (81). But realists’ insistence

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<sup>3</sup> My definition of realism overlaps nicely with Steven J. Belluscio’s summation of what he calls the “well-documented common trends in the genre” (45).

on truth also carried a second meaning. Because it became a comprehensive term for concepts such as authenticity, genuineness, material substance, or interiority (as in uncovering a character's essence and idealistic core), truth also pointed beyond compositional concerns into the broader social realm of ethics.

My project explores the ways literary genres define authenticity, and because of that I am particularly interested in postbellum writers' struggles with finding the most fitting register for the representation of a new postbellum womanhood. During the Reconstruction and Post-Reconstruction period, sentimentalism and realism presented themselves as natural "enemies" in this aesthetic-ideological battle over the truthful representation of a diverse American landscape, especially that of a newly freed, black population. Because realism values authentic difference and an "aesthetic of the common" (Kaplan 21), it seems to offer itself as a choice mode for representing minorities because it can devote as much literary space and serious attention to lower-class characters, simple-minded folk and non-white Americans as romance had previously granted to the upper-class Anglo-Saxon mind. The emphasis on the common, as Amy Kaplan points out, can also function as a connective tissue capable of bringing different types of people closer together because, at bottom, they all share a common humanity. As such, "realism works to ensure that social difference can be ultimately effaced by a vision of common humanity, which mirrors the readers' own commonplace, or everyday life" (ibid.). Kaplan's quote highlights a crucial relationship between the white middle-class reader's own life and that of "others," enabling a cross-class or cross-racial/ethnic connection that the belles lettres had hitherto artificially upheld rather than

bridged. Yet this relation between likeness and difference always refers back to realism's quest for truth and authenticity.

This belief in authenticity in combination with a focus on moral actions paradoxically unites realism and sentimentalism despite the former's tendency to wage war against the latter and accuse it of being diametrically opposed to truth. David Shi reminds us that the key characteristics of the European school of realism – scientific detachment and unsentimental frankness – did not fit perfectly the needs of American literature, despite the influence European models of realism generally wielded over American writers. What made American realism different was its “piquant residue of moral idealism and social optimism” (6). As such, realism shares a core quality, the “ideal,” with sentimental aesthetics. Although realist writers often speak derogatorily of the idealized qualities that morally inflates sentimental characters – what Kenneth Warren has called its ability to have characters transcend obstacles of race, class, power, or gender instead of realistically abiding social environment and personal limitations (82) – realists gladly carry over the moral quality that was encoded in the term “ideal.”

Putting the ideal in dialogue with the real had been a longstanding project of American letters, and eminent antebellum thinkers such as Walt Whitman or popular novelist Louisa May Alcott, neither of whom would fall neatly into the category of romance/sentimentality nor realism, had started to merge their prose into what Episcopal clergymen Samuel Osgood called in 1857 “ideal realism, or a disposition to bring ideal convictions to bear upon practical realities” (qtd. in Shi 6). The connections between sentimentalism and realism, including their tendency, in Shi's words, to “revolve around a moral axis” (ibid.) shows that they built their opposing aesthetics from a similar pool of

social idealism. It thus behooves us to remember not only Amy Kaplan's claim that realist fictions actively construct the social world as coherent (9), but also that they "attempt to mediate and negotiate competing claims to social reality," that they are, in other words, aware of the imaginative stronghold of other forms of representation which realists tried to incorporate or change accordingly (11).<sup>4</sup> Even if realism objected to the "assimilative power of white domesticity to uplift the downtrodden, correct the wayward, and conquer the malicious" as unrealistic, its own program to instruct readers to judge social differences fairly and genuinely in order to manage diversity shares the same hope for a better future world (Elliott 40).

While it might sound like a common-place observation to say that realism's claim to represent social relations stands always in competition with its rival genres, such as the sentimental (after all, as Pierre Bourdieu reminds us, this is probably true of all contemporaneous genres<sup>5</sup>), it is important to note that both forms of writing seize the moral affiliation with the ideal for their own agendas of dealing with social realities. This includes their aim of assigning to truth and ideality a quality of genuineness that can range from human emotion (sentimental novel) to authentic representation (realist novel) but that will in both cases be intimately tied to moral consciousness. The allocation of

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<sup>4</sup> Nancy Glazener's analysis of realism in relation to other contemporaneous fictional categories is helpful here as well. Glazener gives us a chronological and organically evolving self-understanding of realism that largely depends on its present genre-adversary. Accordingly, the birth of realism as a new and egalitarian form around midcentury depended on the bashing of the romance as a genteel and old-fashioned mode, while realism during the decades of the 1870s and 1880s focused on distinguishing itself from sensational and sentimental fiction on the grounds of the latter group's unprofessionalism, often associated with female authorship and the subsequent negative feminization of these types of writing (*Reading for Realism* 13). Tellingly, the gendering of sentimental fiction as feminine and realist fiction as masculine would turn on itself when the romantic revival during the turn-of-the-century made its adventurous image dependent on realism's relegation to the feminine and genteel (ibid.). Other examples that show the fickle instability around gender metaphors and genre include the masculinization of naturalism and its subsequent feminization of regional fiction, a highly championed sister-genre of realism proper (see also Donna M. Campbell's 1997 *Resisting Regionalism*).

<sup>5</sup> See specifically chapter 6 "Principles for a Sociology of Cultural Works" in Bourdieu's *The Field of Cultural Production* (176-91).

the real in the ideal is an especially significant strategy shared by sentimentalists and realists alike when they take the representation of race and, more specifically, of black womanhood center stage. I will argue throughout the dissertation that it is precisely over the figure of the newly freed African American that realism intersects so profoundly with sentimentality and simultaneously becomes more like it. Seized by both as a symbol of great significance for the possibilities of acknowledging a common humanity, overcoming racial difference, and developing white interiority in the process, realism and sentimentalism share the conviction that social responsibility can be successfully modeled through the bodies of black characters and through the right kind of fiction.

Due to these similarities, Warren observes that a didactic and socially outspoken bestseller such as Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* evoked a two-sided response from realists because she "was an inspiration and a problem," the problematical thing about her work being the "deplorable aesthetic" of sentimentality, including its focus on affecting story-telling (72). Critics of realism, such as William Roscoe Thayer, saw realism's greatest flaw in how it foreswore plot in favor of careful, scientific observation of mundane characters or painstakingly researched facts about their manners and customs, thus making realist stories often less than thrilling to read (Elliott 50-1). But despite the gripping cliff-hangers from section to section that made a story like *Uncle Tom's Cabin* such a bestseller, sentimental tales rely as much as realism on the importance of character since characters offer themselves as the representative site through which writers can express the realism and sincerity of a fictional person. While sentimentalists rely on the body as an affective site of genuine emotion, thus enriching a character's authenticity, realists achieve a similar effect through a psychological

representation of interiority. Despite these different means, both styles rely on character representation as their prime mode of signifying the real.

Both sentimentalism and realism tend to use non-normative, racialized characters as their choice figures for embodying authenticity. Cathy Boeckmann identifies the close affiliation between character and representations of race in nineteenth-century American writing. Character, although one of literature's universal building blocks, becomes specifically implicated in debates about race during late nineteenth-century America because it entails the ability to assess people's essence via description, thus offering one way to read character as an index for inherited mental traits of a whole race that could legitimize the social differences between black and white Americans (15). During a time of social uncertainty and racial prejudice about how to integrate a class of people formerly thought child-like, animalistic, dim-witted, and dishonest, literary characterization thus became racially charged and inevitably entangled with the general nineteenth-century understanding of individual character as a largely moral category. "The strength of one's character," Boeckmann observes, "was an obsession of nineteenth-century readers" (40). This would certainly explain why antebellum sentimental novels as well as realist novels often populate their stories with a heterogeneous cast and use non-white figures frequently as essential lenses, both in the moral sense as well as in their mimetic need for diversity and authenticity.

If talking about race in nineteenth-century America almost always meant talking about it through character, the narratives that deal with black figures often resort to highlighting African American women rather than men. This should not come as much of a surprise given the inevitable sexualization of race that had its roots in antebellum

slavery and symbolized its white cross-racial desires, dominion, and black exploitation over the body of the woman slave. Coveted, abused, and raped by white men, stereotyped as hypersexual in order to protect a male double-standard in regards to sexuality, profited from economically as cheap breeders of black labor property for slave owners, the antebellum black woman epitomized the cruelty of slavery. As such, she evoked compassion even as her image could be used negatively as a stand-in for the inferior character of the race as a whole. Because mixed-race children were often the outcome of slave women's rape by white men or their liaisons as disenfranchised mistresses, to a sentimental white readership, African American women embodied the sexualized link between black-white relationships much more poignantly than the exploitation of black men at the hands of whites. In antebellum literature, the frequency with which writers employ the image of the desirable black woman, epitomized through the trope of the tragic mulatta, reflect the imaginary connection nineteenth-century white Americans held in regards to conflating race and character with sexualized black womanhood. Conceptualized as mothers of light-skinned mixed-race children, the image of black womanhood was linked with the social hot button topics of miscegenation and race amalgamation, casting them in the role of scapegoats for race mixing, but their biological link with the children of white men also made them "natural conduits," to use a phrase of Warren's (68), that could bridge racial differences. As such, white people were literally in black women's blood.

When Michele Birnbaum speaks of the "consanguinity of the 'Race Problem' and the 'Woman Question'" in regards to the conflation of race and gender in the black postbellum woman, she thinks particularly of the role "'mixed-blood' hysterics" play in

realist-scientific literature in order to manifest a larger tendency to pathologize femininity (7). Her particular choice of words – consanguinity, which denotes a relationship by blood – is fitting for the larger social sensitivity about race. Like the “tangled skeins” of slavery’s genealogy that Harriet Jacobs had already lamented in 1861, the historical lust of white men for black women and the mixed-race children resulting out of these largely abusive unions put African American women in a peculiar blood relation to hegemonic America. But postbellum black women remained also intimately connected to the subjugated part of Americans that realism considered as “the real” because of their past associated closeness to physical suffering and material hardship.

Both sentimental and realist literature treat the image of the black woman as vital to representing gender and race issues. Because of her presumed intimacy with materiality and honest trustworthiness, she makes a fitting example of authentic, down-to-earth morality that is specifically important for setting her apart from and critically analyzing the empty idleness of upper-class white womanhood. But while sentimental literature translates her symbolic closeness to the real predominantly into emotional power, as a tragic figure whose need of white compassion can incite social action, realist fiction sees the aesthetic virtue of black womanhood in its possibility to deconstruct stale social conventions and counter them with genuine, moral simplicity and truth.

### Chapter Outline

My research is deeply connected to the affect-driven relationships between black and white women that marked the culture of abolition and sentimentality in antebellum America. The tensions and alliances that emerged between women of different races or

classes are central to my argument about gender in realist texts because they continued the earlier competition of different types of women with and against each other. Yet such cross-classed and cross-raced categorizing of women into culturally acceptable notions of femininity underwent significant ideological changes in postbellum discourse. My dissertation's title captures the essence of sentimental sympathy, complete with its ethical dilemma between reinforcing white female normativity and its potential to redefine such cross-racial emotional power structures. "I thought of *you* in her place" serves thus as the guiding mantra of my dissertation as I trace the unstable categories of American womanhood during the nation's transition from the antebellum into the postbellum era.

The speaker of this quote, taken from Louisa May Alcott's novel *Work* (1873), is the protagonist's husband, David, who explains his impending death to his beloved Christie in terms she can accept and honor. In the act of helping a fugitive slave woman escape to freedom, David received a mortal wound. He justifies this sacrifice to his wife because the slave woman made him think of Christie. David's comment suggests the closeness between white and black women. Yet his choice of words privileges the white woman, "you," over the black one, "her." His semantics put his wife in the foreground while the quote also, in the spirit of Hartman, emphasizes Christie's importance in making the black woman's suffering intelligible for a white man. As such, the sentence captures the racial connotations of cross-racial female sympathy, always using black women as the background against which white women's value shines even brighter.

Yet the racial hierarchy evoked by this quote is magnified if it is taken out of the novel's context. As I show throughout the first chapter, Louisa May Alcott consistently puts Christie under the tutelage of a black ex-slave, Hepsey, and towards the end of the

narrative, when David utters this line, the black woman's value as sentimental teacher has been established to such a degree that the racial hierarchy of "I thought of *you* in her place" has acquired a deeper, more self-reflective meaning. I begin this chapter by exploring the ways whiteness informed cultural definitions of womanhood in the sentimental fiction of the postbellum era. Chapter One historicizes realism's gender politics by analyzing two texts that are outside of the genre proper: Elizabeth Keckley's *Behind the Scenes* (1868) and Louisa May Alcott's *Work* (1873). Like Alcott, Elizabeth Keckley plays with the connotations of sentimental sympathy. Through her representation of the intimate relationship between Mrs. Lincoln and herself, Keckley's narrative puts a spin on the seemingly fixed places of the white and black woman in their sentimental relation to authority and veracity. I argue that both narratives challenge the structure of sentimental fiction by inverting the logic of sympathetic identification, positioning black womanhood as the model of femininity that white women should emulate.

While my second chapter on Sherwood Bonner's local color stories leaves the abolitionist realm and turns to white southern women writer's use of sentimental sympathy, the chapter stays within the female domain and focuses on analyzing sentimental cross-racial power relations between white genteel southern belles and African American women 'mammies'. I use this lesser-known writer as a case study to test the limits of exploiting the sentimental formula. Bonner's southern identity and her first-hand immersion into the slave system allowed her to transgress the stiff conventionality imposed on black and white women's interactions by the earlier sentimental formula. Bonner's interpretation of my title quote emphasizes the

emotionally conflated space between white and black southern women. This sentimental conflation oscillates between confirming the interchangeability of white and black bodies due to their physical intimacy and psychological closeness and the eventual reestablishment of social difference. In Bonner's stories, these transgressions translate into a physical proximity that radicalizes cross-racial emotional ties, but the proposed intimacy only thinly shields a more complex power balance between black and white women, one that perpetually oscillates between enhancing whiteness and signifying blackness.

Chapter Three shifts the focus of my project out of the intra-gendered realm and into the sexualized relationship between white men and light-skinned African American women who are able to pass. This chapter also moves the dissertation from so-called 'minor' forms of literary realism into the realm of 'high' realism by exploring William Dean Howells's *An Imperative Duty* (1892) and Charles W. Chesnutt's *The House Behind the Cedars* (1900). Both texts set up the passing woman as a battleground, a site of contested and often paradoxical meaning. Both novels also suggest, however, that white masculinity itself depends on the conflicted, secretive consumption of the African American woman. I explore the precarious make-up of white masculinity in particular with Chesnutt's narrative. Here I explore the role of the passing African American men in establishing his white identity at the expense of the light-skinned, black-identified woman. Chapter Three is still governed by the logic of my title quote, although its interpretations of realist narratives seem to steer away from the quote's female focus and its engagement with a "feminized" sentimental style. After all, a man, Christie's husband David, frames my title quote, despite its reference to the inter-gendered world of black

and white women. Howells's and Chesnut's novels both feature male characters who position themselves as interpreters of an African American womanhood that is based on a sentimental understanding of racialized, female relationships. In both novels, men pitch white and black womanhood against each other in favor of a new womanhood that combines blackness and whiteness over the body of the passing African American female. Thus, "I thought of *you* in her place" gains its import in part from the framed male point of view that sexualizes cross-racial female sentimental relationships while at the same time stipulating its parameters.

My last chapter on Victoria Earle Matthews's short stories and Frances E.W. Harper's *Iola Leroy* (1892) returns to women writers, yet their narratives leave the white woman out of the immediate equation. Instead, they focus on the diversity of female identities within the black community of the 1890s. In this chapter, I look at how African American women writers responded to and transformed a cultural-literary trend among white, realist writers in order to espouse a cross-racial ideology that used black women as embodiments of the real. I analyze how these writers work through the tensions between dark- and light-skinned African American women in order to define a new, positive image of turn-of-the-century African American womanhood. The ideals of white womanhood remain a powerful specter in these writer's fictions, evoking the sentimental past, miscegenation, and the confines of the "tragic mulatta" stereotype against which these writers define a future dark-skinned femininity. "I thought of *you* in her place" thus refers back to the dominance of white normativity in defining American womanhood yet also shifts this sentimental hierarchy out of its white center and into an internal struggle fueled by the politics of color within the black community. The schism between dark-

skinned African American women and those light enough to pass as white is folded onto temporal metaphors of the past, present, and future that use sentimentality and authenticity in new and seemingly contradictory ways.

What unites the diverse writers I analyze throughout the dissertation is that they offer alternatives to a normative model of upper-class white womanhood they deem, for various reasons, limiting, stale and outdated. Their critiques are intricately bound to sentimentalism, both as a literary form as well as a philosophy. The authority of their arguments for the value of African American womanhood against other forms of femininity fall apart without a concerted recourse to the sentimental, even if they may not like or fully approve of their dependence on this genre. My approach to the role of race in realism is thus informed by an emphasis on literary form and social history, particularly as they interact in these texts' deployment of African American womanhood. Unlike work that focuses on specific time frames or a specifically raced group of women, my project aims at a larger and more inclusive analysis of postbellum literature. I argue that the inter- and intra-gendered race relations between black and white women offer an interpretive thread unifying texts in literary modes as diverse as sentimental narratives, regional fiction, high realist novels, and black uplift fiction. Throughout the dissertation, I argue that these writers locate a symbolic value of veracity and authenticity in African American womanhood that they consider imperative for changing a monolithic representation of American womanhood and that they regard significant for controlling an increasingly diverse expression of womanhood in directions they find historically just, progressive, and most of all, ethically acceptable. It is ultimately not the female characters themselves that are crucial to my argument but the concept of black

womanhood: its social, cultural, and ideological implications drove the gender representations of realist, postbellum American literature in powerful, and often contradictory, ways.

## Chapter 1

### Uprooting Normative Whiteness: Sentimental Sympathy in Elizabeth Keckley's

#### *Behind the Scenes* and Louisa May Alcott's *Work*

Towards the end of *Hospital Sketches* (1863), Louisa May Alcott's fictional alter ego, Nurse Tribulation Periwinkle, shocks a fellow Virginian nurse by cuddling and kissing an African American toddler. *Hospital Sketches*, the highly successful semi-autobiographical chronicle of the author's experience as a war nurse, was Alcott's first published work that brought her critical success. The text is laced with abolitionist rhetoric, and Alcott uses the confrontation of race and gender in the above example to enlighten her audience. Not omitting an opportunity to lecture the southern woman on the importance of abolition, Nurse Periwinkle with "one hand stirred gruel for sick America, and the other hugged baby Africa" (59). To Alcott's readers, a crowd well versed in sentimental culture, the image of a white woman lovingly hugging an African American child must have been a compelling symbol that short-handedly captures abolitionist ideals. Hugging "baby Africa" results from the same compassion the nurse uses to heal wounded soldiers – both tasks that are clearly coded feminine and sentimental. As the tableau of Nurse Periwinkle and the black baby suggests, white women's cultural work was of two-fold national importance: one hand cured the war wounds of "sick America"; the other cured another national wrong, slavery. Most importantly, Alcott's sentimental scene repeats the importance of white womanhood to the cause of abolition; it is the white woman, in a maternal gesture, who is supposed to reach out to the enslaved or recently freed, she is the center from which sentimental sympathy radiates to those African Americans in need of guidance.

I start with Nurse Periwinkle and baby Africa because their image symbolizes the typical, abolitionist relationship between white and black people in which women like Alcott or Lydia Maria Childs or Harriet Beecher Stowe take on the role of benefactor and protector to their black, exploited sisters. Deeply embedded in a culture of sentiment, many antebellum slave narratives and sentimental novels repeatedly confirm the logic of cross-racial sympathy as a sisterhood that is centered on and refers back to middle-class whiteness. Through their shared lot as women with specifically gendered sufferings, such as the loss of a loved child, white women are able to sympathize with their black counterparts, humanizing them in the process. Yet these sisterly ties do not come without racial tensions. The relationship between white and black women that marked the rhetoric of abolition from the beginning of its inception in antebellum America was often hierarchical, or, as Karen Sánchez-Eppler suggests, asymmetrical and exploitative (15).

The iconic images used by anti-slavery societies to evoke the cruelty of slavery and to incite white action are prime examples that illustrate such racial tensions. Jean Fagan Yellin analyzes two variations of the abolitionist emblem that specifically reference women's roles in slavery, both as enslaved chattel and enlightened reformers. Yellin traces the development of the iconic "Am I Not a Woman and Sister" image, in which a half-naked, chained slave woman kneels to an invisible other, to its similarly popular counterpart. In this variation, a white woman, often dressed allegorically as Truth or Justice and elevated in contrast to the kneeling, black woman, liberates her darker sister in a symbolically empowering act of chain-breaking. The appearance of a white savior, as Yellin suggests, emphasizes an important difference in the ties of sisterly sympathy since the female chain-breakers imply "racist ideas about the moral superiority

of whites” (*Women* 25). Like Nurse Periwinkle’s generous act of leaning down to the black toddler, scooping him up and allowing him to be close to her whiteness, the representation of abolitionist womanhood in the alternate emblem makes white women the anchor of compassion, action, and truth in this scenario of cross-sympathetic identification.

The racial tension arising out of such cross-racial female relationships also comes to the fore in some of the images that accompany Alcott’s *Hospital Sketches*. Tellingly, the illustrations in the later edition of *Hospital Sketches and Camp and Fireside Stories* (1869) show Nurse Periwinkle with baby Africa curling on her shoulder, yet omit the Virginia nurse at whom her anti-slavery lecture is directed (76). Instead, this illustration juxtaposes the erectly standing Periwinkle with a seated, black woman – the baby’s mother, perhaps? – peeling potatoes in the background. The black woman’s ambiguous glance, directed at baby Africa, only further spells out the hierarchical and loaded relationship between white and black womanhood, particularly over the tutelage of black bodies.

What is important for my discussion is that this sentimental sympathy, loaded with racial tensions, can cross color lines only because it is understood to be a one-way street that begins and ends in whiteness as the core of emotion, value, and femininity. While the representation of Nurse Periwinkle generously hugging baby Africa confirms racial hierarchy, Alcott moved towards questioning and redefining racialized, gendered relationships more openly in her later writings. Consequently, the two texts I analyze in this chapter usurp the cross-racial logic of sentimental sympathy. Both Elizabeth Keckley’s *Behind the Scenes, Or, Thirty Years a Slave, and Four Years in the White*

*House* (1868) and Louisa May Alcott's *Work: A Story of Experience* (1873) are genre-benders that manipulate their respective literary forms – slave narrative and sentimentalism – in order to invest black womanhood with the regard and value previously assigned only to white femininity.

My choice of these two texts might seem odd at first since their differences outweigh their similarities. Keckley wrote an autobiography, Alcott's work was fictional. *Work* belongs to the genre of the sentimental while *Behind the Scenes* mixes elements of the slave narrative, black uplift narrative, and sensational memoir. Additionally, the social position of the respective authors differed considerably. While Alcott, a white northern woman, could align her literary reputation within the tradition of well-known abolitionists and Transcendentalists (such as her father, Bronson Alcott, Margaret Fuller, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and David Thoreau), Keckley, a black southern woman, had only thirteen years earlier bought herself out of slavery and had focused since on her career as a dressmaker. Not surprisingly then, the reception of their respective texts differed considerably. White reviewers thrashed Keckley for the indecency of exposing the precious secrets of the white elite, effectively writing this African American woman off the Washington stage. Alcott's reviewers, although far from enthusiastic, gave her the benefit of the doubt precisely because with *Little Women* (1868) she had earlier established herself by adhering to the genre expectations tolerated of a woman author. The public reception of these texts forcefully reproduces the unwritten rules of race privilege and genre when it comes to the possibilities of writing about gender in mid-nineteenth-century America.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> I choose two representative examples that demonstrate the racially biased treatment Alcott and Keckley received from the press. The *Atlantic Monthly*, a more reputable organ than the many New York weeklies

Despite these differences, I see both women and their texts as connected dots on a larger socio-literary map of the 1870s. Both texts, I argue, challenge the structure of sentimental fiction by upsetting the relationship of sympathy between white and black women as it was widely formulated in earlier slave narratives or domestic fictions. Keckley achieves this through a reversal of the well-known editorial power relationship between white and formerly enslaved women in slave narratives. Interpreting her reputation as a first-class mantua maker of the Washington elite as powerful enough in symbolic capital to speak on behalf of Mary Lincoln's pain, Keckley uses sentimental sympathy to carve out a space for her and Mary Lincoln's inner life.<sup>7</sup> She thus insists on a cross-racial female right to emotion and interiority that can be brokered by those who were formerly only the dependent recipients of white (female) tutelage: African American women. Alcott similarly uproots the center of whiteness at the core of sentimental sympathy by emphasizing the significance of black women to her protagonist's own moral development. The characters in Alcott's novel have to constantly negotiate between the seductive but hollow life of the rich upper classes and a

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that sensationally thrashed Keckley, refrained from angry name-calling yet denied a black woman the literary intelligence needed to compose such a book when they bluntly wrote that they "put Mrs. Keckley out of the question of authorship" ("Review of *Behind the Scenes*" 128). *Harper's*, on the other hand, put the success or failure of Alcott's novel in the context of her secured fame as author. "The book," the reviewer wittily remarked, "would not have made her reputation, but her reputation will make the book" (September 1873, reprinted in Clark 208).

<sup>7</sup> Throughout this chapter, I make extensive use of three different forms of capital as they have been most famously outlined by Pierre Bourdieu in *Distinction*, as well as his greater oeuvre: social, cultural, and symbolic capital. Despite the impressive frequency with which scholars from different fields take over Bourdieu's terms as fruitful categories of analysis, much confusion still abounds over the exact meaning and differentiation between these forms of capital. To clarify, I will use *social capital* to describe a person's resources or legitimacy that have been predominantly amassed through relationships with other people, through the advantageous networking and sharing of capital already possessed by others. *Cultural capital* will be primarily deployed to signal a person's command over accumulated forms of knowledge via education or acquired skills. Finally, I will use *symbolic capital* exclusively for instances in which I want to emphasize a person's overall amassed capital – financial, cultural, and social – as a form of power that enables said person to wield his or her capital against other people. In other words, my use of the phrase symbolic capital is closely connected to showing a character's ability to exercise authority within a larger cultural-social sphere.

modest working-class life, leading to the conclusion that black womanhood is *the* model of femininity that white women should emulate. Reading these texts side by side, hence, furthers a critical understanding of the changing role of black womanhood that accompanied the development from antebellum, sentimental fiction to postbellum, realist texts.

Both texts, as I argue, perform crucial cultural work. By upsetting the hierarchy of white over black these texts aid a paradigmatic shift in American letters, a shift that redefines the meaning of African American womanhood for later genres such as literary realism. Although the works under discussion do not belong to the genre of literary realism, even if defined loosely, their attempt to carve out the possibilities of an inner life for African American women is central for understanding the emphasis realist texts put on black women when they try to represent their characters' consciousness, as I will demonstrate in subsequent chapters.

Before I move into a close reading of *Behind the Scenes* and *Work*, I want to clarify my use of terminology for this chapter as well as those to follow. My point in this chapter is to show that Keckley's and Alcott's manipulation of the sentimental genre leads to a re-evaluation of cross-racial sympathy that ultimately insists on granting women, black as well as white, a space and a representational language for an inner life. However, I do not wish to conflate this with the idea of interiority that came to characterize a major formal element of literary realism. The idea of interiority, particularly as we associate it nowadays with the psychological realism of a writer like Henry James, was not amenable to sentimental writers. As Nina Baym notes in her survey of novel reviews spanning the antebellum years 1840 to 1860, while writers and

readers alike paid increasing attention to a character's interior life, this inner life did not play itself out over the question of a protagonist's reliability in understanding and interpreting the social world around him, as was vital to realism, but rather centered on "the human heart," a phrase that over and over appeared in contemporary reviews (*Novels* 95). The human heart stood as shorthand for the inner life and continued, according to Baym, to signify the "moral framework" of a character (96). In other words, when Keckley and Alcott carve out a space for an inner life of their characters, they are less interested in how such interiority becomes an intensely individualized way of seeing or misreading one's social world, but they rather understand their characters to be models of an inclusive womanhood that performs the cultural work of a cross-raced gender critique.

#### Carving Out a Space for the Human Heart: Elizabeth Keckley's *Behind the Scenes*

Through its mix of slave narrative, political memoir, and a black bootstrap version of commercial success, Elizabeth Keckley's *Behind the Scenes* defies easy genre classification. Even though slave narratives, by definition, rely on several literary genres in order to accommodate their audience, primarily referencing autobiographical testimony and duplicating the sentimental formula to transfer sympathy, Keckley's text breaks away from this *modus operandi*.<sup>8</sup> Utilizing the structure of the slave narrative as a springboard, the text instead centers around life as a free citizen, the end point of most

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<sup>8</sup> John Sekora's image of a "black message in a white envelope" summarizes the multiple raced voices and genre conventions the slave narrative draws on and appropriates. Among many lesser-known works, Sekora shows the interdependency of black narrators on white editors in *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave* (1845), *The Narrative of William Wells Brown, a Fugitive Slave* (1847), and Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1865).

slave narratives.<sup>9</sup> Whereas many slave narratives spend a considerable amount of time detailing life under slavery, Keckley condenses her enslaved experience to the first three chapters of the narrative. Aptly titled, “Where I Was Born,” “Girlhood and Its Sorrows,” and “How I Gained My Freedom,” Keckley selectively tells her readers about the defining moments of her life as a slave. Born in Virginia, Keckley’s early life is marked by the separation from her parents and her first whipping as a four-year old housemaid for letting her master’s baby fall out of her hands. At age fourteen, Keckley moves with her master’s son to North Carolina, where she has to endure sexual advances and further beatings from her master’s family friend, as well as the sexual harassment of another white man from whom she finally gets pregnant. Like Harriet Jacobs, Keckley phrases these experiences in the language of defiance and resistance, blaming a racist and sexist society rather than excusing the sexual transgressions to which she becomes subjected. She further highlights her pride and self-reliance when she reports how, on return to servicing another of her master’s children, she not only keeps the whole family financially afloat during hard economic times, but also resists an easy opportunity to flee to freedom and instead insists on buying herself and her son out of slavery through hard work.

The industrious Keckley spends most of the remainder of the narrative chronicling the success story of her rise to respectable, black entrepreneurship once she arrives in the North. As a talented seamstress, she starts working for the wife of Senator Jefferson Davis, sewing herself into the influential white circle of Washington politics, finally working for Mrs. Lincoln and becoming her confidante. In this position, Keckley

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<sup>9</sup> William L. Andrews’s essays “Reunion” and “Changing Moral Discourse” both take on *Behind the Scenes* as a case study for comparing postbellum slave narratives to their antebellum counterparts, pointing to the different psychological and social needs taken up in such post-Civil War narratives.

is privileged to witness many important historical events of her time first-hand, including the intimate life of the presidential family, the death of their son, and finally the assassination of President Lincoln and the unraveling of Mrs. Lincoln's social and financial standing in the aftermath of her husband's death. Finally, the text culminates in a defense of Mary Todd Lincoln's and Keckley's character, which was questioned during the highly publicized "Old Clothes Scandal" of 1867. The scandal was triggered by Mrs. Lincoln's attempt to boost her pension by threatening Congress to publicly sell her wardrobe. Her hope that Congress would financially help out the impoverished widow of Abraham Lincoln was quickly destroyed. Yet Mary Todd Lincoln, ill advised by her New York brokering firm, placed her wardrobe on exhibition and had her letters to Congress published in the New York papers in a final attempt to secure financial support from the government. This publicity stunt ultimately backfired, and, instead of acquiring the desired respect (and financial means), Mary Todd Lincoln was sensationalized as an attention-seeking, unladylike, and unreasonable woman.

What truly differentiates Keckley's narrative approach from the common slave narratives is her reversal of the hierarchical bond between white and black womanhood, as it had often played itself out in the relationship between controlling editor and controlled narrative subject. In *Behind the Scenes*, Keckley confidently relies on her own power as a witness – as an African American woman equipped with respectability and economic capital – to explain both Mrs. Lincoln's as well as her own actions in this public scandal (4). This rather bold move from enslaved object, dependent on white benefactors, to elevated corrective mouthpiece of white womanhood relies on the text's unusual interpretation of sentimental sympathy. Conventional sentimental sympathy, a

staple of domestic antebellum classics such as Susan Warner's *The Wide, Wide World* (1850) or Maria Susanna Cummins's *The Lamplighter* (1854), expresses the ideological eighteenth-century belief that compassion, the ability to connect to other people over their suffering, will teach people to become good, responsible citizens. The reader's willingness to suffer with literary characters, as Glenn Hendler points out, is at core an act of identification (3). Moreover, the sentimental request to imagine oneself in another's position opens the door between self and others, often running the danger of collapsing identities precisely because sentimental sympathy asks the reader not only to feel like another, but *with* another, "in order to transform partial sameness into identity" (5).

Keeping Hendler's explanation of partial sameness in mind, it does not come as a surprise that slave narratives and abolitionist fiction rely on sentimental sympathy in order to show readers that despite different skin color, African Americans share with white Americans the ability to feel and suffer – the pain over the loss of loved ones is a prime example. Such a comparative approach enables white Americans' willingness to feel for and with enslaved people, allowing sympathy to cross lines of race, class, or caste. "Partial sameness" thus opens the way to a common humanity that bypasses otherwise impermeable class and race barriers. Yet such an opening up of social barriers through feelings remains largely a one-way street, with sentimental sympathy flowing from white well-off class members to the underprivileged but not vice versa. Harriet Beecher Stowe's best-selling anti-slavery novel, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852), powerfully illustrates Stowe's mantra to "feel right" when Mrs. and Senator Bird, although in a moral quandary over sheltering the escaped Eliza because of the passing of the Fugitive

Slave Law, can finally shed tears with Eliza over their common loss of a beloved family member (154-6).<sup>10</sup> As this example, and the many more that populated the genre, shows, those in power might reach down to the impoverished, uneducated or un-free in a gesture of downward mobility that gives them access to a raw, unmediated affective experience from which their cultural capital bars them otherwise (the torturous pain of the flogged slave, the sexualized violation of the raped slave girl, and so on).<sup>11</sup> Because the cultural capital of gentility is ‘weighty’ enough to ground them, they might even momentarily uplift their objects of compassion in the process. Reversing the direction of sentimental sympathy from the downtrodden to the privileged, however, hardly ever occurs in sentimental novels or slave narratives.

I read *Behind the Scenes* as a text example that tries to challenge the hierarchical flow of sentimental sympathy in an attempt to confer black womanhood with the respect and wielding power it previously had been denied. In order to make these rather bold arguments – the negative reception of Keckley’s text only speaks to the resistance white readers exhibited toward such a reversal<sup>12</sup> – Keckley has to first establish herself as a self-reliant woman with enough economic and social capital to earn the necessary respectability among both the emerging free, black middle-class, uplift community of the North as well as the white, fashion-conscious Washington elite. Moreover, Keckley tries to present an African American self that is simultaneously largely independent from

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<sup>10</sup> See also Sorisio (33).

<sup>11</sup> I adapt the idea of downward mobility from Amy Schrager Lang’s discussion of Alcott’s *Work* in which she suggests that “Christie, if she is ultimately to mediate across the boundaries of social difference, must be brought down – brought, that is, into contact with working women whose respectability may be in doubt for reasons of race, nationality, or life experience, but whose womanly virtues are intact” (118).

<sup>12</sup> The anonymous publication of the overtly racist and misogynistic spoof *Behind the Seams* presents the culminating example of vicious press reviews that denied Keckley any agency as either writer of this text or as a reliable source on Mary Todd Lincoln.

white patronage but also on equal footing with them. Unlike traditional slave narratives, such as Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861), in which a white editor takes upon herself the moral responsibility to show other white readers that African Americans are indeed human beings worthy of sympathy and respect, Keckley's narrative strives towards explaining Mary Todd Lincoln's character through the eyes of her closest confidante, which Keckley understands to be herself. Thus, Keckley's projected narrative persona, particularly as she frames herself in the preface, resembles more that of an editor, partaking in the events yet remaining in the background, than that of a protagonist.

Most scholars note the reminiscence and modification of the racialized editor-writer dynamic that makes *Behind the Scenes* at once different from slave narratives and subversive of the logic of white patronage. Frances Smith Foster observes that Keckley "assigned herself the role that Lydia Maria Child played in Jacobs's text," assuming the authority and equality formerly appointed to white abolitionist-suffragists in the fight against slavery (121). Jennifer Fleischner claims that these narrative inversions put Keckley in a rhetorical position that allow her to "reject the 'Otherness' that has been projected onto the slave woman by projecting it back onto the figure of the mistress" (*Mastering* 102). Carolyn Sorisio likewise points out that reversing the power relations existent in the white editor/black narrator dynamics allows Keckley to resist unveiling "the secrets of African American or slave women" and instead publicly expose "Mary Todd Lincoln's false gentility" (27).

As these scholars rightly note, *Behind the Scenes* builds on this reversal of power relationships from white over black to black over white. Keckley's narrative strategy to

position her physical self into the textual background – Rafia Zafar calls it a “near-total erasure of a black female narrator” (13) – plays a major role in reformulating black women’s agency as one that is built on economic and social capital, not female sexuality. But I want to think further about what the inversion of racial positions means for the role of black womanhood, particularly as it plays itself out in later narratives. Rather than thinking about this change as a switch of power along linear lines that simply swap one position for another, I see this transformation as a more intricate circular exchange of framing racial identities and of re-assigning sentimental sympathy. In *Behind the Scenes*, an African American woman grants a pained white lady the figurative space to claim (and edit!) her suffering, that is, the loss of her reputation and fellow-sympathy. This gesture of sentimental sympathy, radiating from black to white, always refers back to African American womanhood. Keckley’s use of sentimental sympathy is thus making a larger statement about the contingency of the idea of femininity on African American women.

The brief inclusion of Keckley’s thirty years as a slave serves one overriding purpose: to prove that Keckley early on learned to rely on herself. This independence is crucial in establishing Keckley’s independence from white people after she emancipated herself. Overall, Keckley’s decision to eclipse her experiences as a sexually abused slave girl with her successful commercial enterprise and her confidential position among the white Washington elite is part of her narrative strategy. She writes herself out of the dependent, hypersexualized relationship most fugitive slaves or recently freed African Americans felt themselves subjected to under abolitionist discourse. In order to project an independent personality, able to care for herself and be a model for others, Keckley

instead utilizes her experiences under slavery for the purpose of grounding her autonomy in a long-practiced character trait: self-reliance.

Keckley clarifies from the beginning that one of the positive outcomes from the “hardy school of slavery” had been that it taught her self-reliance from an early age. Recounting her first task as a four-year old slave, to watch the youngest baby of her mistress, she finds that slavery taught her to “rely upon myself, and to prepare myself to render assistance to others” (8). Next to this important lesson of self-support, Keckley adds another experience. Because her little charge slipped out of the cradle, Keckley was beaten and subsequently told by her master that “I would never be worth my salt” (ibid.). The accusation of idleness, in particular, would haunt Keckley for the rest of her life, and it spurs her to prove such charges wrong, as when she proudly reports that at one point “with my needle I kept bread in the mouths of seventeen persons for two years and five months,” exchanging places with her master and casting herself successfully in the role of breadwinner (20).

While the principles of self-reliance were widespread in a mid-nineteenth-century northern culture that looked up to Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau as vanguards of American individualism, Keckley’s use of self-reliance is ideologically different from the catchword of Transcendentalism. As Fleischner notes, the dressmaker’s understanding of independence, instead of expressing an Emersonian dislike of conformity, rather celebrates her own success in becoming an economically self-sufficient and respected person in the black and white community (*Mastering* 94). Thus, Fleischner affirms the tendency of African American autobiographers to stress their

ability to assimilate into white culture.<sup>13</sup> While Keckley's upwardly mobile narrative certainly needs to be read in terms of her attempt to enter the sphere of capitalist, white society, I want to emphasize another distinction between Emerson's interpretation of self-reliance and Keckley's. Emerson's aversion to conformity and his subsequent call to "Trust thyself," speaks from a position of class, race, and gender privilege which was not available to a person who was thrice-removed from Anglo-Saxon, genteel manhood. The Emersonian plea for abandoning a conformist society bespeaks the privilege of membership to begin with and the freedom of choice or renunciation of said association. Both are denied to Keckley as an enslaved woman, and consequently, her understanding of self-reliance emerges out of a position of need. In order to survive or circumvent further beatings, Keckley, as a young girl, deploys self-sufficiency as a survival strategy. Her self-reliance, therefore, is rooted in life-praxis before it emerges as a notional mantra, as opposed to beginning as a purely philosophical concept and only later being tested in praxis, as was the case with the privileged Transcendentalists.<sup>14</sup>

In crafting *Behind the Scenes*, Keckley uses her assigned race and class position, ranks that would usually work against her, to her advantage by investing her black, laboring subjectivity with the wisdom of truth resulting out of closeness to real life. The ideological move to endow the hard experiences of poverty and racism with a value of the real that is not as easily accessible through the life of white, genteel womanhood allows Keckley to juxtapose her identity as a successful laborer favorably against the idleness of her white patrons and friends. Borrowing from Marx, Xiomara Santamarina

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<sup>13</sup> Fleischner, *Mastering* (94). See also Andrews, "The Changing Moral Discourse" on the materialist leanings of postbellum black writers (237).

<sup>14</sup> The literary examples that come immediately to mind are Henry David Thoreau's *Walden* (1849), or Nathaniel Hawthorne's *Blithedale Romance* (1852), as well as Louisa May Alcott's satirical commentary on her father's attempt at commune life in "Transcendental Wild Oats" (1873).

calls this Keckley's "surplus value" (148). Twice in the narrative, Keckley evokes the helplessness of white, genteel women when it comes to practical crafts that could support female independence. The first time, she comments on the unusual sight of seeing the daughter of President Johnson "busily at work with a sewing-machine." Since Mrs. Lincoln and other of her patrons are never seen performing such chores, Keckley remarks on the exceptional stance of Mrs. Patterson, who she appreciatively describes as "kindhearted, plain, unassuming [...], making no pretense to elegance" (99). The second instance involves a letter from one of her former charges, Maggie Garland, who wrote to Keckley in 1867 of her need to go out to work in order to provide for the impoverished family. Utilizing the most affectionate tone, Maggie teasingly wrote about her teaching position, "None of 'Miss Ann[e]'s' children were cut out for 'school-marms,' were they, Yiddie? I am sure I was only made to ride in my carriage, and play on the piano. Don't you think so?" (117-8). These examples not only show Keckley's readers how utterly unprepared bourgeois women were for a laboring life of independence, but the helplessness of these white women is effectively juxtaposed against the self-reliant, clever, and successful Keckley whose intimacy with labor and hardship make her a stronger, more autonomous woman.

While these examples are only short interjections meant to highlight the value of black women like Keckley, the most elaborate of these juxtapositions occurs between the dressmaker and Mrs. Lincoln, whose character is evoked throughout the narrative as that of a white woman constantly in need of her employee, both Keckley's services as laborer and as emotional guide. Mrs. Lincoln's reliance on Keckley climaxes after the assassination of President Lincoln. Keckley makes it a point to call attention to the fact

that the black woman was the only person who could calm the grief-stricken widow. She remarks several times upon her exclusive status to care for the First Lady's physical and mental well-being (83-6); a shift that finally transforms Keckley from employee to confidante because her services are first and foremost based on compassion.<sup>15</sup> In other words, interracial sentimental sympathy has put Keckley and Lincoln on a more equal social footing.

The status of confidante is an unmistakable sign that Keckley has achieved several of her goals: more than economic independence from white benefactors, it signals equality with this renowned white woman, a parity that, although never absolute on account of Keckley's race, at least implies that the black dressmaker was respectable enough to be considered a friend of Mary Todd Lincoln's. The letters exchanged between the former First Lady and the dressmaker printed in the appendix of *Behind the Scenes* certainly convey the idea of exclusive intimacy between the two women.<sup>16</sup> Repeatedly, these letters pay tribute to Mrs. Lincoln's dependence on Keckley for emotional support that goes beyond an employer/employee relationship. On November 9, 1867, Mrs. Lincoln bemoaned, "How hard it is that I cannot see and talk with you in this time of great, *great* trouble. I feel as if I had not a friend in the world save yourself" (153). Disregarding Mrs. Lincoln's address of Keckley as a friend, it remains ambiguous whether she really perceived her connection to the black woman as one of equal camaraderie since most of the letters in the appendix were composed during the "Old

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<sup>15</sup> Santamarina remarks that it is the conjunction of feeling and service, what she calls "emotional labor" that allows Keckley participation in "political affect" (155).

<sup>16</sup> Keckley's inclusion of her public statement in the New York *Evening News* from Oct. 12, 1867 that served as a corrective response to the many sensationalized reports on Mrs. Lincoln's wardrobe transaction is indicative of how Keckley wanted the public to interpret her link to the widow. Referring to herself as a "bosom friend" of Mrs. Lincoln's certainly must have given the black business woman immense pleasure, even if most white readers might have understood this comment to be ironic (136).

Clothes Scandal,” a time during which the widow felt betrayed by many of her white friends. In addition, no matter how close their bond might have been, it always remains clear that their association is of a pecuniary nature. As Keckley points out in her last chapter, Mrs. Lincoln was unable to repay her for her services rendered during the “Old Clothes Scandal,” as promised – a fact that, Keckley remarks dryly, “made me richer in experience, but poorer in purse” (144).<sup>17</sup>

In order to be regarded as a respectable and refined woman, in the black and white community alike, Keckley had worked hard on building an impeccable reputation since she bought her freedom and moved up North. She amassed impressive social capital in the years after her emancipation in 1855, as evidenced by her exclusive list of white clients, by her privileged membership in the black Fifteenth Street Presbyterian Church, and her closeness to the presidential family.<sup>18</sup> It is not surprising, then, that John E. Washington’s interviews with African Americans who had known Keckley during her lifetime all remarked how refined and cultured she was, how gracefully she carried herself in the presence of others (216). Previously, Francis J. Grimké of the prestigious Fifteenth Presbyterian Church, had confirmed Keckley’s respectability in *The Journal of Negro History*, remembering that “she used to come up the aisle, the very personification of grace and dignity, as she moved towards the pew. Often was heard: ‘Here comes Madam Keckley.’ All eyes were upon her” (57).<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> For more clues on how Mary Todd Lincoln viewed hers and Keckley’s association, see her private correspondence, printed in Turner’s biography of Mary Todd Lincoln (106, 141, 476).

<sup>18</sup> With the need for recommendation letters contingent upon an examination, Fleischner rightfully identifies Keckley’s membership to the Presbyterian Church as a “significant step up the social ladder” (*Mrs. Lincoln* 295).

<sup>19</sup> Grimké’s defense of Keckley’s character, and, in fact, her very existence, was triggered by David Rankin Barbee’s racist and misogynistic accusation in 1935 that Jane Grey Swisshelm, a “sob sister,” had authored *Behind the Scenes*.

Through her vigorous upward mobility, Keckley invites us to read her rise into the black middle class as one way of building on the “surplus value” slavery’s self-reliance had bestowed upon her. What Pierre Bourdieu calls social capital, a relational resource based on a person’s connections to people with a greater amount of social or cultural capital from which the former can benefit by proxy, allows us to translate Keckley’s “surplus value” into forms of distinction that helped her to boost her restricted social status. Moreover, her personal relations and her acquired skills in terms of labor and etiquette, counter-balance, in the words of Toril Moi, the “negative symbolic capital” that her status as a woman and as an African American inevitably produced (1038). A keen observer of customs and mannerisms, particularly since it was a large part of her job description to be familiar with the etiquette of the fashionable world, Keckley knew that her labor and decorum, her extensively amassed economic and social capital, could outweigh some of the disadvantages of her color. Economic capital helped Keckley to climb up the social ladder in the free, black community of the North. It was not strong enough, however, to permeate the walls of racism that divided black and white women from equal association with each other, particularly since African American women were routinely identified as hypersexual, a remnant from slavery and an ongoing mark of racist white sexism.

Yet the shared category of gender presents an opportunity for Keckley to circumvent racial constrictions by imitating white middle-class women’s manners, particularly in regards to sexual decorum. Thus, Keckley reduces the account of her enslaved life to a minimum, stressing instead her identity as a free, respectable black middle-class citizen. Likewise, she abstains from sensationalizing her sexuality by not

dwelling on her abuse during slavery or by highlighting her physicality afterwards. Like many of her sisters, Keckley's experiences with slavery's stereotyping of black women as promiscuous Jezebels must have taught her to practice the "politics of respectability," a term which historian Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham has coined in order to explain African American women's need to counter racist and sexist stereotypes via an extreme awareness of propriety and sexual modesty.<sup>20</sup> Many passages in *Behind the Scenes* seem to come out of Keckley's sensitivity towards respectability and the implicit threat to her femininity. Thus, her disapproval of Mrs. Lincoln's uninvited appearances to her apartment speaks of the ex-slave's reverence for privacy, as well as of her consciousness of proper class boundaries (68).<sup>21</sup> Moreover, her heightened awareness about the exaggerated emotionality which Mrs. Lincoln displays while grieving – Willie's death "threw her into convulsions" (46) and her husband's death elicited "unearthly shrieks" and "wild, tempestuous outbursts of grief from the soul" (84) – likewise indicate the dressmaker's insight into the dangerous association for African American women between emotionality, a woman's virtue, and animal- or child-like dependence.<sup>22</sup> The specific instance of Willie Lincoln's death is a prime example of Keckley's subtlety in

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<sup>20</sup> See pp. 185-229 of *Righteous Discontent*. As Higginbotham indicates, the politics of respectability as a practice is not confined to the nineteenth century but is rather an ongoing pervasive paradigm for black women and their relationship to sexuality. See also Patricia Hill Collins's *Black Sexual Politics* for a discussion of the continuity of this trope in contemporary American culture.

<sup>21</sup> These acts, motivated by the politics of respectability go hand in hand with the "culture of dissemblance," a term created by historian Darlene Clark Hine in order to explain the silence which often surrounded the inner lives of black southern women. When Keckley disapproves of Mrs. Lincoln showing up in her home, this initially goes against the focus the dressmaker previously put on the intimacy between her and her employer, suggesting openness and reciprocity. Yet, as Hine explains, the legacy of rape and abuse, exploiting their vulnerability, led to "the behavior and attitudes of black women that created the appearance of openness and disclosure, but actually shielded the truth of their inner lives and selves from their oppressors" (912).

<sup>22</sup> The fine line separating appropriate feminine emotion from sexual excess also applied to white women. According to Keckley, Mr. Lincoln cautioned his wife to stop losing herself in her grief, because she risked being declared insane and put into a lunatic asylum (46). See also Fleischner, *Mastering* (130).

distinguishing herself positively from the First Lady. After describing the excessive grief Mrs. Lincoln displays, a behavior that goes beyond the intense but controlled protocol of white, middle-class, female mourning, Keckley briefly mentions the death of her own son (47). The dressmaker's succinct and seemingly matter-of-fact statement, however, is more in line with the accepted genteel mourning practices, particularly when she later transforms the grief over her son's death into social work. Refining her sorrow by helping others, she founds the Contraband Relief Association and makes plans to donate her Lincoln memorabilia to Wilberforce University, the traditional black college her son attended before he enlisted in the War (50-1).

Through the subtle juxtapositions of Mrs. Lincoln's transgressions from middle-class conventions through her excessive emotionality and physical vanity – behaviors which were easily translated into the realm of sexuality – and Keckley's own impeccable respectability, the dressmaker achieves the conditions for a reversal of cross-racial sentimental sympathy. But a simple switch of hierarchical positions regarding feminine compassion and moral principles would not have been enough to make white readers forget the negative symbolic capital assigned to Keckley's race. As much as Keckley stresses her value as a woman through intimacy with hardship and labor, she still needs to imbue black *womanhood*, that is, the cultural ideals particularly connected to gender, with qualities that warrant an interracial sentimental sympathy that put African American femininity at its core. In order to do this, Keckley needs to elevate her agency and connect it with the realms most glorified in domestic culture: spirituality and closeness to God.

In the preface to *Behind the Scenes*, Keckley embeds her own literary agenda within a larger, sacred force. Utilizing the passive voice, Keckley speaks of the curse of slavery as one inevitable effect of the historical consequences of the American Revolution. In this scenario, both victims and perpetrators of slavery alike are tools of an almighty God. Consequently, “The law descended to them [slave owners], and it was but natural that they should recognize it,” Keckley reasons, but also points out that “a wrong was inflicted on me” (3). She thus redirects attention away from her own subjectivity as a light-skinned African American woman to her role in a grander national scheme that is infused with the teachings of Christianity. She concludes in a rather general sweep, “God rules the Universe. I was a feeble instrument in His hands, and through me and the enslaved millions of my race, one of the problems was resolved that belongs to the great problem of human destiny” (ibid.). The cliché-like way Keckley presents herself – as a suffering, yet pre-destined symbol of American history – repeats the popular formulas of her time regarding religious sentiments and the deference of human beings in the face of larger, divine forces. Representing herself as passive and disembodied – the “feeble instrument” through which God could act – transforms her into a hallowed vessel. Thus, Keckley finds a convenient and well-accepted way to invest herself with more than just a sexualized, laboring body.

Yet the passive tone of the preface quickly turns into one of action and self-reliance. “As one of the victims of slavery I drank the bitter water;” she continues, “but then, since destiny willed it so, and since I aided in bringing a solemn truth to the surface *as a truth*, perhaps I have no right to complain” (4). In this phrasing of the social morale of slavery, Keckley elevates her status from vessel to a more pro-active one: by helping

to bring “a solemn truth to the surface,” she represents herself as a participant in the larger meaning of slavery, particularly since she uncovers the truth “*as a truth*.”

Keckley’s emphasis on this last part of her sentence validates the role African Americans play in revealing bigger questions of ethics.<sup>23</sup>

Keckley’s attempt to re-evaluate black femininity as ideologically meaningful and imbued with truth would not have worked had she ignored the politics of sentimentality which de-emphasize worldly possessions in favor of compassion. Pioneering scholars on domestic fiction, such as Nina Baym and Jane Tompkins, remind us that one tenet of sentimental sympathy is to invigorate women’s relative political and economical powerlessness by shifting it to the realm of spiritual benevolence.<sup>24</sup> Hence, Keckley’s closing remarks about her materialistically impoverished state are redeemed when she regurgitates the sentimental dyad of friendship and love, explaining that she was “rich in friendships, and friends are a recompense for all the woes of the darkest pages of life. For sweet friendship’s sake, I can bear more burdens than I have borne” (146). This rhetorical move is possible because Keckley invests her work with emotional value that allowed her to emphasize the affective bond between herself and her former master’s family or Mrs. Lincoln (Santamarina 154). Similarly, Fleischner interprets this scene as indicative of Keckley’s effort to conflate material riches with emotional attachments, thus enhancing her rather meager economical capital through an abundance of social capital (*Mastering* 123).

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<sup>23</sup> Adams analyzes Keckley’s strategy here in terms of the relation of origin to surface, thereby validating the enslaved body as meaningful and “a site of origination, located somewhere ‘behind the scenes’ and beneath a surface of meanings that stand as incomplete, vulnerable and incomprehensible without her” (63).

<sup>24</sup> Baym, *Woman’s Fiction* (40), Tompkins (150, 160-1).

The ideological allocation of material possessions with affective investments in *Behind the Scenes* becomes an important analogy for demonstrating the interchangeability of mistress and slave woman. In chapter fourteen, just preceding the sale of Mrs. Lincoln's wardrobe and the end of the narrative, Elizabeth Keckley triumphantly describes her reunion with her old master's family. Titled "Old Friends," this chapter brings Keckley's story about the social life of the northern, white elite back to its roots. It also serves to solidify the reversed power relations Keckley has stressed between herself and Mrs. Lincoln throughout the narrative. In order to show that normative white femininity is not necessarily at the core of womanhood, but instead much more closely intermingled with black womanhood, she shares with her readers an anecdote involving her aunt and that woman's former mistress. After Keckley inquires about her aunt's death, Mrs. Garland tells her the following story about Keckley's aunt and Mrs. Garland's mother:

My mother used to be severe with her slaves in some respects, but then her heart was full of kindness. She had your aunt punished one day, and not liking her sorrowful look, she made two extravagant promises in order to effect a reconciliation, both of which were accepted. On condition that her maid would look cheerful, and be good and friendly with her, the mistress told her she might go to church the following Sunday, and that she would give her a silk dress to wear on the occasion. (113)

So far, the scene rings familiar to readers in its sentimental account of a white woman about the good old days of slavery, proving how intimate the bonds between chattel and mistress could be – the mistress was concerned about keeping her slave happy and, in a

gesture of sentimental sympathy, radiating out from her whiteness to the unprivileged, she bestowed upon her slave a costly hand-me-down as a token of appreciation.

But the anecdote goes further, deepening the interdependency of the women and finally confirming the aunt's implied power, in the form of cross-racial compassion, over her mistress. Mrs. Garland goes on to point out that her mother only possessed one silk dress since it was costly and rare material, but nonetheless she gave it to her slave "to make friends with her." Two weeks afterwards, however, Mrs. Garland's mother was in a predicament since she was invited to a neighbor's and needed an appropriate dress for the occasion, yet that very same dress was now in possession of Keckley's aunt. Finally, Mrs. Garland closes the anecdote, stressing that

She [the mistress] had but one alternative, and that was to appeal to the generosity of your aunt Charlotte. Charlotte was summoned, and enlightened in regard to the situation; the maid proffered to loan the silk dress to her mistress for the occasion, and the mistress was only glad to accept. She made her appearance at the social gathering, duly arrayed in the silk that her maid had worn to church on the preceding Sunday. (113)

The scene shows effectively the physical closeness between white and enslaved women, thus disrupting the illusionary polarization between women of different races that helped underpin unequally distributed power. It also, as Lori Merish suggests, dislocates erotic desire from slaves imitating whiteness to that of the mistress for the slave, as the wearing of a garment that had just touched a black body demonstrates (248). Beyond physical closeness, I want to analyze this scene in terms of its redirection of sentimental sympathy because in its reversal of racial positions, the mistress's plea for Charlotte's compassion

ultimately emphasizes the black woman at the core of this sentimental transaction. Behind the cultural construction of white womanhood stands the labor of black women, enabled either through the production of fashionable dresses directly by their own hands or their unpaid labor in general. Thus, in the end, black womanhood lies at the heart of white, genteel femininity as its foundation of meaning, or, as Katherine Adams puts it, as a “site of origination” against which white femininity seems to pale (63).

Keeping in mind how Keckley has relentlessly prepared her readers for understanding black womanhood as a truer, more refined, and realer version than its white counterpart, this scene articulates a particular logic of white to black and black to white which squarely positions African American women at its center. Overall, this alternative allows Keckley to present Mrs. Lincoln as a suffering woman in need of guidance from Keckley, and, more importantly, it carves out a symbolic space for the inner life of both women. Keckley counters stereotypes about the limited consciousness of African Americans, forcefully using her text as a canvas to bring the interior life, the “human heart” of black women, to the fore.

Through her overturning of power relations, Keckley creatively poses the question, which, according to Tompkins, lies at the heart of female-authored sentimental fiction: “what is power, and where is it located?” (160). Although the characteristic domestic novel employs this loaded question from the position of white, upper-class womanhood, writing against the gender-biased constraints these women faced in a male-centered society, the possibilities of sentimentality always imply redefinition.<sup>25</sup> Hence, the potential for transformation can also be taken beyond the realm of gender antagonism

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<sup>25</sup> For the political potential of sentimentality, see Berlant’s “Poor Eliza.” Berlant argues that the political impulse behind sentimentality was to “[use] personal stories to tell of structural effects,” in order to set into motion an ethical response toward, or, ideally, transformation of social injustice (641).

and transposed onto the interracial hierarchy between white and black Americans. Tompkins's question about the location of power reflects the narrative ambiguity that accompanies much of *Behind the Scenes*. In the scene that recounts the story of the shared silk dress, for instance, we have to remember that the anecdote was told by a white woman, whose motives might have been quite different from Keckley's, perhaps emerging out of the desire to rid her family of their guilt over slavery. Despite the two women laughing the story off and Keckley reproducing it in her narrative for her own use in establishing authority, *Behind the Scenes* remains full of such unresolved instances of black authority.

The chapter "Old Friends" shows this narrative ambiguity most compellingly. A striking scene represents the conundrum of Keckley's position as an African American woman in an Anglo-Saxon world that either looks down on blackness or ignores black people because of their status as servants or menial workers. Describing her stay with the Garlands in Virginia, Keckley points out that their current abode, Rude's Hill, had been chosen by General Stonewall Jackson to be one of his headquarters during the Civil War. Imbuing the place with a sense of historical importance, Keckley continues to write that "The room in which I sat in the daytime was the room that General Jackson always slept in, and people came from far and near to look at it" (112). Here as elsewhere in the text, Keckley employs a narrative strategy which allows her to place herself in the vicinity of important white persona, such as Abraham Lincoln or Jefferson Davis. But in this episode, more than in the other examples, *how* white people perceive Keckley becomes a paramount example for her authorial ambiguity throughout the narrative.

The meaning embedded in the fact that Keckley resides in one of General Jackson's quarters when she revisits the South is a powerful one: the many tourists, expecting to partake in the greatness of one of their war heroes, who, according to Keckley, "they worshipped [...] as an idol," were confronted instead with the presence of a black woman. Yet the text remains ambiguous about the effects Keckley's placement had on the sightseers, and thereby, on the effect of her performance as a symbol for dignified, free, black womanhood. Following these remarks, Keckley reports that "Every visitor would tear a splinter from the walls or windows of the room, to take away and treasure as a priceless relic." While Keckley, a memento hunter herself, can certainly sympathize with the impulse of travelers to take possession of a piece of history, her string of sentences leaves it up to interpretation if and how these visitors might have acknowledged her presence.<sup>26</sup> Although the next paragraph reestablishes her status as a valuable curiosity to the neighborhood due to her attachment to the Lincolns and Garlands – which, in Keckley's words, "clothed her with romantic interest" – her own agency, which she has continuously worked to establish throughout the text, remains ambivalent. Did the sightseers perceive Keckley as an emblem of the Civil War, one that unexpectedly stresses the symbolic value of African Americans embodied through the black dressmaker? Or was she invisible, because white tourists would only be trained to read her as a servant, and, thus, to ignore her existence altogether?<sup>27</sup>

The complexity that comes to the fore in this scene is indicative of the narrative dilemma at large. Throughout her memoir, Keckley carefully considers how to present

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<sup>26</sup> For a detailed discussion on the psychological and strategic implications of Keckley's obsession with material mementos, see the respective chapters on Keckley in Jennifer Fleischner's *Mastering Slavery* (93-132), and Lori Merish's *Sentimental Materialism* (237-58).

<sup>27</sup> For an excellent analysis of the spatial politics between middle-class people and their servants, necessary to uphold the "genteel performance," see Halttunen's chapter on sentimental culture and etiquette (92-123).

black, female agency in a way that celebrates it but still appeals to white readers. Her attempt to align her identity as a black middle-class, working woman with the value of truth and authenticity, assets of the real that could assist her in wielding black, cultural authority more effectively, is constantly in danger of becoming invisible, as might have been the case in the above example. The many negative reviews in the white press that *Behind the Scenes* garnered speak for the refusal of white readers to acknowledge what Keckley had suggested about her own agency as a respectable woman and about the depth of African American womanhood in general; a complexity that, for instance, suggests that black people possess the same ability to portray the “human heart” and can carve out an inner life of their own that goes beyond the limitations abolitionist fiction has imposed upon black characters. The most extreme example of white outrage over black agency culminated in the blatantly racist and misogynistic spoof, *Behind the Seams; By a Nigger Woman Who Took in Work from Mrs. Lincoln and Mrs. Davis* (1868), which struggled from the beginning with pinpointing Keckley’s social place. Her spoof alter-ego, Betsey Kickley, introduces herself as a “nigger and slave” (6), marking the importance the lampoon places from the beginning on a doubled semantic classification, which insures that Betsey Kickley remains fettered to a degrading status, one that inscribes her with as much difference from white Americans as possible. More than that, the spoof also consistently signifies her by her double-raced rank, but seldom characterizes her through her gender. Instead, “nigger” serves as a stand-in to contrast Kickley with the white women with whom she does business. This refusal to typify her

over gender at all is a powerful statement in utterly denying her access to the category of womanliness.<sup>28</sup>

High among the list of accusations against *Behind the Scenes* was a refusal to acknowledge Keckley as the author of such an insightful and elaborate account of White House politics, as the *Atlantic Monthly*, for instance, proclaimed (128). The question of authorship remains of interest to current Keckley scholars since it continues to be unclear how much editorial help steered the composition of the narrative. As Washington chronicled when he interviewed first-person witnesses to Elizabeth Keckley's relationship to the Lincolns, James Redpath had been a constant visitor to Keckley's boarding house during the time she wrote her memoir, assisting her in the process of compiling and editing the book (235-40). Redpath was an established name in the circles of abolitionist discourse. In 1860, he had published a biography of the abolitionist hero John Brown and continued work as a journalist and publisher of anti-slavery literature. Judging by his ideological leanings, James Redpath was a clever editorial choice and probably not a person who would have deliberately tried to undermine Keckley's authority. Yet much of the scandal the narrative evoked was linked back to the private correspondence between Keckley and Mrs. Lincoln printed in the appendix. According to Washington, Redpath included these letters "with but little editing" against the instructions of the dressmaker who handed them over to him in order to confirm the events during the "Old Clothes Scandal" (239). With this information in mind, Keckley's full text, including the appendix, becomes a contested site of authorial voice, one that

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<sup>28</sup> For an example of this strategy, see p. 12 and p. 20. In general, the spoof, despite its repulsive racism, showcases the fascinating paradox of sensationalized and satirical publishing practices. After all, the lampoon helped to stabilize Keckley's status in postbellum nineteenth-century culture because the parody highlighted her presence in the literary marketplace and in the public eye.

potentially shifts agency from African American literacy to white people speaking *for* and *through* African Americans.<sup>29</sup> Redpath's relationship to Keckley, however, poses more questions than those of simple authorship; their collaboration also shows how literary tastes, the publishing industry, and key figures navigating these two could dictate not only a book's reception but also an author's very reputation.<sup>30</sup>

Although Redpath's role allows fascinating glimpses into the production of texts within the constraints of racial and gendered power dynamics, *Behind the Scenes* still maintains its weight as an influential narrative that demands agency for African American women. Keckley's text subverts genre conventions from within the slave narrative script by usurping the logic of white-to-black sentimental sympathy. By forecasting black agency, *Behind the Scenes* boldly claims African American womanhood – abstracted as an ideological value system that lends itself as an

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<sup>29</sup> Redpath's role in *Behind the Scenes* seems to be an inconvenient complication for most scholars who try to assign textual authority exclusively to Keckley. Although the presence of an editor comes as no surprise to African Americanists studying nineteenth-century black literature and certainly does not discredit Keckley's narrative, the lack of manuscripts or other documents that would verify Keckley as the main author (as in the case of Harriet Jacobs and Lydia Maria Child, for instance) confronts scholars with the vexing problem of how much agency they can assign to the text's claims about African American womanhood to Keckley herself. Barbara Ryan takes up this conundrum most forcefully in order to sensitize scholars to a historically accurate interpretation. "I recognize the importance of repelling those who would find *Behind the Scenes* inauthentic or a product of a never-enslaved person's pen," she writes, setting up her argument, "Yet I am concerned about forceful claims concerning passages in a multi-functional text, the provenance of which is murky, and about use of *Behind the Scenes* to illuminate Keckley's character and motives" (40-1).

<sup>30</sup> Coincidentally, Redpath also collaborated with Lousia May Alcott. In fact, Redpath published Alcott's first major success, *Hospital Sketches*. Furthermore, as Alcott's correspondence with Redpath documents, they had plans to publish *Success*, the pre-Civil War project that later turned into *Work*, together (Redpath did not publish the book *Success* ultimately turned into, see Alcott's correspondence in Myerson *Selected Letters* 86-105). In contrast to Keckley's ultimately disempowering relationship with Redpath, Alcott's experiences seemed to have been more positive and successful. These contrasting examples illustrate the difference race played in Keckley's and Alcott's reputation as respected writers, ruining the name of one and celebrating that of the other. Redpath's role as a white male editor who connected these two women (although more than likely they never met), and who took part in brokering their respective literary reputations, adds a complicating factor to how we read female-authored texts that boldly subvert racial hierarchies of gender status. For more on Redpath's diverse mentorship of several female authors, including Sherwood Bonner, see Williams's extensive essay "Forwarding Literary Interests."

authoritative and authenticating category of analysis – as crucial to understanding postbellum nineteenth-century gender norms. Elizabeth Keckley positions herself as the most adept interpreter of Mary Todd Lincoln’s inner life, this woman’s motives and her suffering, thereby not only showing that Keckley herself possesses a “human heart,” an interiority equal to that of white women. She insists on acknowledging the value encapsulated in being a black woman in nineteenth-century America. Louisa May Alcott’s *Work* shares Keckley’s insistence on the concept of black womanhood in shaping (white) women and imbuing femininity with ethical substance and closeness to the material world of gender. Bending the genre of sentimentalism as Keckley did, Alcott’s emphasis on African American women as arbiters of sentimental, female authenticity forcefully illustrates what it means to inhabit the role of a strong, independent, useful woman, reversing color hierarchies in the process.

“A Loving League of Sisters”: Louisa May Alcott’s *Work*

The first edition of Louisa May Alcott’s *Work: A Story of Experience* (1873) features a frontispiece of bees pollinating flowers, followed by a Carlyle quote, praising that “an endless significance lies in work; in idleness alone there is despair.” Highlighted already in the title and supported by this quote, Alcott’s novel presents a critique of work as thankless, meaningless and alienating wage labor. While many critics focus on Alcott’s critique of wage labor and its effects on middle-class white women, I argue that the novel’s message about meaningful work in the service of female community building hinges on a complex set of attacks and re-evaluations of normative white womanhood. Like most of Alcott’s earlier fictions, such as the best-selling *Little Women* or the well-

acclaimed *Hospital Sketches*, *Work* incorporates sentimental ideologies in the service of women's rights, thus peppering this popular antebellum, female-centered genre with a post-war dose of politics and realism. *Work's bildungsroman* journey to female self-fulfillment surrounds the protagonist Christie Devon with women who exist outside the parameters of normative gender, race, and class. Among those are the fallen woman Rachel, later known as Christie's sister-in-law Letty, the plain but neat working-class Cynthy, but most importantly, the female ex-slave Hepsy. Foregrounding an African American woman as Christie's teacher to empathetic maturity, Alcott scrutinizes the white ideal at the core of sentimental womanhood, suggesting a radical alternative. Alcott's narrative insists on offering an alternative path to sentimental womanhood, one that celebrates marginal female identities for giving a renewed sense of sincerity and reality to a limiting ideal.

Alcott's *Work* traces the journey of Christie Devon, a young, strong-willed orphan who finds the possibilities offered by a rural town and a patriarchal, uncaring uncle not sufficient for her own happiness. In vignette-like episodes, the narrative documents Christie's alienating experience in the labor market through several different occupations open to single women with an average education – servant, actress, governess, companion, and seamstress – only to have Christie denounce paid labor for the loving work done within the circle of extended family and friends, setting up a model for female support and alliance across different classes, races, or ages. Along the way, Christie grows and learns from different women who exist outside the parameters of normative gender, race, and class. Although the second half of the book is dominated by the courtship of Christie and David Sterling, the novel does not culminate with their

marriage. Rather, David dies during the Civil War in the act of helping a fugitive slave woman, leaving Christie surrounded by her female friends, a “loving league of sisters” (343).

Alcott’s novel borrows heavily from the genre of domestic fiction, advocating compassionate, suffering characters that practice sentimental sympathy in order to become “useful, happy” women (11). But Christie’s passage to female fulfillment is also deeply connected to the emancipation of African Americans, framing racial rights as a model for claiming women’s rights. Towards the end of *Work*, after giving a movingly effective speech at a political meeting of working women, Christie firmly embeds her women’s rights activism within the context of abolitionism. Of her work as a mediator between women of different classes she says, “Others have finished the emancipation work and done it splendidly [...]. I came too late to do anything but give my husband and behold the glorious end. This new task seems to offer me the chance of being among the pioneers, to do the hard work, share the persecution, and help lay the foundation of a new emancipation” (334). Historicizing the fight for women’s rights as one that evolved out of the battle against slavery confirms the narrative’s trajectory from a racial struggle towards a gendered and classed one.

Louisa May Alcott, who models Christie’s encounter with wage labor after her own ventures into service positions to help support the family income, had long mapped her passion for women’s suffrage in terms of her allegiance to abolitionism.<sup>31</sup> An 1885 letter to the American Woman Suffrage Association reveals how profoundly the fight for African American rights steered the rhetoric with which she approached women’s rights.

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<sup>31</sup> See Cheney, who reported that *Work* incorporated autobiographical material more than other Alcott novels. Cheney noted that Alcott confessed to a friend: “Christie’s adventures are many of them my own” (265). See also Elbert’s *Hunger*, p. 243, and Alcott’s autobiographical “How I Went Out to Service.”

“After fifty years’ acquaintance with the noble men and women of the anti-slavery cause and the sight of the glorious end to their faithful work,” Alcott explains, “I should be a traitor to all I most love, honor and desire to imitate if I did not covet a place among those who are giving their lives to the emancipation of the white slaves of America” (qtd. in Stern, “Feminist Letters” 449). By equating white women’s lot with that of enslaved people, unfree to make important decisions and relatively powerless before the law, Alcott employs a common rhetorical device.

Yet the phrase “white slaves” deserves special attention here since this term denoted a popular but highly charged shorthand for the lop-sided power relationship between white, free Americans and enslaved African Americans. Borrowed from abolitionist rhetoric, the phrase “white slaves” references the sentiment of cross-racial sympathy and political action in which white abolitionists fight for the rights and humanity of enslaved, black people. This sentimental sympathy, however, usually maintains a racial hierarchy that puts whiteness at its center. Alcott, whose father and his famous circle of friends had immersed her in the ideas of transcendentalism and racial equality from a young age, often assigns white women the role of respectable custodians to African Americans when she evokes the logic of sentimental sympathy. As Sarah Elbert has noted, many of Alcott’s abolitionist stories, such as “M.L.” or “My Contraband,” reproduce the sentimental racial hierarchy by “link[ing] white women [...] to abolition at the possible cost of regressing freedmen into childhood and the moral guardianship of abolitionist women” despite their racy subtext of white, female desire for black, male bodies (*Race* xlii). Using slavery as a metaphor for other political causes that fight social inequality maintains the same residual focus on whiteness inherent in the

alliance of white and black Americans through abolition. In the specific context of labor or women's rights, "white slaves" refers back to the cause of African Americans, but it simultaneously hijacks their agency by transferring it into the realm of whiteness, channeling the compassionate outrage over degraded chattel across the color line and anchoring it to whiteness.

Although *Work* reflects Alcott's abolitionist and domestic oeuvre, which relies heavily on the formula of sentimental sympathy, Christie Devon's *bildungsroman* goes beyond earlier literary attempts by Alcott. *Work* locates agency and wisdom in alternative representations of womanhood that transgress the normative definitions of race, class, youth, and sexual decorum. As Philip Fisher reminds us, sentimental fiction provisionally lends out "normality," meaning feelings associated with the etiquette of the ruling class, to those who are routinely denied access to such emotional capacity, like slaves, children, or the poor (98). Yet, as Fisher extends his argument, "this experimental loaning out of normality assumes that normality – full human normality – is itself a prized possession" (ibid.), thus explaining how sentimental fiction, despite its democratic utopia of creating an affective community, maintains a hierarchy that posited white, genteel identity as its superior referent. While *Work*'s tendency to equip underprivileged women with wisdom adheres to the traditional sentimental script, its placement of these types of womanhood as ultimately superior disrupts the monolithic position white, middle- to upper-class women routinely inhabit in the paradigm of sentimental sympathy. In its celebration of these marginal female identities, Alcott pays special tribute to black womanhood.

Alcott's novel is intensely occupied with locating value in competing nineteenth-century versions of womanhood, and those versions are unpredictably mapped onto race. The good angels that guide Christie's moral growth all depart from the ideal nineteenth-century woman: the black Hepsey, the down-to-earth lower-class, white Cynthy, and the beautiful but fallen woman Rachel/Letty. Yet what these models of alternative womanhood offer Christie in comparison to their rich and fashionable counter-parts is a genuine sympathy, and, more importantly, a dose of reality that upper-class life, with its staged etiquette and secretive love ploys, can no longer access. In Alcott's work, 'the real' signifies a specific set of attributes central to imagining an alternative ideal of womanhood, one that destabilizes the values of middle-class whiteness. These qualities allow Alcott's characters exclusive access to a moral interior life equivalent to that usually granted only to their gentrified counterparts. Yet this moral consciousness is also deeply linked to a material interaction with the outside worlds of work, day-to-day drudgery, and individual independence. The real thus maps itself onto an embodied type of womanhood that is prized because of its intimate connection to material life and its expanded moral sensibility. The conclusions Alcott offers in *Work* are only achieved by critiquing white, normative sentimentality as standing in opposition to veracity and in opposition to an egalitarian view of race, class, and gender. Alcott locates such authenticity in the non-normative flip-sides of standardized personifications of race, class, and sexuality, thereby exploiting offences to white, upper-class femininity in order to productively criticize a stifling gender ideology. As a result, black, working womanhood becomes the ultimate catalyst for a meaningful life of shared female fulfillment. With these formal modifications, the novel transcends Alcott's reputation as

a writer of tame, juvenile, domestic fiction and allows her to push the sentimental genre in favor of later styles intent on situating an ideal reality within alternative, non-normative American identities.

Insofar as *Work* follows the script of sentimental novels, its path through the conventional mode of the genre is marked by ambivalence. Deviations from the master script form the basis of the novel's ability to chart an alternative model of gender to describe and represent the real. Reflecting Alcott's commitment to the women's rights movement, the first sentence of *Work* tells its readers directly about the text's immediate involvement in the hotly debated Woman Question of the postbellum era. When Christie, the practical, self-confident, and youthful protagonist, announces to her aunt that "there's going to be a new Declaration of Independence" (5), Alcott references the typical beginning of sentimental, woman-centered fiction which places its heroine in the drama of paternal abandonment in order to let her grow into a refined woman and wife through subsequent learned self-reliance and sympathy.<sup>32</sup> Yet Christie's forceful declaration of autonomy, playfully revising a sacred and nation-defining trope of American consciousness into the hands of her womanly destiny, also transposes the sentimental novel onto the political landscape of women's rights activism.<sup>33</sup> Instead of reacting to the loss of a father or protective family, Christie actively and freely decides to leave hers in

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<sup>32</sup> I rely here on Nina Baym's delineation of sentimental fiction as woman's fiction, that is, a plotline which focuses on the education of young women into a certain type of sentimental womanhood: independent, yet caring and responsible members of a sympathetic, middle-class community.

<sup>33</sup> Many scholars note the political dimension *Work* takes on, particularly in its closing pages. See, for instance, Hendler who claims that Christie "transforms sympathy from a purely affective interaction into a form of political mediation" (137). Yellin, one of the first among late twentieth-century critics to write about *Work*, questioned if the book failed to please nineteenth-century readers because of its mix between sentimental and political that prevented the narrative from successfully "becoming a vehicle for serious social criticism" ("*Success*" 539).

order to take care of herself. Like the bread dough she kneads while proclaiming her independence, “she was shaping it [her destiny] to suit herself” (5).

Like most women-centered narratives, *Work* repeatedly places Christie into pivotal moments of sentimental education. At her first occupation as a servant to an upper-class, urban family, Mr. Stuart’s order to have his boots blackened insults Christie deeply. Angered over the degradation she is subjected to, Christie vents her irritation to the black cook and fugitive slave, Hepsey. Yet humble, suffering Hepsey reminds Christie that at least her services, unlike slave work, are paid and do not compare to the degradation inherent in slavery. Setting Christie’s frustration in context, Hepsey’s speech about real humiliation and suffering shames Christie so much that “all her anger died out in a great pity” (21). Like the heroines of sentimental classics such as *The Wide, Wide World* or *The Lamplighter*, Christie needs to learn to control her own anger and lose her sense of self-importance. The practice of shaming the girl-in-training by a beloved elder – what Richard Brodhead has termed “disciplinary intimacy,” a psychological means of moralizing guilt and obedience through love<sup>34</sup> – aims at transforming anger into compassion for others, thus redirecting self-centered emotions into shared sympathy. Hepsey, distinguishing Christie’s position as servant from that of enslavement, effectively tames Christie’s hotheaded temper. Hepsey’s painful experiences as an enslaved woman and her efforts to save the rest of her family through her labor elevate her into the respectable elder woman whom Christie admires and tries to imitate. In this instance, Hepsey becomes Christie’s sentimental teacher, claiming authority over her

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<sup>34</sup> See his first chapter, “Sparing the Rod,” particularly pp. 32, 41, 47.

status as suffering, more experienced woman who can guide the girl's further development into a caring companion.

Throughout the narrative, Christie perfects sentimental sympathy, reaching out to others who have suffered and putting her own misery aside. When Christie needs to leave the Sterlings because of her mixed feelings towards David and the flirtatious Kitty – another young girl who Mrs. Sterling and her son David have previously given shelter and moral direction, much as they do Christie – she cures her heartache by alleviating the suffering of others through her “gift of sympathy.” Moreover, the “terrible real and great” sorrows of others make her own self-centered troubles so insignificant “that she was ashamed to repine at her own lot” (239). The benevolent nature of sentimental sympathy becomes strongest, however, in the deep relationship between Christie and Rachel, later revealed to be David's sister Letty. The silent and remote seamstress at a mantua-making establishment remains an outcast, mostly because she, like many other young, inexperienced women who went to the city, has lost her virginity and respectability without getting married. Rachel, the fallen woman, needs to hide her “sin” in order to obtain work until Christie comes along. Christie's initial attraction to Rachel lies in the girl's sad face, hinting at someone “who had known some great sorrow, some deep experience” and whose “eyes were old with that indescribable expression which comes to those who count their lives by emotions, not by years” (103). Choosing this melancholy woman as her companion, Christie learns to affiliate with others through their suffering. Her sympathy for Rachel eventually transforms Christie into an upstanding person who forgives Rachel's past mistakes when nobody else wants to help

this sexually tainted woman. Sentimental sympathy thus becomes an asset of strong, self-regulating, and caring female community.<sup>35</sup>

Notwithstanding the underlying ideology of sentimental sympathy that informs the novel's message that women need to support each other, *Work* struggles with sentimentality's manifold variations. In order to promote one strain of sentimentality, one which confirms women's self-reliance in the context of their mutual love and collaboration across class and race lines, Alcott's narrator needs to dismiss the genre's propensity towards sappiness, female subordination, and a narrowly stifling normative femininity. Tellingly, scholars locate the narrative's departure from its sentimental script in different places, further confirming the immense variability of the field in terms of enabling or disabling agency and promoting or subverting complicity with its generic, formulaic story line. Illustrating the breadth of interpretations about *Work*'s deployment of anti-sentimental strategies, Yellin, for instance, points out that Christie's short marriage and following widowhood mark a radical departure from the sentimental convention of leaving the protagonist happily married and associated with a male partner ("*Success*" 532). Mary Rigsby concludes that "Alcott prepares her audience for romance but delivers realism" (115), referring to the author's decision to people her narrative with

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<sup>35</sup> Christie's relationship with Rachel, however, also points to the text's larger ambivalence about sentimental sympathy in relation to women's need for wage labor and its implied alienation from loved ones. First, as Eiselein has argued most extensively, the women's bond is ripe with sexual tension, adding a homoerotic dimension to the dynamics of sentimental sympathy. Second, Rachel's departure throws Christie into a deep depression, leading to what most readers interpret as an attempted suicide. This development shows the pitfalls of sentimental sympathy gone awry, because Christie begins to lose herself in her identification with others (see specifically Hendler 119-21). Alcott's narrator credits this loss of self, though, to a great degree on the alienating labor Christie is subjugated to through her jobs, culminating in the loveless climate at the dressmaking establishment and her ensuing lonely self-employment when she takes in sewing. The narrator describes this as Christie's "worst life" (116), and autobiographical references confirm Alcott's own complex relationship to the labor of sewing in terms of her status as a poor but genteel woman, the "humblest work" to which she often had to resort in order to keep the family financially afloat. Alcott's journal entries of the years 1850-58 repeatedly mention the drudgery of sewing and other types of work she had to perform despite her abhorrence for such degrading types of labor (Myerson *Journals* 90-1).

women who are far from flawless heroines and instead represent marginal voices. Hendler, finally, analyzes sentimentalism's eternal struggle with becoming political because the genre's gender ideology promotes normative femininity, a behavior trait that demands selflessness instead of assertive individualism – a major conflict for the final pages of *Work* that attempt to represent Christie's politicization into a women's rights activist (135). My own contribution to the discourse on the narrative's moments of anti-sentimentality partially overlaps with these scholars. But I focus particularly on the novel's critique of sentimentality through its juxtaposition of overly romanticized, 'novel-like' notions of authenticity with that of a tangible truth assigned to plainspoken, underprivileged characters. In other words, Alcott's *Work* undermines conventional sentimentality by advocating a cross-racial female solidarity that transgresses class barriers as the ultimate principle for a genuine womanhood.

Alcott's autobiographical piece, "How I Went Out to Service," published in 1874 in *The Independent*, candidly denounces the overly romanticizing and self-abnegating tendencies of sentimentality. Immersed in a gendered critique of inappropriate power relations between her male employer and herself, Alcott vehemently decries the deference that is expected of her. In an angry tone, she complains:

I was not to read; but to be read to. I was not to enjoy the flowers, pictures, fire, and books; but to keep them in order for my lord to enjoy. I was also to be a passive bucket, into which he was to pour all manner of philosophic, metaphysical, and sentimental rubbish. I was to serve his needs, soothe his sufferings, and sympathize with all his sorrows – be a galley slave, in fact. (358)

The images Alcott evokes in order to describe her paternalistic treatment deliberately resemble those employed in sentimental discourse. The passive bucket is a suitable metaphor for Brodhead's philosophy of disciplinary intimacy which regards the child or subject-in-training as an empty vessel to be filled with parental awe or demure reverence. Furthermore, to serve another's needs, alleviate their pain and be compassionate towards their ailments typifies sentimental behavior. Yet in Alcott's autobiographical context – one which admittedly did not conform entirely to the logic of sentimentality since “going out to service” significantly complicated the affectionate ties of sentimental companionship because it brought with it the elements of wage and employment – these empathetic characteristics engender the opposite of love and mutuality. In fact, because these demands come from a man in a position of power, both in terms of his class and his veiled sexual intentions, the charity of compassion became an element of labor. As a result of Alcott's sensitivity towards gender equity and her women's rights agenda, her report is a far cry from the lessons in *The Wide, Wide World* which advocates female devotion to the same loving, fraternal John Humphreys who is also the violent master mercilessly beating his horses into submission (376-7). Christie's rage over Mr. Stuart's demand to blacken his boots communicates the same sharp gender critique prevalent in “How I Went Out to Service,” despite Yellin's scrutiny that Alcott's novel is less overtly angry and radical when it comes to critiquing sentimentality's doctrine of female subordination (“*Success*” 529-30).

*Work* passes judgment on another common form of sentimentality when Alcott exposes the ideology's tendency to romanticize human relationships, thereby alienating people from the material reality of gender that can only be accomplished through

sensitivity towards the plight of underprivileged subjects. Again, “How I Went Out to Service” provides a telling framework for the novel’s assessment of overly romantic attitudes as stand-ins for women’s expectations in their real, lived worlds. Naively starting her job, young Alcott feels exhilarated by her proximity to the intrigues of wealthy gentry life. Comparing her new environment to the setting of a gothic romance, she admits that her employers’ mysterious mistrust for one another “was altogether romantic and sensational, and I felt as if about to enter one of those delightfully dangerous houses we read of in novels” (354). Yet Alcott’s fascination with the unreal life of the upper classes quickly dissolves into a damning assessment of its tyranny and remoteness from the values of compassion and happiness. Leaving her job disillusioned, she now sees the mansion as a “dull old house, no longer mysterious or romantic in my disenchanted eyes” (362). Despite the essay’s overt moral to honor wage laborers with the same sympathy as companions, Alcott’s juxtaposition of the real with the romance endorsed by trite novels drives large parts of the tale’s vigor. “How I Went Out to Service” provides then a framework for understanding the structural and ideological underpinnings at work in her novel because Alcott’s essay showcased her deliberate interpretation of narrative conventions as forms of gendered perceptions.

*Work* transfers young Alcott’s fascination with the thrilling life of the upper classes to Christie’s first job as servant to the Stuarts. Being enamored with luxury, “like most young people” and dreaming herself closer to the cultivated life of the well-to-do by emphasizing her own genteel roots since “my father was a gentleman” (23-4), Christie, like a fly on the wall, utilizes her labor as a servant to observe and study upper-class etiquette. Although the narrator equips Christie with enough comprehension to see

through the repetitious artificiality of the Stuarts' leisurely life, observing the theater of upper-class manners holds as much entertainment and luxurious allure for Christie as reading the novels she finds aplenty in the attic. Immediately following the mixed awe and ridicule with which Christie judges the Stuart's social life, the narrator reveals that her protagonist "loved books" and regularly immersed herself in stories (26). Even though Alcott does not specify what kind of novels Christie devours in her free time, the direct transition of the "romantic" life of her employers to her reading habits suggests that these books were likely gothic thrillers or romantic love triangles. This is the first of many moments in the narrative that contrast the idle, unreality of novels (and novel reading) with experiences "so bitterly real that [Christie] never could forget [them]" (25).

Not surprisingly, Christie's first lesson in supplanting her fictional models of womanhood with real-life activism comes from her initial and most influential teacher, the ex-slave Hepsey. After listening to Hepsey's story of escape from slavery and her subsequent plan to work hard enough to travel south and liberate her aged mother, the "tears of sympathy" normally shed over the fate of a fictional heroine ring much truer. Consequently, "novels lost their charms for now, [...], because truth stamped [Hepsey's] tales with a power and pathos the most gifted fancy could but poorly imitate" (27). Alcott's wording deserves particular attention here: Hepsey's tales are not more gripping because they are more adventurous (though the stakes are undeniably higher for Hepsey than those of the regular genteel heroine having to choose the right suitor), they exceed romantic novels by far because they bear the mark of truth. The harsh suffering of slavery, even if only experienced second-hand, counts as more original and worthy than that of urbane life. Taking into account the humorous way Alcott stages the Stuarts'

behavior as “‘trained canaries’ to twitter and hop about their gilded cage,” it is not so much the dichotomy between novels and real life that is at stake but rather how value and authenticity can be ascribed to any tale (25). Compared to the equally ‘true’ (as opposed to fictional) spectacle of upper-class life Christie witnesses daily among the Stuarts and their distinguished company, Alcott’s narrator emphasizes the value of stories from underprivileged people, such as African Americans, because they can tap into an authenticity and verisimilitude denied to the insincere life of the Stuarts’ ilk.<sup>36</sup>

In the didactic tone she employs towards sappy sentimental novels that instill unrealistic expectations and harmful hero-worship in their readers, Alcott might as well have shaken hands with realism’s dean and severest critic of romantic novels, William Dean Howells. Although Alcott’s body of fiction formally differs from realism’s focus on interiority and psychological complexity, her agenda to seek truth and ascribe it to non-normative American identities strongly resemble Howells’s ideology of promoting a “democracy in literature” (*Editor’s Study* 96). Romance, as Amy Kaplan remarks, was realism’s “favorite whipping boy” (16), and Howells’s disdain for sentimental literature that filled readers, particularly female ones, with fanciful, unrealistic notions about life repeats Alcott’s concern with fiction that downplays simple, pragmatic life in favor of pomp and glitter. Howells’s April 1887 argument in his “Editor’s Study” provides a particularly useful lens to understand Alcott’s and his own investment in a literature that

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<sup>36</sup> Sentimentality’s drive to mingle fiction and reality also extends into the realm of performance. Particularly chapter 3, “Actress,” takes up the dangerous closeness of sentimental sympathy to a culturally scorned, inauthentic femininity that overflowed into theatricality, causing Christie to ask herself at the end of her experience with the vain shallowness that comes with being an actress, “A fine actress perhaps, but how good a woman?” (43). I do not take up this instance for my analysis because I chose to focus on those scenes that juxtapose fiction and reality in order to make larger arguments about the value of black and white femininity. For an otherwise excellent discussion of the ramifications of sentimental sympathy’s troublesome relation to normative femininity and improper forms of women’s theatricality, see Hendler, pp. 129-134.

portrays truth, that is the daily grind of life, instead of romance. Advising how to judge fiction for its value, Howells instructs his readers to ask themselves “before we ask anything else, Is it true?” If novels pass this essential question about their intrinsic moral worth, then this type of fiction has made “Reality its Romance” instead of the other way around (74-5). Christie’s choice to value the true story of Hepsey’s life over sensational novels and fascination with the Stuarts’ social circle is a powerful example of Alcott’s alignment with many of the concerns realist writers took up when it came to judging not only good fiction but also good subjects worthy of portraying ethical matters central to nineteenth-century American culture.

Underlying concerns about the reality and moral value of fiction, as Kaplan argues, were not the dangers that sentimental novels would stray away from “normative reality” but rather that social and cultural changes had made nineteenth-century American life “indistinguishable from fiction” (19). Acknowledging the dialectical relationship between reality and fiction, Alcott’s writing aims at showcasing Christie as a fictional heroine who acts in a decidedly non-romantic manner, just as readers like Christie would when faced with trying circumstances. This dichotomy between romance and reality continues to be a dominant thread throughout Christie’s growth into useful, happy womanhood. Alcott’s critique of heavily romanticized, false notions about life becomes clearest in the portrayal of the courtship between Christie and David that governs the second half of the novel. In the romantic uncertainty of falling in love, the narrator lets Christie struggle most dramatically with replacing sentimentalized notions of heroic love with a more down-to-earth, tangible humanity. Christie’s anti-romantic behavior in the “crisis” over David’s devotion to her stands at the end of this learning process.

Misinterpreting David's behavior towards young, coquettish Kitty, Christie decides to leave the Sterling household so as not to stand in the way of David's happiness and instead distract herself from her own pain with useful charity work. In so doing, she exhibits none of the attributes commonly found in romantic heroines tragically in love. Alcott's narrator evaluates Christie's deviation from sentimental norms. "If she had been a regular novel heroine at this crisis," the narrator explains, "she would have gone gray in a single night." Continuing to list the traditional associations with lovesick women, such as madness, the narrative voice praises Christie because "[b]eing only a commonplace woman she did nothing so romantic, but instinctively tried to sustain and comfort herself with the humble, wholesome duties and affections which seldom fail to keep heads sane and hearts safe" (239). Through Christie, herself a fictional character, Alcott forcefully denounces an approach to life that is dictated by unrealistic gender conventions concerning courtship. Here, as earlier in the novel, she values a depiction of character and experience that pays tribute to the hard, non-glorified work of inhabiting gender roles instead of distorting them with excessively dramatized emotionality. The real heroes, as *Work* has already suggested by introducing Hepsy as Christie's first sentimental teacher, are those that can most readily tap into the materiality of womanhood because they are barred from class or race privileges. By telling their stories, reality, in Howells's sense, has indeed become romance. Moreover, it has become a romance that is didactic, true to life, and gives those not born white or wealthy a voice to impart their experiences on women-in-training such as Christie.

The verisimilitude that Alcott presents in *Work* – one that points toward an alternative genealogy of realism – is deeply inspired by women barred from the

normative center because of their race, class, or sexuality. Black, poor womanhood, symbolized through Hepsy in the beginning of the novel, constitutes the framework for this immersion of Christie in what Amy Schrager Lang calls her need to be “brought down [...] into contact with working women” (118). Lang’s notion of what I would like to label affirmative downward mobility is crucial in understanding the novel’s cultural work in upsetting hierarchical relationships of race as they are prevalent in sentimental sympathy, thereby displacing normative white femininity from its long-cherished pedestal. Although Christie herself has led a rather simple life with her aunt and uncle, the novel repeatedly emphasizes Christie’s distinguished origin, either by defining her as a “poor gentlewoman” or by referring to her father’s status as that of a cultivated gentleman. Thus, the fact that Christie, unlike other white servants, insists in the beginning of her sentimental journey on sitting and eating with the black Hepsy, because “there must be no difference made. [...] and because you have been a slave is all the more reason I should be good to you” emphasizes that reaching ‘down’ is a necessary and ultimately uplifting gesture towards Christie’s own refinement (22). The sentimental lessons Hepsy imparts on Christie in the beginning of her moral growth puts blackness at the core of Christie’s value system. Blackness, consequently, functions in *Work* as a node of authenticity that helps Christie connect to and value other non-normative women, such as the white, lower-class Cynthia Wilkins, a poor but cleanly, happy matron who always has an open heart for others, or the fallen woman Rachel, whose deviance from what is deemed proper sexual modesty does not limit Christie’s love for her. Indeed, Alcott presents these alternative models to proper, white, prosperous womanhood as ideals, not because they espouse poverty or sexuality, but because the hardship inherent

in these experiences has imbued Hepsey, Cynthy, and Rachel with a special wisdom. Christie, by reaching downward, has to aspire to this center of authenticity and goodness before she can become a happy, useful companion herself.

Taking into account how the novel valorizes alternative versions of womanhood, it comes as no surprise that Alcott consistently ascribes great intrinsic value to women like Hepsey, Cynthy, or Rachel. Christie, for instance, admires Cynthy for her “natural refinement of soul,” which outshines her external flaws and lack of education, hence providing viable substitutes for the cultural refinement Christie expects to find in the Stuarts, Philip Fletcher and the Saltonstalls, or the Carrol family (154). Labor makes up the connective tissue binding together the gendered identities of Hepsey, Cynthy, Rachel, and Christie because it collectively differentiates these women from the ladies of leisure they can never become. Highlighted already in the novel’s title, work serves as an alternative form of cultural distinction for women who are barred from the sophisticated life of upper-class womanhood. The first edition’s accompanying frontispiece of bees pollinating flowers was followed by a Carlyle quote, celebrating that “an endless significance lies in work; in idleness alone is there perpetual despair.” Thus endowing work with higher meaning beyond the simple execution of labor, David’s final advice to Christie before he dies – “Such a beautiful world! [...] and so much good work to do in it” (315) — repeats the novel’s mantra for equipping work with personal and social value.

Indeed, all four women utilize work as an alternative form of cultural capital that outweighs their lack of the feminine refinement exclusive to a life of leisure. For Hepsey, her wage labor symbolizes her independence from slavery as well as a means to

liberating the rest of her family. For Cynthia and Rachel, work has a therapeutic value, preventing them from shallow vanity and sexual temptations respectively, with the added bonus of directing their lives to helping other women in need. Likewise, Christie's relationship to labor enables her to imbue work with the intimate purpose of female community building, distinguishing it from the loveless, alienating system of wage labor.<sup>37</sup> As was the case for Elizabeth Keckley in *Behind the Scenes*, work becomes an alternative asset that signifies these women's worth when they compete against normative ideals of nineteenth-century womanhood.

The proposal scene between Christie and David shows even more dramatically how crucially Christie's own happiness is wedded to the value attributed to her fellow suffering female friends. After David resolves the misunderstanding over his relation to Rachel/Letty, clarifying that he is not the lover who disgraced and abandoned her but indeed her brother, Christie's joy over the reunion between the siblings as well as herself and her most intimate friend paves the way to her marriage. In fact, Christie's selfless compassion in standing by Rachel "when all others, even I [David], cast Letty off" triggers David to finally confess his love and ask Christie to become his wife (269). Christie's empathy for Letty imbues her with the necessary moral capital to raise her value in David's eyes. Their happiness, then, only becomes possible through the salvation of a fallen woman, another embodiment of the real in Alcott's women's rights vocabulary.

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<sup>37</sup> Elbert makes a useful distinction between domesticity and domestic service, writing that Alcott's purpose was to show that the "substitution of a wage for affection and interdependence made the one a house to clean and the other a home to live in" informs Christie's ultimate trajectory from single wage earner to loving, working wife and daughter-in-law (*Hunger* 244).

Christie's willingness to actively join the Civil War as a nurse completes her commitment to the agendas dear to her heart. Even though her decision to enlist emerges primarily from her love for David who decided to become a soldier, her readiness to help in the cause must also be seen in light of her passion for abolition, triggered by and manifested through Hepsey. In addition to Christie's dedication to abolition, her eager immersion in the gruesome, painful materiality of war also answers her thirst for tangible reality and opposes it once again to the sheltered life many novels dictate to their female readers. While Christie remains attracted to romances, her brief but intense visits to her new husband during their rare furloughs bestow upon their romance "a very somber reality" (300). Comparing this real-life romance to classical love tales, Alcott underscores that the intensity of feelings of any Romeo or Juliet can only pale in comparison to the power of David's and Christie's commitment. The invigorating but also terrible realism of the war serves here as another enhancer of human sensibility that "distilled a concentration of the love, happiness, and communion which many men and women only have known through years of wedded life" (299-300). In other words, Christie's life, as narrated by Alcott, already becomes what Howells only fifteen years later would stipulate as the hallmark of good, true story-telling: she makes reality her romance.

If Hepsey's blackness introduces Christie to a new understanding of womanhood that reverses existing power relations, David's sacrificial death for a fugitive slave woman bookends the novel's attempt to link African American womanhood with an ethical sensibility worthy of imitation by their white counterparts. David's death scene represents a pivotal moment in the narrative because it buttresses the importance of black

womanhood to American understandings of gender, putting it at the core of honor and respectability. Hearing that David has been seriously wounded, Christie rushes to her husband's camp. Elisha Wilkins, Cynthia's taciturn husband, informs Christie about the cause of David's injuries. Having encountered four fugitive slave women and their babies, one of them being dead, David took it upon himself to help these scared women find their way up to safety in the North. "I never saw the Captain so worked up as he was by the sight of them wretched women," Elisha reports to Christie, "He fed and warmed 'em, comforted their poor scared souls, give what clothes we could find, buried the dead baby with his own hands, and nussed the other little creeters as if they were his own" (311). Elisha's description of David's behavior towards the black women portrays David doing fundamental sentimental work: in true compassion, he reaches down to the fugitive women, comforts them, and joins them in their grief over the quintessential sentimental scene of shared sympathy: the loss of an innocent child. But, more than that, David's empathy eventually mortally wounds him when hidden rebel soldiers shoot him in his final attempt to help the fugitive women continue their journey to freedom.

Finding her husband and acknowledging with her trained nurse's eye that he will die soon, Christie at first selfishly rants at him for risking his life "for a creature whose whole life is not worth a day of your brave, useful, precious one!" "Why," she desperately asks, "did you pay such a price for that girl's liberty?" David quickly diffuses the emotionally overwhelmed Christie and her uncharacteristic lack of loyalty to African American women otherwise constant throughout the narrative. "Because I owed it," David justifies, "– she suffered more than this seeing her baby die; – I thought of *you* in her place, and I could not help doing it" (315). This scene epitomizes the controlling

tone of *Work*. The first part of David's sentence reproduces the traditional logic of abolitionism: ethically, white Americans owe compassion, respect, and support to the liberation of African Americans. The second part of his reply takes on sentimental logic: because the fugitive woman suffered immense pain by being enslaved and losing her child in the process of claiming freedom, she is worthy of white people's empathy. Her suffering acts as a bridge to overcome differences of color between white and black Americans and unite them through their shared sorrow. The last part of David's response, finally, solidifies the logic of sentimental sympathy by comparing and matching Christie to the black woman. "I thought of *you* in her place" repeats the closeness required between white and black womanhood in order, in Hendler's words, to feel *with* another person's misery and *like* this other person (121-22). For David to utter these words is particularly revealing because he shifts sentimental sympathy out of the intra-gendered realm in which white women feel with and for black women, and instead introduces a third role, that of a male benefactor/companion who measures his wife's merit against an unknown fugitive slave woman. The most inviting reading of David's utterance seems to confirm white womanhood through his comparison of these two women. "I thought of *you* in her place," highlights Christie's importance and her final self-referential occupation of the place held open for her by the suffering black woman. Although David's phrasing implies only a conditional scenario that imagines Christie in agony built on the reality of the fugitive woman's pain, the lasting impression is that of a white woman, not that of an African American one. In other words, the initial reading of this sentence confirms a normative hierarchy of white-over-black womanhood.

I want to introduce another layer of meaning embedded in David's reply, however, one that resurrects African American womanhood as the core of an embodied womanhood capable of wielding significant cultural authority. We need to read this conversation as simultaneously also subverting hierarchical relationships of color inherent in sentimental sympathy because the narrative consistently emphasizes black womanhood as the locus of realness, as the best encapsulation of American womanhood. Up until this point, *Work* spent considerable time situating Christie, the average American woman, "moderately endowed with talents, earnest and true-hearted" (12), as the kindhearted student acquiring sentimental capital by learning from non-normative female companions, above all by cherishing African American experience as paramount to becoming a "useful, happy woman" (11). While Hepsy's role as Christie's moral guardian is only confined to the first of her many experiences with wage labor and guiding figures of plain, alternative womanhood, the black woman remains a constant role model throughout the narrative, evidenced by the many side remarks about Hepsy's whereabouts and the fact that she and Christie stay in touch (55, 101, 172, 288, 341). Thus, for Christie to hear David utter that he thought of her in the fugitive slave woman's place contains more than a declaration of love and devotion. It reminds Christie that she has become a humble, compassionate woman only because she modeled her life after those women whose painful experiences enrich them more than mere money, cultivation, or wealth ever could. In the text's didactic logic of how to train useful, happy women, enslaved black womanhood continues to stand as the emotional core to which one continuously needs to aspire.

Alcott reinforces *Work*'s emphasis on valuing non-normative female identities over universalizing white, genteel ones by immediately comparing the scene's realism with widespread, fictional notions of heroism. Describing the effectiveness of David's appeal to Christie, "she was silent: for, in all the knightly tales she loved so well, what Sir Galahad," Christie asks herself, "had rescued a more wretched, wronged, and helpless woman than the poor soul whose dead baby David had buried tenderly before he bought the mother's freedom with his life?" (315). Here as earlier in the narrative, *Work* glues together two of its central criticisms for crafting a sentimentalism devoid of overly romanticized notions of femininity and classed racism. Inscribing David's deed with more dignity, honor, and significance than the actions of one of *the* chivalrous heroes of Western imagination, spawning such widely popular historic novels of gallantry as those by Sir Walter Scott, Christie, in Carolyn R. Maibor's words, "completes her journey from sentimental romantic to realist" (117). More than just affirming the realism of people like David and Christie – average, plain Americans – against the romanticized class-ism of genteel Europeanized whiteness, Alcott's dual purpose of juxtaposing fictional, chivalrous notions of gender behavior with the down-to-earth, moral insight assigned to African Americans and other non-normative Americans puts them squarely in the limelight. Alcott, to put it quite simply, highlights offences against the script of genteel femininity in order to formulate her critique of this normalizing ideology through a combination of the dual forces of black *and* average, white womanhood. In the process, she transforms these offences into viable alternatives that destabilize dominant gender conventions.

While Alcott grants a great deal of narrative space to a genuine description of the integrity of ‘other’ women like Hepsey, she also falls from time to time into a rather stereotypical portrayal of women ethnically different from white Americans. In these instances, we see the author struggle with her own prejudiced relation to the white middle class and her desire to better the status of the “poor gentlewomen” among whom she counted herself. One striking example of staged white sympathy for African Americans involves Cynthy Wilkins and her husband Elisha, the “selfish, slothful little man” who, much to Cynthy’s chagrin, refuses to enlist in the Union cause. Despite Cynthy’s attempts to “rouse him by patriotic appeals of various sorts,” even going so far as to reduce their meals to simple, plain rations in solidarity with the suffering soldiers, Elisha cannot be persuaded to become a war hero (284-85). In fact, all of Cynthy’s multiple appeals to Elisha’s manly honor finally culminate in her husband’s reply that he does not understand why “decent men” should be injured and killed “jest for them confounded niggers” (287). Elisha’s racist attitudes toward the moral obligation of the Union fighting the Civil War enrage Cynthy to no end.

Conjuring slavery as the ultimate evil, Cynthy scolds her husband for denying the authenticity of suffering that Hepsey has told them slave life to be. “Can you think of them wretched wives sold from their husbands;” Cynthy begins, “them children as dear as ourn tore from their mothers; and old folks kep slavin eighty long, hard years with no pay, no help, no pity, when they git past work?” (ibid.). Intended to induce guilt over the outrage of slavery, Cynthy’s example attempts to paint slaves’ misery as crimes that destroy the domestic family. Yet Cynthy’s moralizing rant is surpassed by the living tableau of Hepsey and her old mother residing in one of the Wilkins’s backrooms. In a

dramatic, theatrical gesture, Cynthia confronts Elisha with the real-lived embodiments of slavery's wrongs on African American family structure and happiness. Similarly staged as if behind a theater curtain, Cynthia throws open the back door in order for Elisha to look at Hepsy and her mother, an old, spent woman who "looked more like a shriveled mummy." Although Hepsy's mother is "blind now, and deaf; childish, and half dead with many hardships," she is finally free and united with her kin, and Hepsy's face, "full of pride, [...] peace, and happiness," forcefully symbolizes the need for Elisha to join a cause that makes such reunions possible (288). This quintessentially sentimental scene, drawing on the pain of mother-daughter separation and eventual reunion, adds an abolitionist twist by making these women black and assigning blame to slavery, the culprit of their trauma. Finally, it changes Mr. Wilkins's mind because, in true sentimental logic, he begins to transfer Hepsy's painful loss to the possible grief it would bring him should he ever lose his family.

The melodramatic character of this scene seems to disrupt Alcott's earlier attempts to depict African Americans as real people, with dignity and individuality. The scene also betrays a certain clumsy utilitarian touch, drawing on stereotypical images of abolitionist rhetoric that uses black bodies as mute, dependent props in need of white agency. Perhaps these lapses in Alcott's otherwise more realistic attempts to portray African American women were partly caused by the rushed nature with which Alcott had to revamp "Success," the manuscript which she had started more than ten years earlier and now had to finish as *Work*. The *Christian Union's* offer of \$3,000 for a serialized story to be published between Dec. 1872 and June 1873 set Alcott into a writing frenzy to which she attributed the paralysis of her thumb as well as her discontent with the final

outcome (Myerson *Journals* 184). In early 1873, she complained in her journal that she had finished *Work* but that it was “[n]ot what it should be, – too many interruptions. Should like to do one book in peace, and see if it wouldn’t be good” (ibid. 187). Alcott’s ambiguous attitude towards the production of *Work* might have also been one of the reasons that critics such as Yellin criticize *Work* for the “blandness” with which the novel treated racism (“*Success*” 530).

More importantly than Yellin’s comments regarding the narrative’s occasionally staged sentimental abolitionism, the above scene is strangely out of sync with Alcott’s earlier attempt to carve out an inner life for her female characters, white and black alike, poor or disdained. Even though Hepsey is a mix modeled after the real-life ‘Black Moses’, Harriet Tubman (Elbert, *Race* xxvi), and Winnie Beale, a less famous African American woman Alcott had only heard of and was impressed with because of her determined attempts to reunite her family (Elbert, “Introduction” xxvii–xxviii), Alcott created this character with spirit and care. Hepsey’s role as Christie’s sentimental mentor grants this black woman space for her own individuality and a depiction of her “human heart,” a common phrase evoked earlier in the chapter to delineate how mid-nineteenth-century critics dubbed the increasingly common narrative method of portraying a character’s inner life. Although Hepsey seems to lose her individuality during this scene, Alcott brings her back in the text’s closing scene of female collaboration, allowing her to regain the status of a character equipped with personality and interiority.

If Alcott occasionally displays a white-centric, maternal attitude towards her characters of color, her narrative voice is even less sensitive towards accepting Irish immigrants. From the beginning of Christie’s immersion into the labor market, Alcott’s

prejudice against immigrants makes Christie separate them from American women. Visiting an intelligence office for the first time, Christie “took her place among the ranks of buxom German, incapable Irish, and ‘smart’ American women” (17). Contrasting Irish immigrants negatively against full-figured Germans and “smart” Americans betrays Alcott’s prejudice against this ethnic group. Moreover, the stark juxtaposition of Irish against American women validates the latter with a gesture towards nativism since “in those days foreign help had not driven farmers’ daughters out of the field, and made domestic comfort a lost art” (ibid.). Christie’s (and Alcott’s) ethnic bias needs to be seen in the larger context of impoverished, American-born women competing against the wave of immigrants during the nineteenth century for domestic and other low-skilled positions. In his study of the formation of the American middle class, Stuart Blumin asserts that the forms of labor open to immigrants during the years 1830-1860 were predominantly those demanding manual work with few skills (252). Although generally, the laborers were divided plainly along ethnic lines since native-born Americans had higher chances of learning non-manual trades, this pecking order seems less clear-cut when gender was taken into account. Alcott’s plea in the chapter leading up to Christie’s attempted suicide is an example of the peculiar situation of the native-born “poor gentlewomen” for whom industrial labor would have meant mingling “with coarser natures,” a descent towards immigrant womanhood which entailed a considerable loss of social status (117).

This nativist bias extends throughout the novel, reflecting a direct juxtaposition between Irish and African American womanhood. According to David Roediger’s landmark study *Wages of Whiteness*, such comparison was a common one among native-born, nineteenth-century Americans for whom the whiteness of Irish people was far from

being unequivocal. Indeed, as Roediger illuminates, the immediate comparison of Irish and African American people often resulted in favor of the latter group. One of the reasons for this was that nativists “typically developed a ‘moral’ rather than a ‘racial’ critique of the Irish” (133). Christie’s comments regarding her Irish co-workers express a judgment based on morality that condemns this ethnic group much more strongly than the black women encountered in the narrative, all of whom exhibit a “surplus value” of ethical behavior that counter-balances their color. Accordingly, after Christie loses her position at the Stuarts’, she reasons that “she would never live with Irish mates, and could not expect to find another Hepsey” (30). Later on, Christie confirms the direct damnation of Irish workers vis-à-vis African Americans when she assures Mrs. Sterling that she is fit for housework as long as “I need not do it with a shiftless Irish girl.” “I have lived out,” she continues, “and did not find it hard while I had my good Hepsey” (172). These instances of ethnic prejudice suggest a lop-sided sympathy in which American-born, white women prefer blackness over Irishness. The reasons for this remain largely speculative, but for Alcott, at least, it seemed that the history of slavery had immersed African Americans with more of the Puritan life-style she herself espoused than she could find in the values of immigrants.

In her inclusive ending to *Work*, in which Christie finds her calling as a political speaker for the rights of female workers, Alcott drops her heretofore strong aversion towards Irish immigrants. When Christie attends a meeting of “working-women,” the narrator ceases to distinguish between the ethnic make-ups of these women. The chasm between the two classes, these being divided up into “working-women” and “ladies,” is instead responsible for the misunderstanding between speakers and audience during these

meetings (330). United in theory over their common goal to better women's lives, in practicality the upper-class reformers cannot access the discourse of their lower-class sisters. Because of this they are in dire need of Christie, who acts a mediator able to "bring the helpers and the helped into truer relations with each other" (331). Christie's ability to converse simultaneously with the wealthy women and understand the plight of working ones presents challenges for most critics. At stake in their analyses is Alcott's gendered class and racial politics because she chose a white, middle-class woman as "interpreter between the two classes" (334). On the one hand, scholars like Tara Fitzpatrick criticize Alcott's seemingly idealistic solution of equipping Christie with representational universality because it washes out the complexity of class conflict (37). Lang, on the other hand, focuses on the novel's attempt to portray a female alliance strong enough to overcome race and class antipathies, thus making a case for the contingency of these identities rather than their essential nature (116). Most scholars follow Hendler by incorporating both arguments in their interpretation of this scene. While Christie's portrayal as mediator suggests what Hendler calls an "early example of a strain within feminism [...] in which the middle-class white woman sees herself as the universal subject" (140), he also contends that *Work* differs from other sentimental fictions because it "crosses rather than affirms lines of class and race" (143-44).

Both sides of this argument pose valid critiques of Alcott as an author with a firm reputation as an out-spoken abolitionist and women's rights activist, yet who was also deeply mired in her own cultural anxieties. These concerns over her agency can be located in her impoverished, dwindling class status of genteel whiteness and her struggle with spinsterhood in a society that continued to look down upon unmarried women.

Christie's trajectory in *Work*, culminating in her bridge function between different types of women, certainly reflects a desire to imbue the average white woman with the power to mediate greater cultural and social differences. While it would therefore be uncritical to overlook the narrative's tendency to celebrate a normative form of womanhood in the end since Christie embodies whiteness and the middle class, the scene nevertheless accounts for Christie's skills as go-between by pointing to her shared experience with the working classes. Part of Christie's success, aside from her refusal to enter the stage and symbolically reinforce class hierarchies, lies in her familiarity: the audience identifies with her because she looks, dresses, and speaks just as they do (333). In other words, her exposure to the hardships of work and to women like Hepsey, Cynthy, and Rachel – that is, her downward mobility – gives her the cultural capital to be conversant across gendered lines of class, race, and ethics. Work, "her best teacher," forms the connective tissue that allows Christie to become the "genuine woman" respected by all (332-33).

At one point in the scene, Alcott gives another explanation for Christie's success: parental heritage. Because her father imparted on her his gentrified manners while her mother imbued her with the practicality of a farmer's daughter, she is particularly able to converse with both parties. This hereditary explanation, while playing into romantic notions of birth and talent, contradicts the narrative's larger trajectory. After all, Christie becomes a "happy, useful" woman only because she learns from her sentimental teachers; all female guides of non-normative womanhood who lead by example and mold Christie's moral fiber. Moreover, the novel's title highlights the importance of work in Christie's growth, but it also stresses that this journey was "*A Story of Experience*." It is experience, finally, that ensures women like Christie gain the prized Emersonian qualities

of “self-knowledge, self-control, self-help” (12). Through these celebrations of the female self, Alcott’s philosophy of authentic womanhood also intersects with Elizabeth Keckley’s mantra of self-reliance. Self-reliance enables women to become independent despite the racist, classist, or sexist odds against them. It also builds the basis for a cross-racial sympathy that demands space for the inner lives of non-normative women.

Alcott returns more explicitly to the question of female voice in her egalitarian attempt to bring together in harmony the major female characters that have accompanied Christie over the course of the narrative. This “loving league of sisters, old and young, black and white, rich and poor,” gathering at Christie’s homestead consists of Hepsey, Cynthy, Rachel/Letty, Mrs. Sterling (Christie’s Quaker mother-in-law), Bella (the sister of a mentally ill upper-class belle for whom Christie worked as a companion until Helen committed suicide), and Christie’s little daughter, nicknamed Pansy. Sitting around a table, ready to talk, gossip, and support each other in the comfort of the domestic circle, they start admiring the painting Mr. Fletcher, Christie’s old, reformed suitor, gave to her. The picture references a beloved text Alcott had used extensively in *Little Women* to symbolize the moral trajectory her characters underwent: *Pilgrim’s Progress*. Mr. Fletcher’s picture, *Work’s* narrator explains, shows “Mr. Greatheart, leading the fugitives from the City of Destruction,” acting as guide to Mercy and Christiana as well as carrying a sleeping baby in his arms (342). Marveling at the beauty of the painting, Mrs. Sterling, Rachel/Letty, and Hepsey share with the other women how the painting affects them on an emotional level. Mrs. Sterling sees her son in Mr. Greatheart, Rachel identifies the child in the guide’s arms as resembling Pansy, and Hepsey comments that Mercy and Christiana “oughter bin black” because David’s good deed reminds her of abolitionist

heroes such as John Brown. These personalized readings of the painting are in and of themselves a powerful statement for the agency Alcott grants these women in participating in the interpretative appropriation of an iconic text that symbolizes key American ethical values. Each woman identifies with the ethos of the painting because she can see something of herself in the characters. Alcott's message is clear: women's voices and their interpretations of culture are worth listening to, because contemporary political events affect their lives too. More importantly for Alcott, women can and should interject their views into cultural discourse, changing it for the better in the process. *Work's* roundtable continues the narrative's portrayal of women's complexity, celebrating their flaws and strength by granting them a narrative space to express the level of their depth, their "human heart."

Hendler perceptively observes of the women's interjection that they weaken the actual content of the picture and instead foreground "not only the common femininity of the observers [...], but also their particularities of race, age, and personal history" (144). The personalized desire to identify with the painting certainly shines through in Mrs. Sterling's, Rachel/Letty's, and Hepsy's remarks. Hendler is likewise correct in recognizing that all of their responses refer back to David, the heroic son, father, and protector of black womanhood.<sup>38</sup> But a closer look at the phrasing of each of the women's comments enriches this scene with a deeper significance, one that is particularly crucial for black womanhood. Mrs. Sterling's and her daughter's remarks are worded rather tentatively. Their observations open up the possibility of reinterpretation, thus

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<sup>38</sup> Hendler's claims about David's centrality in the women's interpretation of Mr. Fletcher's picture obtain a deeper layer of force when he points out that the illustrations of *Work* by Sol Eytinge replace the painting with a commemorative portrait of David which is placed over the table, symbolically connecting these different women through his meaning to every one of them (144).

placing them as composers of their own desires – Mr. Greatheart evokes David’s generosity, the baby looks like Pansy – but they remain relatively timid suggestions that are grounded in personal appeal. Hepsey’s interjection, on the other hand, entails a directive command – “Dem women oughter bin black.” Employing this instructional tone, Hepsey claims agency for herself and for the recognition of African American women’s role in shaping American culture. Implicit in her comment that Mercy and Christiana should have been black is both an accusation and a demand for placing African American womanhood center stage. Moreover, Hepsey’s forceful tone in this scene rescues her from the prop-like quality she displays earlier in the Cynthia-Elisha plot and firmly reestablishes her as a self-directed character equal to Christie, even resuming her role as sentimental teacher through her directive language.

The voice Alcott grants Hepsey in this scene ties the importance of African American women back to the novel’s initial reverence for them. Integrating Hepsey as a member of Christie’s “loving league of sisters,” who interpret the current political and social conditions as vital to women’s lives *and dependent on them*, Alcott’s *Work* ends on a high note, hoping that “the coming generation of women will not only receive but deserve their liberty” (344). Even though Christie ascribes her “independence, education, happiness, and religion” to labor since it enables her to experience life to the fullest and grow, Alcott’s narrative accomplishes important cultural work itself by presenting ordinary, unprivileged female characters as people with inner lives, desires, and ambitions worth imitating (343). By transferring agency to women like Hepsey, *Work* shares with Elizabeth Keckley’s narrative a redirection of sentimental sympathy that insists on the mutual dependency of white and black women who support each other and

who enable each other's entry into the public sphere. Because of such a reciprocal relationship, Keckley and Alcott suggest that the inner lives of American women embrace a more inclusive spectrum of female identities in order to achieve combined value as contemporary expressions of American life.

Elizabeth Keckley's and Louisa May Alcott's respective texts employ sentimental rhetoric but also significantly subvert it by upsetting its white-centered hierarchy. Placing greater value on non-normative expressions of womanhood, particularly African American female identity, they employ a popular postbellum literary strategy: celebrating underprivileged characters as vessels of genuine American character to which upper and middle-class, white American urbanites can turn in order to recapture a closeness to materiality and one's body that privileged, modern life obscures. Local color, or regional fiction, the focus of the next chapter, would perfect this sentiment by portraying quaint, uneducated characters as the focal points of their protagonists' consciousness, perpetually chasing after the experience of the real.

## Chapter 2

### Emotional Likeness – Social Distance: Sentimental Relationships Between Black and White Women in Sherwood Bonner’s Regional Stories

In July 1875, Katherine Sherwood Bonner McDowell, a young woman from Mississippi who wrote as Sherwood Bonner, published her local color story “Gran’mammy’s Last Gift” in the *Youth’s Companion*.<sup>39</sup> The story, semi-autobiographical in recounting the intimate bond between Bonner’s younger self, Kate, and her black mammy, Molly Wilson, chronicles the black woman’s last living moments, in which she dutifully imparts each of her white charges with invaluable advice and long-cherished memorabilia. Capitalizing on the depiction of regional types, peppered with interracial bonds in the still popular sentimental voice, Bonner’s story jump-started her reputation as an accomplished author of regional fiction.<sup>40</sup> With its authentic representation of dialect, the story appealed to readers of the *Youth’s Companion*, a widely read family-oriented magazine with a large subscriber list, and quickly generated demand for more of this type of literature (McAlexander 73). Over the next two years, the *Youth’s Companion* published “Gran’mammy’s Story” in January 1876, followed by “Breaking the News” in December 1877, further reinforcing Bonner’s pioneering role in helping shape the popular mammy image in literature. When Bonner prepared her

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<sup>39</sup> From here on, I will refer to Katherine Sherwood Bonner McDowell, both as a private person as well as in her function as author, as Sherwood Bonner.

<sup>40</sup> Scholars of this body of fiction, particularly when it refers to the late nineteenth century, continue to have conflicting views on its terminology. Alternately, “regional fiction,” “local color fiction,” or “dialect fiction” come with their own history and ideological baggage. This is best epitomized by Judith Fetterley’s and Marjorie Pryse’s distinction between “regional fiction” as a gendered site of critique and conflict between nation and region, power and resistance, produced by a specific set of predominantly female, north-eastern writers, and “local color,” with its more caricatured and nostalgic impetus (*Writing Out of Place* 4-9). I do not mean to disregard the critical work of feminist recovery surrounding regional fiction and its ideological implications, but for the purpose of this essay, I do follow June Howard and Barbara C. Ewell in applying the three terms from a historical perspective, thus using them interchangeably (Howard “American Regionalism” 123, Ewell 160).

collection of juvenile fiction, *Suwanee River Tales*, published posthumously in 1884, her Gran'mammy figure had become such a trademark that six revised sketches of Gran'mammy opened the collection.<sup>41</sup>

Bonner's cycle of stories about the endearing, witty black matriarch Gran'mammy and her white charges perfectly merges the voice of sentimentalism with that of the vernacular so popular in late nineteenth-century local color fiction. "Gran'mammy's Last Gift" focuses on the sentimentalized death scene of a beloved family member, although in this case, Gran'mammy is part of the "extended" family sprung out of the South's often intimate relationships between house slaves and their white owners. Reminiscent of Little Eva's death in Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, which emphasizes Eva's imparting of wise words and sentimental mementos of herself to family members and slaves, Gran'mammy has precious gifts to pass on, too. Among those, the most significant is a pair of white wedding slippers that once belonged to Kate's mother, who passed away long before. The gift is heavily burdened with emotional memories and laced with the complex racial relationships between enslaved women and their southern mistresses. As Gran'mammy fondly recalls, she was the one helping Kate's mother undress out of her "fine weddin' dress" the night of the ceremony. "An' when I took de slippers off her slim, pretty feet," Gran'mammy continues, "she flung her white arms aroun' my neck, an' she says, 'Keep 'em, Gran'mammy, in memory o' dis night.' An' now my chile, arter all dese years, I give 'em to you, de fust-born, – your dead

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<sup>41</sup> According to Hubert H. McAlexander's research, Bonner had truly become a pioneer of the black dialect sketch with "Gran'mammy's Last Gift." Apparently, the popularity of this story led to an increasing demand for the *Youth's Companion* and comparable magazines to run similar stories depicting mammy figures (121). He further solidifies this fact by pointing out that Bonner's Gran'mammy stories "appeared in 1875, three years before the publication of Irwin Russel's celebrated Negro dialect poem 'Christmas Night in the Quarters' and five years before Joel Chandler Harris' Uncle Remus tales reached a national audience" (183).

mother's weddin' slippers" (235). The slippers, of course, represent more than the deep emotional cross-racial bond between Gran'mammy and Kate's mother that also marks Kate's relationship to the black woman. As Kathryn McKee points out, the gift of the dainty slippers further symbolizes that Gran'mammy "literally gives to Kate whiteness," the precious quality needed for a young girl to enter the realm of normative, upper-class womanhood ("Race" 36).

Like McKee, I am intrigued by the story's lessons about southern women's racial relations, the ways in which Bonner's Gran'mammy tales suggest "the need for blackness and whiteness to reinforce and define one another" ("Race" 37). But my own investment in Bonner's treatment of cross-racial female relationships goes further. As the above scene suggests, the whiteness that is Kate's by heredity can only be rerouted, interpreted, and finally bestowed upon her by a black woman. In Bonner's universe, white southern womanhood emerges out of and rests on African American womanhood, a signifier of the real and bedrock of authenticity, genuineness, and affection. Yet the emotional power of the above scene relies on a back-and-forth exchange of whiteness and blackness between Kate's mother, Gran'mammy, and Kate – Kate's mother 'gives' whiteness to Gran'mammy through the slippers, Gran'mammy and her blackness become the custodian of this whiteness before it gets passed on to Kate, yet we have to wonder if or how this whiteness might have been changed or affected by the fact that it does not directly come from the white mother but through the black mammy.

Bonner's rendition of these interracial bonds suggests that she experienced the boundaries of racialized gender in the South as less clear-cut and more fluid than those expressed, for example, in the writings of Louisa May Alcott. Both Bonner, Alcott, and

Keckley employ the concept of sentimental sympathy in order to give voice to their own viewpoints regarding race and gender, but whereas I argue that Alcott and Keckley rely on a rather straight-forward switch of referents within the logic of cross-racial sentimental sympathy, I explore in this chapter how Bonner's Gran'mammy stories propose a more messy, yet fundamentally more radical, interpretation. As I will argue throughout this chapter, moments in Bonner's local color stories similar to the example of Kate, Gran'mammy, and the legacy of Kate's mother show that at first Bonner imagines the core of sentimental womanhood as an emotionally conflated space of blackness and whiteness. Yet the suggested emotional interchangeability of black and white women at the same time translates into a physical and social difference along racial lines that seems to exploit black womanhood in rather stereotypical ways because it is based on a distinctly regionalized voice of sentimentality: that of the postbellum white South as opposed to the northern abolitionist ideology that marks, for example, Alcott's writings.

Part of my aim in this chapter is to contemplate how regional identity influences postbellum women writers' sentimental interpretation of the value of African American womanhood against the backdrop of an emerging realist marketplace. As a southern writer, Bonner's entry into the world of publishing, whose center was unequivocally located in New England, and, particularly, in Boston, was marked by her ambiguous stance towards the abolitionist North as the "very center of isms and ologies and reforms", viewpoints which she often found alienating ("A Southern Girl's Experience" 6). An early encounter with Louisa May Alcott in Boston, to which Bonner had moved in late 1873 to become a writer and earn money, scandalously leaving her daughter and an unhappy marriage behind, illustrates how the combination of regional and gender

identity could alienate rather than ally two women whose trajectories into the male-dominated print market were fairly similar.

Like Alcott, Bonner debuted as an author via melodramatic, romantic tales, hinting at the pre-determined avenue of profitable sensational story-telling open to many women writers before they could advance their literary careers.<sup>42</sup> In March 1874, Bonner butted heads with Alcott over their respective views on southern womanhood. To her home audience of the *Memphis Avalanche*, Bonner portrayed the women's exchange as follows:

Said Miss Alcott to me, "I like your Southern women; they are very pretty and refined and well bred; but do you know they always seemed to me like dressed up dolls?" Sweet women of the South! I thought of you as I had known you. In your home-spun dress or your plain, black robes – your eyes shining with faith and hope – your steady white hands binding ragged wounds, or pointing the way to heaven dying eyes – your toil, your suffering, your courage in those stern, somber days when our beautiful country stood all bleeding and desolate and despairing. My eyes grew dim. Dressed up doll! Quarrel then with angels because their snowy wings are fair. ("A Southern Girl's Experience" 5-6)

This glancing encounter between Bonner and Alcott powerfully shows the failure of two professional women to find common ground over their identities as female writers. But it also points to the specific difficulties Bonner faced in Boston when she tried to craft her own persona as a writer with southern roots. For Bonner, Alcott's comment about the stereotypical image of southern womanhood as dependent, indulgent, beautified southern belles indicated that Alcott grossly misunderstood the real women of the South; only a southerner like Bonner, although likewise drawing on defensive clichés of the sacrificial, patriotic nature of southern women, could paint a realer picture of this regionalized form

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<sup>42</sup> In 1869, Bonner published her first stories in the *Massachusetts Ploughman and New England Journal for Agriculture*. Of these three stories, "Laura Capello: A Leaf from a Traveller's Notebook," "The Heir of Delmont," and "Saved," McAlexander and Gowdy both note their close allegiance to the melodramatic tales that feature Gothic European settings; sensational narratives extremely popular at the time (McAlexander 29-33, Gowdy xxxix-xl).

of womanhood.<sup>43</sup> But the exchange also seemed to signal to Bonner a larger “rootedness of cultural assumptions” (Williams 270), one in which Alcott stood as a representative of a broader northern abolitionist temperament that Bonner often seemed to find pretentious and boring, full of “startling statistics, and abstruse speculations, and blood curdling theories,” which apparently was “enough to bleach the hair of an outsider who tries to keep the pace” (“A Southern Girl’s Experience” 4-5).

While Bonner’s keen sense of her southern ‘otherness’ often alienated her from Bostonian culture, she was also aware that she could capitalize on her regional identity in the emerging realist literary marketplace, especially through the popular demand for regional stories that flourished alongside realism proper. The place of postbellum southern women writers within the genre of local color fiction has been an uneasy one from the beginning. Regional fiction’s cultural work of portraying the local, including a specific region’s inhabitants, their customs and vernacular, in contrast to a homogenous view of American identity as well as part of it, has presented particular difficulties for the southern states. The genteel South as a region was marked by the Civil War as alternately rural, quaint, backwards, and feminized when compared to the North, which

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<sup>43</sup> In the case of southern identity, the interplay between region and gender can yield different ideological results, depending on its association being made internally or externally. From a national, northern-driven perspective, the South has been consistently feminized in order to denote its weaker, colony-like status after the Civil War (see McKee, “Writing Region” 126) while the postbellum southern response used gender to mythologize an honorable, antebellum South whose virtues were carried within white, southern womanhood. For excellent analyses of postbellum southern identity, especially in regards to the prevalence of the Lost Cause ideology and its effect on southern womanhood, see Anne Goodwyn Jones, Barbara C. Ewell, and Nina Baym. Ewell applies Benedikt Anderson’s national concept of imagined communities to regions, accounting for the power of stories to define and differentiate regions and places, and, in the case of the postbellum South, to explain its fixation on the past –the image of the Old South – in contrast to an expanding and more fluid North (162-3). Jones contends that the fabrication of southern “true” womanhood differs from the ideal of British or American “true” womanhood because it stands “at the core of a region’s self-definition” (4). Like Jones, who goes at great length to separate image from the reality of diverse identities of southern nineteenth-century women, Baym likewise debunks southern womanhood as a postbellum fantasy without historical roots in the real (and fictional) lives of antebellum women (“The Myth of the Myth” 192-3).

was symbolic of the progressive, industrialized, and enlightened future of the United States (and, not coincidentally, the site of the publishing industry). Regional fiction used such local differences, most often expressed through a distinct dialect, to evaluate cultural differences against a national standard. Stephanie Foote argues that regional fiction thus did more than just assigning different locales, “places,” to Americans, but more importantly helped its readers imagine “the ‘place’ they inhabited in a social hierarchy” (11). As a result, the regions depicted in this type of writing are far from “internally homogenous,” and instead of affirming a common national past, they actively construct versions of such a past (13). For some southern writers who had a vested interest in reinventing the South’s shattered, post-war identity, regional fiction provided the tools needed to craft a mythologized version of the nation’s past.<sup>44</sup> It allowed these writers to evoke their home region as the chivalrous stronghold of Euro-Christian roots while at the same time transforming the cruel reality of race slavery into a harmoniously paternalistic picture of benevolent white masters and loyal black servants living happily side by side. Most famously exemplified in the plantation fiction of Thomas Nelson Page’s *In Ole Virginia* (1887), southern regional fiction became associated with nostalgia for the Old South and Lost Cause mythology.

The representation of African Americans played an important role in defining southern fiction as regional and in helping the South construct its own past. Among black characters, African American women inhabited a special place. According to Sherita L. Johnson’s analysis of black women in the culture of the post-war South, this

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<sup>44</sup> This applied mostly to white, genteel writers, of which Thomas Nelson Page and Thomas Dixon might be the most famous examples. It cut the other way, too, though. African American writers of the South, such as Charles W. Chesnutt, found themselves virtually confined to the genre no matter how hard they tried to break away from it.

role could enable them to “change the ‘text’ that is the South” in black-authored writings, but also shows how white southern writers used black women “to do certain cultural and political work” (3). Bonner’s Gran’mammy tales are examples of such white-authored southern fiction that depicts black-white relationships in complex ways through their deliberate use of the black woman. Shaped by two often contradictory forces – regional fiction in general, and particularly southern local color stories that reinforce racist hierarchies – complicates Bonner’s intervention in exploiting these genres in order to shape her own take on the South’s race, classed, and gendered subjectivities. The specific conventions of the latter type of stories often relied heavily on a sentimentalized representation of the past, and this provided another point of contention for Bonner’s style. On the one hand, it enabled her to keep writing in the sentimental register, a voice in which she felt familiar and a mode of expression that, as the above exchange with Alcott demonstrates, she understood to be genuine for expressing southern relationships of race and gender. In her discussion of southern women’s role in local color writing, Barbara C. Ewell links regional fiction to sentimental literature because both “become a site for exploring women’s subjectivity” (168). Ewell’s comparison applies well to Bonner’s Gran’mammy stories since the interracial interaction described in these tales resembles the structure of female-centered sentimental education with Gran’mammy taking on the role as young Kate’s sentimental guide.

On the other hand, Bonner’s use of sentimentalism likewise signals her complicity with a more nostalgically raced paternalism when she portrays Gran’mammy as the loyal servant before and after emancipation. As critics such as Ewell and McKee emphasize, southern women writers’ social rank in this conservative self-representation, both as

celebrated symbols of southern chivalry and subjugated individuals with little power, puts them into a place of simultaneous complicity and rebellion. Thus, while McKee makes the case that white southern women's writing cleverly uses literary conventions as a shield underneath which they can undermine "the conventions of gender, race and class relations, or, in other situations actively engage in the politics of image-building," ("Race" 31), Ewell complicates the liberating possibilities in the convergence of gendered and regional space by highlighting their biggest obstacle: race. The myth of the Old South, with its implicit racism, accordingly curbs white women's potential to use regional fiction as a tool to shape their own social prowess because "the postwar struggle to reconstruct an 'old order'," makes the South a site "where places of women (and black men) were already named" (Ewell 166). In Bonner's stories about the bonds between differently raced southern women, we see this conflict arise over and over again through her use of sentimentalized womanhood. While it serves as a counterpoint against the formal, detached image the North upheld of the South and enables Bonner to portray a true, 'real' and also largely independent picture of southern women, her excessive sentimentalism also holds her characters hostage to flattened stereotypes of race and gender.

Bonner's place in Boston and role as author was neither fixed nor comfortable because of the combination of her southern and gender identities. Given Bonner's ambiguities towards the North and the presence of unsentimental realism as *the* literary form of the moment, the success of "Gran'mammy's Last Gift" was no small feat. It signaled to her that through the popular demand for local color stories that accompanied the larger rise of a realist market place, she was able to keep writing stories that could

retain a sentimental tone while also portraying a true, ‘real’ picture of the South. The success of the story confirmed her eagerness to become a successful writer, respected by the northern elite, but it also presented itself as another battleground to measure which genre – realism or sentimentalism – was best suited to represent southern women. In a sense, then, Bonner’s Gran’mammy stories point to the difficulty of imagining the subject matter at hand – cross-racial relationships after slavery – in anything but sentimental terms, the genre that had historically dictated the empathetic tone of black-white relationships. Before I analyze in more detail another of Bonner’s Gran’mammy stories, “How Gran’mammy Broke the News,” as well as her melodramatic tale “Two Storms,” I want to spend some time tracing the development of Bonner’s authorial persona once she moved to Boston and needed to negotiate her regional identity against the genre expectations of a northern-dominated literary marketplace. As her authorial choices show, her mapping of sentimentalism onto the South is intricately connected to her understanding of racial relationships and to her deliberate use of black womanhood. The larger questions about literary genre, style, and region in which Bonner engaged help us better understand why and how she relies on sentimentalized cross-racial relationships in her Gran’mammy stories.

#### Navigating the Regional Marketplace: Howells, Bonner, and Sentimental Realism

It can be difficult to resist the temptation to concentrate on Sherwood Bonner’s dazzling, authorial personality upon encountering her work. Bonner’s biography as a proud, postbellum southern woman, who took the center of northern abolitionist tradition – literary Boston – by storm and not without scandal, is unequivocally one of the most

fascinating case studies of nineteenth-century women authors' complex entries into the literary marketplace. Born in Holly Springs, Mississippi in 1849, Bonner started writing at a young age and her "bookish" nature helped shape her into the alluring paradox of a young southern belle with intellectual, and even sometimes feminist, ambitions. After an unhappy marriage to Edward McDowell, Bonner risked disgrace by leaving a financially irresponsible husband and her young daughter behind in 1873 to become a successful writer in Boston. Supported by literary idol Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, whom she self-confidently charmed into acquaintance soon after she arrived in the North and which gave plenty of opportunity for gossip concerning an elderly man's patronage to a dazzling, young woman, Bonner soon published stories in the leading magazines of the day. Although she remains a minor figure among current critics of regional fiction, Bonner published a notable number of travel letters and short stories, ranging from melodramatic romances, sentimental dialect tales, and regional stories capitalizing on southern humor to narratives that merge local color with realist and naturalist touches, particularly in her later fictions about Southern Illinois and Tennessee mountain women. Beside her quite positively received apprentice novel, a sectional romance with feminist touches called *Like Unto Like* (1878), she also produced two short story collections – *Dialect Tales* (1883) and *Suwanee River Tales*, published posthumously in 1884 – towards the end of her life, which was tragically shortened by breast cancer at age thirty-four. Bonner's colorful biography and unmitigated ambition to make it as a successful writer in the postbellum magazine culture of realism seem to place her as a shining example of literary opportunity during the late 1870s and 1880s, the period when middle-class reading tastes shifted from sentimental stories to regional fiction.

Critics often evaluate Bonner's readiness to try on literary styles outside of the romantic-sentimental mode, the genre she was most familiar with from her own reading practices as a young girl and her first attempt at authorship, as opportunistic. Hubert H. McAlexander observes, for instance, that Bonner's tendency to be "peculiarly susceptible to literary influence" partly explains her wide-ranging oeuvre of fictional styles (154). Adding to her impressionability, he continues to list the greater literary offences resulting from this adaptability. She rode on the success of a fellow female writer and "copied" Mary Noailles Murfree's regional stories about Tennessee mountain folks, as well as peppering her miscegenation story, "A Volcanic Interlude," with a suspiciously similar plot line, setting, and tone to that of George Washington Cable's Creole fiction (*ibid.*). Richard Brodhead takes Bonner's decision to piggyback on Murfree's success, that is her sudden resolution to go "on a flying visit to learn how to 'do' Tennessee mountain folk," as a prime indicator of the "opportunities for the ambitious that regionalism's demand created" (119). In a sense, then, Sherwood Bonner's shrewdness in exploiting any advantage she could, social or literary, makes her a fascinating model for understanding how the magazine culture's craze for regional stories enabled her to set foot in the homes of Boston literati that would have been otherwise closed to a young, southern woman without formal literary education.<sup>45</sup>

Reading Bonner's letters confirms this woman's ambition and calculated measures to achieve success in 1870s Boston. Boldly sending a letter of introduction to Longfellow on December 8, 1873, Bonner's note sells herself as "a Southern girl away from my home and friends. I have come here for mental discipline and study [...]" It

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<sup>45</sup> For an excellent analysis of the role of influential magazines like the *Atlantic* in promoting and "selling" regionalism, see Nancy Glazener's comprehensive study *Reading for Realism*, especially pp. 190-205, as well as Brodhead (118-24).

would be a great happiness and help if I might know you” (Biglane 29). Capitalizing on her charm and her willingness to be mentored, Bonner purposefully uses her gender and regional identity to seek out connections that might aid her in fulfilling her dream of authorship. Although Bonner quickly gained a powerful and long-lasting ally in Longfellow, who could introduce her to other prominent writers and editors, this nationally cherished writer stood for a literary style of older times, the romanticism linked to the Fireside poets. While Bonner was thankful for Longfellow’s benevolence and his connections, her letters to her sister Ruth reveal Bonner’s early awareness of the need to adapt to whatever style of writing the eastern magazines, first and foremost the *Atlantic*, currently valued in order to get published. In one of her first letters after she arrived in Boston in late 1873, Bonner displays faith in her potential as a writer, explaining to Ruth that “[t]he more I see of other minds & the more I understand the literature of the day the more certain I am of my capability to take a rank not very high perhaps, but high enough to earn my own bread and butter” (Biglane 26). This pragmatic outlook on successful authorship, one that would pay the bills – an important aspect for Bonner, whose husband had proved to be financially unreliable – helps explain her confidence in emulating the literary modes surrounding her while her outsider status as southerner made her at the same time feel disadvantaged and alienated from the Boston elite (as the letter to Longfellow indicates).

From the beginning, Bonner displayed a strong orientation towards the *Atlantic*. Her first letters from Boston reveal that her main insurance for making it in the East was, in her eyes, to get acquainted with William Dean Howells, then editor of the *Atlantic*, and arbiter of the new literary trend of realist and regionalist writing. Getting to know

Howells and getting published in the *Atlantic* would mean that she had made it as a respected, financially stable authoress. The peculiar mix of professional aspiration and flirtatious femininity with which Bonner awaited her first meeting with Howells, arranged by Longfellow, illustrates how serious Bonner took this chance. Writing to Ruth about the impending meeting in September of 1874, Bonner confesses that “[h]e is a man I’ve long wanted to meet, and I’m all a flutter of delighted anticipation.” Yet her vanity and feminine wit soon intervene in her business-oriented consideration, as she writes that “[I h]ave had my b. silk fixed short and will get some fawn-colored gloves & new bonnet strings and curl my hair – Hope to strike his majesty favorably tho [sic] I hear he’s a stern business man” (Biglane 31-2). The letter shows Bonner’s unconventional approach to meeting editors. Instead of focusing on her business persona or suitable conversation material for striking up an interest in her work as writer, Bonner falls into a flirtatious mode that plays up the very stereotypes about southern women that otherwise vexes her. The letter’s tone also betrays a larger mismatch between Bonner’s identity as a female, southern writer and the northern world of publishing and reserved socializing that would continue to stand in her way of making contact with the very people she tried to impress.

Howells remained one of the literary arbiters Bonner would be unable to acquaint. According to McAlexander, Howells was one of the few Boston elite who “she could neither bewitch nor even win to her side” (61). Bonner, on the other hand, continued to obsess over the desired recognition Howells embodied, using him as the definitive hallmark to measure her success. When her first novel, *Like Unto Like*, was published in 1878, it received a considerable number of favorable reviews for a budding author.

Nonetheless, Bonner was devastated by the less praiseworthy assessment in the *Atlantic's* December issue of 1878.<sup>46</sup> The review's assessment of the novel's "girlishness" as "it's [sic] greatest charms," its accusation of "poor writing" and its contention that the author "will hardly lead farther afield the wandering glances which have essayed to peer beyond Mason and Dixon's line for the long tarrying portent of the Great American Novel" dampened the young writer's ambitions ("Colonel Dunwoodie and Other Novels" 705-06). In short, what the review argued was that Bonner's writing remained stuck in melodramatic, overly romantic generalizations of characters as types and lacked the faculty of realist representation that had become a necessary pre-requisite for a "masterpiece." Bonner's distress over the "blow Mr. Howells has given me!" and her concluding assessment that "an unfavorable verdict will do me a mischief in the very quarter where I most wished to be thought well of" reflects her keen sense of Howells's importance in determining an author's fate (Biglane 102).<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Unbeknownst to Bonner, the review was written by Harriet Waters Preston, an influential acquaintance of Howells's and frequent contributor to the *Atlantic* who had bought into the rumors portraying Bonner as a flirtatious woman who had overstepped the boundaries of married conduct with at least two men: Longfellow and abolitionist journalist James Redpath. For background on Preston's prejudice against Bonner and the repercussions of such gossip for Bonner's reputation in Boston, see McAlexander 115, 143, and 155-7. A detailed reproduction of Preston's letter that spells out the rumors about Bonner's marital transgressions, written to Paul Hamilton Hayne, a Southern poet who also reviewed Bonner's novel, can be found in Rayburn S. Moore's "'Merlin and Vivien'?" (182-3).

<sup>47</sup> Bonner was fixated on Howells. In a letter to Longfellow, in which she describes the negative repercussions the *Atlantic* review of *Like Unto Like* might have on her career, Bonner bemoans, "It is hard to bear. Sometimes I feel a burning indignation against Mr. Howells" (Biglane 102). Despite this, she did not lack connections to other editors of noteworthy literary magazines. On her tour through Europe in 1876 she met William Kirk, the son of *Lippincott's Magazine* editor John Foster Kirk. Solidified through a long-lasting friendship with William and his sister, Sophia, Bonner continuously published a good portion of her stories in *Lippincott's* from 1875 until 1883. Likewise, after the success of *Like Unto Like* in 1878, *Harper's Weekly* and *Harper's New Monthly Magazine* regularly printed her stories. Personal meetings and written correspondence between Bonner and Samuel Stillman Conant, editor of the *Weekly*, as well as Henry Mills Alden, editor of the *Monthly*, confirm the faith these influential agents of literary taste invested in Bonner. For Conant, see McAlexander who quotes a letter from the editor, assuring Bonner that "I accept your articles now without reading them in advance. Your signature is enough" (166). For Alden, see Bonner's letter to her father in which she recounts her positive meeting with the editor of *Harper's Monthly Magazine* and his request to write more stories for publication (Biglane 90-1).

Bonner's awareness of literary realism, keenly experienced through her rejection by Howells, did not mean though that she felt wholeheartedly at home in this new mode. To the contrary, her literary fluency was deeply anchored in romantic and sentimental writing. Her attachment to these literary modes paved the way for her sentimentalized rendition of African Americans in her local color stories. It also explains why Bonner could only imagine a representation of the true South and its womanhood through the cultural work of the black woman, as my analysis of her Gran'mammy stories will show. Like her heroine in *Like Unto Like*, Blythe Herndon, Bonner's juvenile reading tastes reflect the southern preference for English writers, such as literary idol Sir Walter Scott, next to Richardson, Fielding, and Thackeray.<sup>48</sup> This penchant for adventure romances reemerges in her first published stories, printed in the *Massachusetts Ploughman and New England Journal for Agriculture* in 1869, when she was barely twenty years old. But Bonner's difficulties in renouncing romantic writing techniques for realist ones might also point to her specific identity as a southern writer. Anne Goodwyn Jones's encompassing study about late nineteenth- and early twentieth century southern women writers notes their paradoxical relationship towards realism and romanticism. Although the realist mode should help female writers in debunking the myth of southern womanhood that limits their lives as independent, strong women, the romantic form strangely enough allows for greater liberty in shaping a female individuality that surely

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<sup>48</sup> The resemblance between Blythe Herndon and Bonner's upbringing and character traits supports an autobiographical reading of Blythe as a blueprint for Bonner's literary education. Chapter Two of *Like Unto Like* gives a detailed description of the girls' cultural education, including what they were encouraged to read – English classics, as opposed to American literature, which they knew little of “as it came chiefly from the North” (12). In addition, glances into Bonner's diary entries from the year of 1869 confirm her passion for Gothic romance plots. On June 28, she jots down that she started to read Charlotte Brontë's *Villette* to her friends, “a great favorite of mine.” A day later she reports enthusiastically that she has finished the novel, praising its “inexpressible pathos” and gushing “[h]ow exactly it suits the wild spirit that weary of its useless rebellings [sic] against fate rests at last in the calm of despair” (qtd. in Frank “Diary” 22).

would be at odds with the reality of the paternalistic South's confining gender hierarchy (359). Bonner's conventional southern education and her life-long rebellions against conforming to the traditional southern lady certainly reflect Jones's broader analysis about the persistence of sentimental and romantic forms in these women's writings.

Bonner's difficulties in representing her region and its people without resorting to the sentimental indicate that, for her, racially charged cross-female relationships could not be satisfactorily captured under the new dictum of realism. Although she was aware of the powerful demand for this type of representation, her letters reveal her simultaneous willingness to employ realism and her discomfort with it as the *best* form of representing reality. Describing to Longfellow her impressions of her long journey back to the South on June 1, 1874, Bonner expresses a good deal of skepticism towards the merit of realism's dispassionate approach to its subject matter: everyday life. "I had a safe and particularly stupid journey," Bonner complains, only to poke fun at the Boston literati she usually admires, "I think it is only in the delightful pages of Mr. Howells or Mr. Warner that one finds 'dear stupid Real Life,' very interesting as seen on a steamboat or car in these commonplace days." Thus expressing her doubt in this new literary approach because its subject matter does not seem to excite her if seen through objective, anti-romantic eyes, Bonner immediately juxtaposes her boredom with northern scenery with the stimulation she receives from entering the South:

It was interesting to note the gradual glide into the Southern land and the difference in the "manners and ways" of the people. I assure you my heart gave a bound when I first saw the men in their broad Spanish hats and long love-locks,

looking so sweet and Southern and picturesque and barbarous, and the old black Aunties came on board with their gaily turbaned heads [...]. (Biglane 30)

This passage is not noteworthy for Bonner's enthusiasm for the South as more beautiful, or more exciting than that of the West, or East, or North. This should be expected, given her southern pride and the fact that she describes her home to the New Englander Longfellow. What makes this passage remarkable is rather the fact that Bonner can only use sentimental language to describe "dear stupid Real Life" in the South. To her, the identity of the region, the very drudgery of its every-day life, is only accessible as pastoral, as a romantic display of white and black people co-existing day-by-day. Like the paintings Bonner confesses she prefers over reality, the 'real' South is neither stupid nor boring; its very reality is picturesque, including its barbarous elements.

In contrast, half a decade later, Bonner's letters expose her non-cynical willingness to take on the local color rationale to study "dear stupid Real Life" through keen, levelheaded observation of local people and customs. But tellingly, the fictions that she planned to create out of this anthropological process in Tennessee and Illinois were set beyond her home region, the deep South.<sup>49</sup> When she resided in southern Illinois in order to proceed with her divorce petition, she tried to make the most out of this exile by gathering writing material for the regional stories that were still in popular demand. Without the hints of sarcasm or removed skepticism that she displayed in her letter to Longfellow five years previously, Bonner writes again to her mentor on April 28, 1880. "What diverse experiences come into my life," she concedes as if to reflect on the opening of her mind and the literary development she has undergone during these last

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<sup>49</sup> In 1879, Bonner informed her childhood friend Cora Watson Carey of her plan to research the Tennessee Cumberland area in order to write a novel on the region's moonshiners, an enterprise that, in her eyes, held great promise for securing literary fame (see Biglane 14).

years. “And this studying humanity ‘by the natural method,’” she continues, “is exactly what a writer needs and what a woman seldom does” (Biglane 123). Bonner’s Tennessee and Illinois stories are usually counted among her best writing, particularly because these tales foreground an emotional realism devoid of sentimentalism, the type of literature, as the quote indicates, that was highly feminized and thus counterintuitive to the “natural method.” Although most critics argue that the distinction between these later stories and her southern, interracial tales lies in her general growth as a writer, I suggest that we need to reconsider such a statement in light of Bonner’s allegiance to her home region.<sup>50</sup> For Bonner, the identity of this region seems to be intricately wound up with race. Consequently, southern identity, both black and white, can only be imagined over the sentimental ties rooted in slavery.

Bonner’s story “The Revolution in the Life of Mr. Balingall” (1879) provides a template for tracing the co-existence of realist imagery, romantic plotlines, and black figures against the southern setting that generally characterizes Bonner’s fiction. Most importantly, the conclusion of the story points to Bonner’s literary strategy of assigning African Americans the symbolic role of best representing the reality of the South to a northern audience. Bonner had applied the results of this method extensively and successfully in her Gran’mammy stories through the interrelated relationship between the gendered bodies of black Gran’mammy and white Kate, but these earlier stories lack the

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<sup>50</sup> Most critics describe Bonner’s literary trajectory as a parallel for the larger decline of romance in light of realism, clearly valuing her burgeoning realist and naturalist style as superior to her sentimental stories. See, for example, William L. Frank who contends that despite Bonner’s talent for regional fiction she “finally went beyond that movement, and in her later writings she anticipated the realism of Howells, James, and Mark Twain” (Introduction xx), or McAlexander, whose wording in his otherwise excellent biography betrays a certain favoritism towards the stories that portray “the kind of local color realism that verges on the more sophisticated realism of the Howells school” (75). For example, he ranks her Illinois stories as “more successful works of art” (188). The counter-part to these more artful stories, in McAlexander’s account, are Bonner’s romance stories, because this genre was “the one most dangerous for her as an artist, for in it she could so easily indulge her old taste for sentimentality and melodrama” (193).

theoretical underpinnings of the connectivity between genre, region, and race that “The Revolution in the Life of Mr. Balingall” spells out. Published in the October 1879 issue of *Harper’s New Monthly Magazine*, the story reflects Bonner’s recent misery caused by the Yellow fever epidemic of 1878, which led her to return to her beloved hometown in haste, and during which she watched neighbors and friends ravaged by the disease. Bonner, who took a considerable risk in journeying from Boston into the infectious territory only to see her father and brother die, was deeply affected by this loss. But she also displays a keen writer’s sensibility for chronicling the many grief-stricken, heroic acts of her neighbors and friends who loyally stayed in Holly Springs to aid the dying despite the chance to flee to safer climates. Writing about these incidents, she continues to inhabit the same mediator role between North and the South that she did throughout her early Boston years as a columnist for the *Memphis Avalanche*. In these pieces, Bonner translated the cultural “Hub” of the North with its “somewhat stunning effects of Boston isms” for her southern audience (“A Southern Girl’s Experience” 3). This time, however, she describes a southern yellow fever outbreak for her northern audience.

Written as an advice piece to the juvenile audience of the *Youth’s Companion*, Bonner initially published her experience in April 1879 as a first-person chronicle, entitled “The Yellow Plague of ’78: A Record of Horror and Heroism.” Framed in the language of regional patriotism and drawing on human empathy, the tale’s tone remains largely documentary, giving its readers a sense of a suffering community through short portraits of individual citizens, distinguished either by the severity of their losses or their bravery. Cautioning her audience that “it is not a tale I can tell with art or eloquence,” because “it touches too near the deepest fountain of feeling,” Bonner only translates these

incidents “as simply a child talking to a child,” thereby “hold[ing] before your eyes a page of life stained with tears, and illuminated with the glory of true manhood and womanhood” (179). She ends her sketch by drawing out two such examples of true manhood and womanhood: Mr. W.J.L. Holland, one of her native friends who took a leadership role during the epidemic, and his fiancée, who returned to Holly Springs, despite its dangers, in order to aid her infected lover on his deathbed. Bonner uses Holland’s sacrificial death as an example for the noble manhood produced by the South. She takes the image of his despairing fiancée, bending in agony over his grave and lamenting the fact that she survived while her family did not, as a final symbol for the simultaneous desolation and nobility that marks the poise of postbellum southern society (190).<sup>51</sup>

Race does not seem to play a role in “The Yellow Plague of ’78.” The touching example of brave Mr. Holland and his fiancée’s undying love is the major plot factor and also becomes the backdrop for the fictionalized spin on Bonner’s experience with the Yellow Fever epidemic, published as “The Revolution in the Life of Mr. Balingall” six months after her documentary sketch. While racial relations are not put center stage, neither in the sketch nor the story, the latter’s ultimate message that southern womanhood can only be understood through the racialized voice of sentimentality only attains its full force from the introduction of a black character towards the end of the narrative. The story centers on Mr. Balingall, a young Cincinnati doctor who is engaged to the beautiful but shallow Fanny Vancourt. Ambitious and eager to escape his poor background, Balingall’s engagement to the wealthy Fanny is part of his practical and deliberate

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<sup>51</sup> Bonner’s letter to Longfellow on November 3, 1878, also refers to the heroic deeds of Mr. Holland and his secret fiancée, who, much to the surprise of Bonner and her family, turned out to be her husband’s sister, Lilly McDowell (Biglane 97).

mindset, given that her father happens to be Balingall's medical mentor. Balingall's complacency with his current relationship becomes rattled when he runs into Idalia Carey, a young woman determined to take the night train into the fever-infected South so that she can comfort her dying lover, Fane Evans. Sabotaged by the constant delays and misled by a family friend, Idalia addresses Balingall in order to reach the night train. Fascinated by Idalia's fearless intensity and her pure love for Evans, the brief encounter with this woman leads Balingall to re-evaluate his own life, especially his pragmatic relationship with Fanny. Fueled by Fanny's jealous discovery of Idalia's scarf-pin, a memento that Balingall accidentally obtained and held dear, their relationship becomes strained and finally breaks off. Balingall's crisis in defining a purpose for his life reaches its climax when he finds himself on a boat tour to New Orleans, unknowingly stopping in Idalia's hometown and learning from the African American sexton that Idalia did not die in the epidemic, but rather heart-brokenly visits her lover's grave every day. The story ends with Balingall staying in Kilbuck indefinitely, observing Miss Idalia from a distance and waiting for the day he will speak to her and maybe even win her love.

If reporting about her relatives and hometown only becomes possible at the expense of "art or eloquence" in "The Yellow Plague of '78," then Bonner uses the Balingall story to transform her painful recent history into a discussion of the idea of love and human self-knowledge. The narrative allows her to come back to her favorite brand of fiction: romance, an umbrella term for Bonner that, according to McAlexander, encompassed any of her love stories or thrillers (193). Bonner continued to value this type of fiction late in life, as is evidenced by her desire to publish a collection of stories under the heading *Romances* alongside her two other collections, *Dialect Tales* and

*Suwanee River Tales*. While this plan was cut short by Bonner's early death, Dorothy Gilligan notes in her 1930 Master's thesis that Bonner had listed the stories meant for her romance collection on the back of an envelope; "The Revolution in the Life of Mr. Balingall" was among them (58).<sup>52</sup>

Current critics often praise Bonner's Balingall story for its non-sentimental, realist writing style. The narrative's strength lies in its calm and slightly distanced tone. Bonner probes deeply into the interior of Mr. Balingall. Indeed, as the story unfolds, readers learn that the revolution in the life of Mr. Balingall, though certainly life-changing, is predominantly a psychological one, triggered by the seemingly chance encounter with a strong woman who embodies an ideal of love that Balingall thought extinct. Juxtaposing mundane details, such as the "quick, long steps" that Idalia takes, with Mr. Balingall's confused fascination towards her, leads to the protagonist's intense experience of their silence as "magnetic" and "vibrat[ing] with pain." Balingall gets hung up on the oddity of the situation, mentally remarking, "I did not think a woman could take such long steps" (285). In his farewell to Idalia, he thinks that "[h]e should have liked to kiss the hem of her dress" (287). These sentences suggest a mode of writing that registers minute details as important to character interiority, sidestepping the elaborate emotional confessions that were usually taken as hallmarks of narrative intensity in sentimental and romantic tales. McAlexander attributes Bonner's melodramatic restraint in this story to the fact that the subject material was too "close and real," thus demonstrating that she was "capable of serious and effective work within the [romantic] mode" (193).

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<sup>52</sup> According to Gilligan, the list entailed the following stories: "The Valcours," "Two Storms," "The Revolution in the Life of Mr. Balingall," "A Volcanic Interlude," and "A Chance in Life" (58).

If the immediate specter of reality – Bonner’s first-hand experience of the fever epidemic – contributed to refining her romances into burgeoning realist tales of interior consciousness, as McAlexander suggests, this juxtaposition between real and romance also reflects the internal conflicts within the story. Throughout the story, Bonner has each character compete over interpretations of Idalia. The characters thus lay claim on the definition of what counts as romantic and what counts as real. Balingall’s revelation, after all, entails renouncing his superficially pragmatic life and acquaintances for the supposed realism of a woman like Idalia, a person who embodies intensity, purity, and a kind of courage to risk her life for love. The story’s tension between romance versus reality, however, is never straightforwardly resolved. Idalia’s name alone symbolizes this internal rift. Introduced by her chaperon, Mr. Ormsby, as “Miss Idal,” Balingall infers the phonetic allusions Bonner clearly intends. Contemplating that he does not even know her full name but only the address as Miss Idal, Balingall admonishes, “[S]omebody’s ‘Idol’ he could well believe, but not this loquacious young man’s, whose chief regret about the whole matter seemed to be that some one might hold him responsible” (288). Although Balingall’s mind immediately classifies Idalia as stronger and more worthy than Ormsby or even himself, his awe for “such a sweet and strong young life” borders on idealization itself.<sup>53</sup> Wishing to align himself with the willpower that Idalia embodies against Ormsby’s self-centered smallness of mind, Balingall must admit that once he sees her into the southern-bound train, the fumes of carbolic acid bring on him “a sudden horror.” He realizes that in his need for safety he “could only look on dumbly” as Idalia

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<sup>53</sup> Gowdy’s annotated edition of Bonner’s short stories suggests that Bonner may have borrowed this name from Eliza Heywood’s 1723 novel, *Idalia; or the Unfortunate Mistress* (301). Heywood was known for writing titillating romance adventures, featuring strong female characters. The combination of romance and women’s independence certainly would have appealed to Bonner, if we can assume that she was familiar with Heywood’s works.

immerses herself so readily in the reality of pain and suffering, thereby magnifying his lack of emotional prowess (286-7).

Soon after Balingall's encounter with Idalia, the narrative emphasizes that he may well idolize this southern woman, but in his own mind, Idalia becomes a counterpoint of sincerity and real love, measured against his own fiancée, Fanny. Greeting her lover with the request to admire her, Balingall can only throw his fascination with Fanny's beauty into relief by confessing that "in the abstract [...] I like something grave and noble in a woman's face," using the exact same words he chooses a few minutes later to describe his mysterious encounter with Idalia after the jealous Fanny found her scarf-pin in his pocket (289). With Fanny's vanity insulted, an argument ensues between the lovers. To Balingall's dismay, he realizes that Fanny misinterprets the noble determination he sees in Idalia as markers of a fast woman who disregards good manners by addressing strangers at night in the street. Disappointed that Fanny's jealousy overrides any signs of female sympathy for another woman in distress, Balingall belittles his fiancée's envy as a sign of immaturity and shallowness. While Fanny rightly calls out Balingall's lack of esteem for her, she also accurately assesses his infatuation with the fleeting image of Idalia. "George, you are turning into a tragedy hero," Fanny concludes, undermining Balingall's view of himself as rightful interpreter of Idalia's genuine love and truthful womanhood (291).

Although Fanny keenly observes Balingall's own glorification of a woman he admires for her authenticity, thus distorting the very qualities of veracity her actions represent, his fiancée's portrayal likewise removes Idalia from the spectrum of real, lived womanhood. Spurned by jealousy and the gossip with her friends, Idalia's specter

becomes a threat to Fanny, haunting her as the intangible “yellow-fever heroine [...] with the romantic name” (292). Moreover, her friend’s starry-eyed interpretation of Balingall’s fascination with Idalia, casting him in the role of “Becket’s sweetheart” hunting the South for a pretty name, only intensifies Fanny’s anger. Refusing to take on her friends’ dreamy exclamation that she cannot “see how he could resist the romance of the thing,” Fanny deliberately positions herself as a counterpoint to the hollowness of Idalia’s idealistic image, suggesting that Fanny presents reality, however flawed (294). Fanny continues to be obsessed by the fleeting image of this rival and presses her fiancé to incessantly tell the story of his encounter with Idalia, and, in so doing, transforms Balingall’s hero worship into a caricature. While the narrator chides Fanny’s cruel pencil drawing of Idalia’s despair as exposing her own “vulgar little soul,” the story nonetheless never questions that Fanny’s own attempts to reveal the same ridicule in Balingall’s rose-tinted view of Idalia is less accurate (293). In fact, the narrator’s critique encompasses both Fanny’s and Balingall’s misinterpretation of the southern woman, insinuating that their regional identity makes them unable to fully understand Idalia’s complexity. One transforms her into a romantic heroine while the other responds with mockery, yet in so doing both deny Idalia’s comprehensive individuality and remove it from the realm of authenticity. Both representations remain unable to capture the real Idalia as a symbol of the South, a task that will only be achieved by the black sexton, whose southern identity reflects back on and replaces Bonner’s own authority on southern womanhood, towards the conclusion of the story.

Even after Balingall’s separation from Fanny, brought on by his continued fixation on his idol, Balingall sustains a romantic view of his symbolic acquaintance.

Running into Ormsby and learning of Idalia's death after succumbing to her lover's disease does not curb this obsession. Although the narrator confirms that such a crisis as the undoing of an engagement demands deliberation and adjustment, the chance invitation of a friend to take a steamer trip to New Orleans, presumably to initiate change, only confirms that Balingall maintains his romanticized view of Idalia. Balingall experiences his journey downstream as if it came out of a plantation novel, leisurely passing "the lazy negroes fishing sleepily, the low swamp lands with their clotted growth and serpent-winding vines, the plantations and their tributary fields" (295-6). Even when the captain announces an unexpected stop at Kilbuck, the very town Idalia called home, Balingall's eagerness to visit the homestead of his infatuation overshadows the reality of the town's post-epidemic despair. Titillated by the idea of "fancy[ing] in which one of [the houses] Idalia had lived," Balingall mistakes the "odd conjunction" of dead flowers and old clothes, a marker of the infectious death epidemic, at first as regional quaintness before he realizes with horror that the real face of the South is anything but pastoral (296).

After he registers the devastation the yellow fever has brought to Kilbuck, Balingall continues to sentimentalize the death-like quality that has marked the town by concluding his round at the cemetery. Awed by the numerous fresh graves dug because of the epidemic, he gives voice to the "thrilling sadness" by muttering, "And this is the end of every man's desire." Incidentally, the reverence that leads him to consider the despair in the face of death does not curb Balingall's specific desire since, just at that moment, he spots a mourning woman, "with a step so gliding that she seemed to float rather than walk," who turns out to be Idalia. Inappropriately, almost laughing at the

sight of the woman he deemed dead, Balingall diverts his attention from the reality of human suffering surrounding him so that “the graves were no more to him than the leaves that strew the earth after a hurricane. Idalia was alive – that was enough” (297).

Reverting to his obsession with the romantic ideal, Balingall rejoices in Idalia’s unerring love rather than acknowledge the severity of southern grief that Idalia exemplifies.

I do not mean to suggest that Bonner did not intend for Idalia to become an image of heroism and noble southern womanhood, but the point of the tale is that such symbolism goes beyond the mere romantic love story that Balingall develops around Idalia. Idalia’s strength and authenticity lie in her courage to uphold the ideals of humanity, compassion, and regional pride even in the face of death. As the reader learns, this includes the sacrifice of her lover, Fane Evans, whom Idalia had encouraged to stay in Kilbuck and help secure order and honor in the town. Rising to fame and respect because of his ability to retain order, even quenching the potential for a racial riot, Fane Evans embodies the ideal postbellum southern gentleman, bound by honor and compassion to serve his neighbors, white and black alike. This is the back-story of Idalia Carey and Fane Evans, one that counters Balingall’s one-dimensional infatuation via a multi-dimensional approach to the meaning of veracity.

Unlike her first-person chronicle “The Yellow Plague of ‘78,” Bonner does not use the narrative voice in the Balingall story as a stand-in for herself, teaching northerners about the glorious concept of “true manhood and womanhood.” In fact, the ultimate lesson taught to Balingall about the extent of Idalia’s personality comes through the voice of an African American character, the town’s sexton. Interrupting Balingall’s wistful gaze towards his object of affection, the black sexton fills in the history of

Kilbuck, Idalia and Fane Evans. Rendered in dialect, thus sprinkling her romance with the necessary touch of local color, Bonner bestows upon an African American character the capability to rightfully interpret southern womanhood. Explaining that he stayed throughout the epidemic since “[d]ar warn’t no partikeler use in my runnin’ off. [...] An’ dar was work for me to do,” the sexton, priding himself on properly making graves for the white citizens, establishes his credibility as town chronicler (298). Describing in his own words and intonation the cause of the outbreak and the town’s management of the crisis due to brave men like Fane Evans, the sexton takes over most of the emotional and historic responsibility that Bonner claims for herself in “The Yellow Plague of ‘78.” The way in which the moral interpreters of the two narratives – Bonner in “The Yellow Plague of ‘78” and the African American man in “The Revolution in the Life of Mr. Balingall” – map onto each other suggests an intricate, almost interchangeable, connection between white and black southerners in interpreting the meaning of the South.

Bonner’s use of a black character implies that the complexities of the postwar South, especially its construction of white man- and womanhood can only be channeled properly through the consciousness of African Americans. Unlike Balingall, who romanticizes Idalia, or Fanny, who reduces her to a caricature, or even Idalia’s northern family friend, Ormsby, who can only imagine her as a lovesick, irrational woman, the black sexton is capable of rendering the full, truthful picture of Idalia’s greatness. Helping “Miss Ida” water Fane Evans’s grave – note that the sexton does not make the same mistake of phonetically turning Idalia into an idol – this black man shoulders the burden of her grief with her, preserving history alongside the white southern woman. In addition, he tells Balingall that when Idalia came back from her near-death, she was “not

de same pretty young lady dough, but a *shadder*, all broke wid grief” (300). Breaking down the idealistic image of beauty that Balingall insists on seeing in Idalia even when she appears in deep mourning, the sexton corrects Balingall’s narrow concept of romantic love. He gives Idalia depth and points out how the reality of sorrow has affected her physically.

Despite the sexton’s wistful account of the real Idalia Carey, Balingall has not changed at the end of the story. Rashly deciding to stay a while in Kilbuck, he continues to pine for Idalia from a distance, hoping to one day win her love. Although he watches her carefully and observes “with sharp pangs that month by month her features are more sharply cut, her form more slight, and her step drags more heavily,” in the end he clings to his preconceived ideal of Idalia as a symbol of woman’s undying love. He does not allow himself to consider, even “in his most fearful dream [...] that she will die” (301). With this ending, Bonner returns to a more conventional romantic conclusion that allows hope for sentimentalized love. However, the majority of this narrative works against a superficial storyline that glosses over the complexities of women and instead reduces them to one-dimensional receptacles of devotion. In fact, the tension between reality and romance, embodied through the meaning of Idalia, drives the narrative’s, and by proxy, Bonner’s own struggle with rendering romantic tales in a realist manner. As in most of her stories, the amalgamation of these different styles has to be rerouted through blackness, endowing the narratives with the needed sentimental genuineness.

Intimate Exploitation: Black and White Women in Bonner's Southern Regional  
Stories

All of Sherwood Bonner's Gran'mammy stories are deeply concerned with mapping the relationship between white and black bodies in the South, especially throughout the volatile social changes brought on by the Civil War. In the Gran'mammy stories, we see Bonner's willingness to "stretch the boundaries" of the plantation tradition unfold, undermining her complicity with the genre's paternalistic postwar racism through a celebration of interracial female bonds (McKee, "Race" 33). In these tales, the connection between white and black women remains often messy, and they fail to achieve a balance of power in which both types of women reinforce each other equally; repeatedly, as McKee convincingly shows in "The Night the Stars Fell," Gran'mammy's blackness serves as a counterpoint for young Kate, allowing her to "restore her own sense of embattled whiteness" ("Race" 35).<sup>54</sup> "Breaking the News," as well as the revised version, "How Gran'mammy Broke the News" that Bonner prepared for *Suwanee River Tales*, remains one of the Gran'mammy stories frequently overlooked by critics. Yet this story deliberately plays with the interchangeability of black and white women, showing their intimacy and locating sentimental agency in the value of black womanhood. At the same time, the tale's production history hints at Bonner's shrewdness in exploiting an increasingly popular regional fiction commodity, the black mammy, in the service of whiteness.

"Breaking the News" and its revised version "How Gran'mammy Broke the News" follow the same plot. Recalling a Christmas Eve during war time, the girl

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<sup>54</sup> Previously published as "Gran'mammy's Story," Bonner renamed it for her collection *Suwanee River Tales*.

narrator, a stand-in for young Bonner, describes the family's preparation for a holiday party. Despite the scantiness of provisions and guilt they feel for indulging during these hard times, the household rejoices in the welcome distraction, especially Aunt Sarah Edmandson, a widow who resided with the Bonners'. Though constantly worried about her beloved son, Allan, who was away fighting in the war, even Aunt Sarah takes part in the general giddiness. Yet all merriment is soon cut short when the minister arrives with bad news from the front, sending Aunt Sarah in a fit of inconsolable grief over Allan's death. Being left in charge of raising her aunt's spirits, young Kate proves helplessly overwhelmed at the task. However, by a miraculous turn of events, Allan's death turns out to have been a mistake since he arrives home shortly thereafter. The remaining difficulty rests on Kate's young shoulders because she needs to find a way to "break" shocking, albeit happy, news to Aunt Sarah's in her already fragile mental state. Having rather awkwardly mastered this task, the whole family can rejoice over Allan's rescue at the battlefield, one that was symbolically enabled by the kindheartedness of a northern soldier.

"Breaking the News" features young Kate as the principal actor, giving Gran'mammy a rather tangential role, much like a scenic prop that reflects southern ambience. Thus, when the reader first hears Gran'mammy's comparison of this Christmas meal's meagerness with the "solid week a-bakin' and a-brewin'" that produced an abundance of extravagant food for the wedding of Kate's mother, she inhabits the role of loyal black servant who fondly reminisces about the golden pre-war years (238). Sentimentalizing the antebellum slave South as enabling slaves and white owners to produce and consume such riches side-by-side, Bonner uses the proud Gran'mammy as a

mouthpiece for the nostalgic racism of the plantation tradition. But the narrative also suggests that underlying the loyalty of blacks such as Gran'mammy is a deeper bond between ex-slave women and their white charges; a tie that reveals how their customary physical closeness has transformed into a nearness of minds that makes them act like emotional twins.

This emotional bond between black and white women becomes evident throughout the story. When the minister tells Aunt Sarah that her son is dead, the rest of the family surrounds her. Her grief affects her audience in sentimental fashion, all reacting empathetically to her pain as well as supporting her. Thus, Kate's mother jumps to catch the fainting aunt in her arms. Like a domino effect, Gran'mammy grasps Sam, Kate's brother, and bemoans the grim fate of southern men in losing their lives to a war that is "cruel an' hard, an' dar's no right in any of it." Substituting Sam for the dead Allan in sentimental manner, Gran'mammy criticizes the war by crying out that "[i]t's all bitter, black wrong – dat's what it is!" (240). Kate likewise responds to this sentimental chain reaction by "echo[ing]" Gran'mammy's words by throwing down the flowers she holds in her hands. Playing echo to Gran'mammy's words, Kate demonstrates an inseparable bond between her and the black woman that triggers them to reflect each other's feelings. In this instance, Kate imitates Gran'mammy's lesson of sentimental sympathy, rounding out the series of interracial compassion prompted by Kate's mother that demonstrates how black and white women act in sync through their emotional ties.

Shortly after this moment, "Breaking the News" differs in a striking way from its later, revised version, "How Gran'mammy Broke the News." As the title already suggests, Gran'mammy takes center-stage in the later version and replaces Kate as the

one who prepares Aunt Sarah for Allan's return from the dead. The transfer of agency from Kate to Gran'mammy in the revised version certainly speaks to Bonner's awareness of literary audience, reflecting the popularity of her black icon by strengthening her role so that the story would more organically flow with the rest of the Gran'mammy cycle wherein the black servant frequently seizes agency (Gowdy xxiv). But beyond this knack for popularity that explains the radical shift in agency, the scene that announces the death of Aunt Sarah's son portrays Kate and Gran'mammy as sharing an irrefutable intimate bond. Featured in both versions, this scene makes them more alike than different, even suggesting that they are variants of one inseparable unity. As such, their compassion becomes a strong symbol, portraying, in Sophia Kirk's words – a close friend of Bonner's who wrote the preface to *Suwanee River Tales* – “fragments of reality which no poverty of invention, but insistence of affection forced into print” (iv).

“How Gran'mammy Broke the News” expands on the above scene by “forcing” more of these unassailable moments of affection and interchangeability between Kate and Gran'mammy “into print,” to use Kirk's turn of phrase. In the earlier version, Kate, all by herself, wanders off into the front yard after having been unable to comfort Aunt Sarah. It is here that she spots the homecoming Allan. In the later version, Gran'mammy joins Kate in an effort to soothe the young girl, but both of them “break down in tears” at the face of such inconsolable grief.<sup>55</sup> Again, this scene confirms the intimacy between the two women. Acting in sync since they start to weep “when either of us tried to

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<sup>55</sup> The presence of Gran'mammy might be implied in the earlier version as well. Although Kate describes only herself when she wanders into the garden and spots a soldier, the next paragraph inconsistently reads, “The sun was in *our* eyes” (my emphasis 241). If we assume that this slippage betrays Gran'mammy's likely presence, this moment provides another example of the inseparability between white and black women. Even as a silent prop or ghost-like company, Gran'mammy naturally surrounds Kate and thereby reinforces her white, female identity.

“speak,” Kate and Gran’mammy complement and comfort each other in their sadness (30). Furthermore, once Allan has come close enough for them to recognize him, Gran’mammy embodies Kate’s disbelief and joy when she kneels tableaux-like with outstretched arms to thank God for His mercy (*ibid.*). McKee registers the interdependency between Kate and Gran’mammy in her analysis but also notes how this intimacy often works to highlight Kate’s character. Relying on Toni Morrison’s insight that black characters are regularly used strategically to enhance or qualify white counterparts (52-3), McKee asks us to take note of Bonner’s vision of black-white relationships that depend on one another for definition, even if this dependency often turns out to be lop-sided (“Race” 35-6). In “How Gran’mammy Broke the News”, the black woman’s iconic gesture helps specifically to reinforce Kate’s own sentiment at seeing the cousin she believed to be dead. In a sense, then, Gran’mammy acts here as a personified part of Kate’s emotional consciousness.

Just at the moment in “How Gran’mammy Broke the News” when Bonner seems to have established a racialized relationship that privileges whiteness, albeit circuitously, Gran’mammy takes action. While Allan and Kate excitedly exchange their sides of the story, Gran’mammy intervenes against Kate’s impulsive idea to go and see his grief-stricken mother immediately. “Stop, honey, stop; Miss Katie you forgit,” the older woman admonishes, “Don’t you know dat joy itse’f is sometimes more dan a breakin’ heart kin bear?” (31). In the original “Breaking the News,” there is no such intervention. In this earlier version, young Kate becomes the go-between of a delicate set of messages. Not surprisingly, Kate, who has been several times described as alternatively fascinated, frightened, or overwhelmed by Aunt Sarah’s excessive grief, fulfills her task awkwardly

and without social skill (239-40, 242). In the later version, however, Gran'mammy confidently seizes agency, instructing Kate to help Allan refresh himself while "I'll go up stairs, an' break de news ter Mis' Sarah" (32).

Slipping into the definite role of sentimental teacher, Gran'mammy transcends the earlier intimacy that would relegate the black woman to merely a silent symbol of Kate's integrity as a character. As a woman-in-training, Kate complies and reports that she, immediately after delivering Allan to the rest of the family, "slipped up stairs" to observe her sentimental teacher demonstrate her diplomatic skills by administering the heartbroken mother. These include Gran'mammy softly singing praises to God and thanking Him for His goodness, thereby expertly and slowly coaxing Aunt Sarah into a discussion about God's grace and the ultimate trust in His ways. Conjuring up images of interracial closeness and maternity, since she had nursed Allan as well, the black woman compassionately shares in Aunt Sarah's pain, winning her confidence through the sentimental moment of shedding tears with her and for her son. Thus, Gran'mammy's gentle expertise prevents Aunt Sarah from becoming overwhelmed with the sudden change of extreme emotion, and, as a result, safely unites her with her son (32-6).

The way in which Kate culminates her account of Gran'mammy's sentimental coup d'état emphasizes the young girl's admiration for her black nurse, locating in Gran'mammy's actions a depth hitherto unacknowledged and one that Kate can only wish to attain some day. "Words cannot do justice to the solemnity, the yearning tenderness, the pathetic earnestness," Kate acclaims, "that made the dear old woman like one inspired. Wave after wave of feeling rolled over her face. I do not know how to express it," she confesses, "– but a sacred, even *religious* rapture seemed to hold her in its

possession. Strong feeling had exalted her. I felt as if I should like to steal in and pray beside her” (35). Linked through sentimental sympathy with Aunt Sarah and Kate, Gran’mammy epitomizes the essence of womanhood so perfectly that she also becomes a link to God. She thereby embodies an ideal of womanhood in its depth and genuineness with which Kate longs to merge. Physical closeness and emotional intimacy between Kate and Gran’mammy still, in the end, serve predominantly Kate since it helps delineate and refine her white womanhood. But blackness transcends its prop-like quality here to become not only an enhancer but also a source of veracity. Not surprisingly, the story quickly undermines its portrait of Gran’mammy as an individual of superb human quality, a model for women like Kate. After everybody rejoices in the lucky reunion, Kate relegates Gran’mammy back to her usual place in the background of domestic bliss, becoming “quite her comfortable fat self again” (37). As the ever-changing dynamics of their relationship in this story demonstrate, the linkage between both women already undergirds “Breaking the News” and is expanded in the later version. In both cases, Gran’mammy and Kate are natural extensions of one another. The second version does not denote a radical change that superimposes Gran’mammy’s agency over that of the white girl. Instead, both versions show that the power balance between black and white women is more complex, perpetually oscillating between enhancing whiteness and signifying blackness as the real.

The constant back and forth between Kate and Gran’mammy’s agency in these stories forcefully illustrates “the need for blackness and whiteness to reinforce and define each other” that characterizes Bonner’s southern vision (McKee, “Race” 37). That does not mean, however, that Bonner represents Kate and Gran’mammy’s presence as equally

well-rounded characters. The moments that relegate the black woman to a tableaux-like figure of supporting value or that reduce her to a defenseless stereotype, like that of “her comfortable fat self,” disturb the symbolic value of cross-racial female relationships Bonner otherwise celebrates. These instances also undermine the notion of black women as embodiments of moral veracity that appear so central in Alcott’s writings. Compared with Alcott’s attempt to imbue black womanhood with a genuineness inaccessible to normative white womanhood, Bonner’s depiction of black women is alternately exaggerated in its flamboyant sentimentality or a flat, racist stereotype.

Bonner’s willingness to transgress the physical and emotional boundaries between white and black women puts her literary figures in a place where blackness and whiteness co-mingle. The daily interaction between black servants and white children and women customary in southern ante- and postbellum households turned physical proximity into habitual intimacy. In “Gran’mammy,” the opening sketch Bonner put together in piecemeal fashion from her previously published stories so as to introduce the reader to her beloved character for *Suwanee River Tales*, Bonner shows how such physical contact facilitates emotional ties that readily cross the color line. Gran’mammy’s “tenderness when we were wee toddlers,” thus shapes an affective connection based on bodily contact that insures she will remain the maternal figure “to whom we ran to tell of triumphs and sorrows” (3,5).

However, the southern site of domestic cross-racial intimacy also proves to be a territory in which the volatile fusion of racialized gender must ultimately be separated for white womanhood to consciously re-appear as underpinned by but different from black womanhood. The Gran’mammy stories share an underlying impetus to teach young Kate

that, despite all physical closeness to Gran'mammy, her black body is essentially different from Kate's white one. To that end, Bonner undermines the interchangeability proposed in "Breaking the News" when Gran'mammy safely transforms from embodied ideal of womanly virtues to her fat self, re-erecting an insurmountable barrier between this coarse, maternal type of womanhood and the delicate, refined one Kate will naturally inhabit as a white southerner.<sup>56</sup> Nevertheless, blackness provides the template that lies at the bottom of Kate's gendered education. The contrast between these racialized gender identities enables Kate's white self to appear in the end as even "whiter."

The impossibility for black and white to co-exist on equal terms becomes even clearer in one of Bonner's best-known short stories, "Aunt Anniky's Teeth" (1882). One of Bonner's most acclaimed stories (at least by the standards of current critics), Bonner portrays with Aunt Anniky a black woman whose independence of mind and business savvy leads her to get what she wanted all along: a set of shiny white teeth. Based on humor, an essential element of southern dialect fiction, the story moves away from the motherly sentimental ties that mark Kate and Gran'mammy and towards a broader depiction of post-war domestic relations between whites and recently freed blacks. Despite beginning to describe Aunt Anniky as an "African dame" with an "imposing presence," the narrator quickly concedes that for most people, she was "a funny, illiterate old darkey" (93). Confirming the racist assumptions about black Americans that, according to Gavin Jones, characterized much dialect fiction, particularly those that adhered to the plantation tradition (107), Bonner's portrayal of Aunt Anniky's color as the blackest black only adds to this genre's propensity to encode segregation through the

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<sup>56</sup> McKee eloquently analyzes "Why Gran'mammy Didn't Like Pound-Cake" in order to show how these stories employ supposed biological differences between black and white bodies as metaphors for social differences, thus insinuating that "black skin signals difference at every level" ("Race" 33-4).

contrast between black and white skin. Adding to this, Anniky's choice of small, delicate and very white teeth set against "the great cavern in which Aunt Anniky's tongue moved" only emphasizes the dangerous absorption of whiteness by black bodies as well as the unfit amalgamation of blackness and whiteness since it neither aesthetically nor culturally pleases. Thus, when the narrator aptly describes the dialectical sensation whenever Aunt Anniky opens her mouth as that of "a piano-lid opening suddenly and showing all the black and white ivories at a glance" (98), McKee fittingly points out that Aunt Anniky's body becomes a personified line of racial segregation, transgressing blackness while at the same time remaining a site of incorporated Jim Crow ideology ("Race" 41).

Descriptions such as Anniky's deep blackness or Gran'mammy's coffe-colored fat self quickly remind readers of Bonner's stories that white women's biologically different make-up must lead to social differences as well. Accordingly, the physical closeness that marks the every-day interaction between differently raced women in the South does not necessarily insure a likeness between black and white women; to the contrary, their bodies, and ultimately their social selves, are quite different from each other. Emotionally, however, their bonds can become and will remain inseparable. In other words, a sentimental concept of womanhood allows for a conflation of color; indeed, as the intimate relationship between Bonner's black mammys and white charges consistently shows, white and black womanhood remains ultimately the same, even if white and black women must differ from one another.

In "Two Storms" (1881), Bonner takes up the conflation of black and white womanhood, both by uncovering racial boundaries as arbitrary and simultaneously showing the very real dangers of such a conflation for white women's social reputation.

Stylistically, the plot of “Two Storms” remains rather convoluted. Starting with the tableaux of a beautiful woman whose hair is being combed by her daughter, Dina, the story paints a romantic picture only to let tragedy strike when the weak mother dies from shock after a storm has destroyed half of the southern coastal island on which they reside. Interspersed with Maum Dulcie, Dina’s mammy, telling her little charge the Tar Baby story before the storm sets in, Bonner freely mixes narrative conventions by combining romance with folk tale and dialect fiction. After this prelude, the story proper sets in. Motherless Dina is now sixteen. Neglected by her grief-stricken father who dabbles in cotton speculation, Dina’s only paternal bond is with Maum Dulcie, a figure who, despite her love and concern, lacks the social skills needed to imbue etiquette on precious white daughters. Accordingly, Bonner gives her romance a sensational turn when Dina accompanies Maum Dulcie to one of her Hoodoo rites where the two women are saved from mystical madness by an unknown stranger. Marion West, an opportunistic author attracted at first to Dina’s wildness, quickly woos Dina, but their love is built on falsehood and danger from the start, since he is already married. Before his seduction is complete, however, another devastating storm leaves both lovers almost dead. In the end, Dina remains heart-broken and alone after a long sickness, comforted by the only love safe for a young maiden: a father’s devotion to his daughter.

Instead of analyzing the patchwork structure of this story, riffing on African folk tale, voodoo practices, melodrama, and historical romance by fictionalizing the 1856 Gulf hurricane, I want to concentrate on the segments that portray the close-knit bond between Dina and Maum Dulcie.<sup>57</sup> Their relationship illustrates the fragile upholding of racial

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<sup>57</sup> For comments on the various influences in “Two Storms” and Bonner’s mixing of genre pieces, see also McAlexander (199). For Bonner’s early venture into composing regional stories about the Louisiana Gulf

barriers, suggesting that Dina's and Dulcie's transgressions of their respective socio-gendered positions point to the likewise volatile boundary between black and white womanhood, making their conflation both possible and likely. The story opens with the domestic picture of a genteel lady, her picturesque child, and the type of devoted black servant that Bonner used excessively in her Gran'mammy stories. Here, Maum Dulcie, "a turbaned old black woman," alternately mends the riding habit of her original charge, Eugenia Mabyn, as well as lovingly "cool[ing] and powder[ing] the flushed face" of little Dina and soothing her with the Tar Baby story in the absence of her parents (728-9). After Eugenia's death, the sentimental ties between Dina and Maum Dulcie intensify since the black woman's "guardianship was all that Dina had." Although Maum Dulcie replaces the child's mother, the narrator is quick to highlight the fact that mammy's love, while emotionally abundant, lacks the essential components of "advanc[ing] [Dina] in a young lady's education" (734). With her father regularly absent on business ventures, Dina grows to be a beautiful but wild, spoiled child.

Because of Dina and Maum Dulcie's emotional closeness, the girl quickly registers the secret – "an affair of the night" – that from time to time interrupts Maum Dulcie's loving attendance. These night romps and the following days of Dulcie's nervousness and repentance turn out to be participation in secret Hoodoo rites. Associated with the mysterious Sinai, an old black "beggar-woman" who gets "drunk on black coffee" and whose countenance, according to the narrator, "a painter of the Ugly Real could desire for a model," Hoodoo practices denote a territory of forbidden pleasures and social transgressions for both Dulcie and Dina (735). Closely connected

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islands, years before Kate Chopin or Grace King, see Gowdy (xlii). For praise from early, almost contemporary, biographers of Bonner's about the significance and literary merit of the story, see Bondurant (63) and Drake (115).

with African rites, devil worship, and oft-sexualized fervor, Hoodoo becomes a racialized site of excess in polar opposite of the pious spaces designated for genteel, white womanhood. Thus, it comes as no surprise that Dulcie vehemently refuses to take Dina to one of the meetings. Even when threatened by the girl's blackmail, Dulcie rhetorically rationalizes that the irresponsibility of taking Dina would equal holding "a cup o' pizen to yer lips" (737). However, this dilemma does more than reinforce the chasm between white womanhood and a black womanhood deemed promiscuous, epitomized by Sinai and Hoodoo. Maum Dulcie's own reputation is at risk since her domestic blackness as servant in a wealthy household and care-taker signifies a "personified respectability," aided by clothes and facial features of distinction that set her apart from Sinai's savageness (735). In fact, Dina and Dulcie's strong emotional bond insures their loyalty and likeness to each other. This comes to the fore when Dina at first vehemently defends her mammy against Sinai's accusations (736). These acts of affection further indicate that Dulcie's socio-gendered respectability outweighs her skin color to a certain extent so that she can be placed side-by-side with Dina in a zone of cross-racial intimacy that is safely engulfed by (race-neutral) domestic womanhood.

Despite the protective mantle of domestic sentimentalism that grants Dulcie racialized respectability, she cannot withstand the temptations to transgress these boundaries into the terrain of Hoodoo practice that is clearly marked as black. Being called out by both Sinai and Dina about her spiritual duplicity, Dulcie can only defend herself by admitting to Dina that "[d]e Hoodoo meetin' is my drink," and presents such an addictive force that it "pulls an' pushes till I git dar" (737). After Dina finds out her secret, the narrator resorts back to more typical racial stereotypes to describe Dulcie's

passion. Spurned by Dina's curiosity and growing desire to participate in Dulcie's wild side, Maum Dulcie is plagued by "[s]ome wild superstition of her race [that] was interwoven with her being." Further, the narrator describes, "[i]nstance, like a leaping passion or mother-love, was stronger than reason. No force could hold her back, when from the altar that bugle sounded" (737-8). But this force affects not only Dulcie but Dina as well. As much as the two depend on each other's company at home, Dina also rationalizes her desire to go see the Hoodoo scene through the emotional claim she holds on her nurse. "I'm going – to keep you out of mischief," Dina proposes, much like she took responsibility in defending her mammy against Sinai's threat of verbal "abuse" (738, 736). Although Dulcie still has the mind to insist that Dina wear a scarf to hide her face and stay in the background since anybody spying the white girl at such a meeting "might spile yo' chance for a husband, honey," Dulcie needs Dina because her promised presence will help the black woman resist the urge to join in the forbidden rites (738). Despite their determination to remain only invisible spectators, Maum Dulcie nevertheless soon breaks away from their hiding place and from Dina's clasp, representative of white respectability, and "rushed forward with an African yell and joined in the dance as wild and mad as any Hoodoo among them" (ibid.).

Initially, Dulcie's decision to give in to temptation has the effect of alienating Dina who now willingly marks the difference between the black unbound passion in which Dulcie partakes and her own white modesty. She prepares to leave this site of danger, and Dulcie, behind. But Sinai's call to punish Dulcie for her dual worship of God and the devil awakens Dina's bonds. If beforehand the gap between racialized gender widened with Dina's realization of Dulcie's wild side, marking white and black

women as irreconcilable different, the narrator's description of Dina when she decides to save her mammy from her abusers eradicates this disparity. Enraged by the group's violent abuse of Dulcie's body, Dina embodies the animalistic passion that just a few minutes earlier has repulsed her in Dulcie. Springing forward, "[h]er lips were drawn back over her short teeth." Finishing the comparison to Dulcie's instinctive African yell, the narrator remarks about Dina that "[a] little enraged animal looks just so when about to bite" (739). Thus again united over their impulsive passion – Dulcie's leading her to join the territory of darkness, Dina's prompting her to defend and save her black mammy – Bonner describes both women in similar language, indicating their likeness even when they are transgressing the domestic sphere of white security. In fact, if inside the house the cross-racial emotional ties help conflate their different skin colors into a race-neutral zone of compassion and loyalty, the same emotional intimacy binds them in the outside space of cultural transgression by making them collectively dark, dangerous, and animalistic.

As is the case in her Gran's mammy stories, Bonner eventually undermines her own portrayal of white and black women's fundamental likeness. If Gran's mammy needs to be put back into her comfortable fat self after she embodies a moral center of female veracity so that its black counterpart may not overwhelm Kate's whiteness, so does Dina and Maum Dulcie's emotional conflation of their racialized gender identities come at a cost. In "Two Storms," Maum Dulcie and Dina's transgression into a territory of sexualized black womanhood without proper boundaries endangers both women's social reputation. But whereas Maum Dulcie jeopardizes 'only' the part of her black gender identity that prides itself on respectability and piety, for Dina, her whiteness itself

is at risk. This becomes clear when a stranger, Marion West, saves the two women by scaring the Hoodoo mob into submission with his pistol. Admiring Dina's ferocity in standing up for Maum Dulcie, Marion openly shows his attraction for a woman he assumes to be anything but a "gentlewoman" given the circumstances of the nightly seance in the woods and Dina's display of animal-like passion. The narrator remarks upon Dina's naivety: she does not detect the insinuating implications in the familiar tone Marion uses to address a young woman he just met. Consequently, Marion deduces that Dina's display of fierceness can only mean that she is "[s]ome creole girl, [...], or a quadroon, the granddaughter of the old woman whom she called nurse": in short, anything but a white, respectable woman (740). Although it is ultimately Marion West's shady character that destroys the young girl's respectability and hope for a happy future (above all, because he is already married when they begin to court), this scene strongly suggests that Dina's transgressions are at least as much to blame. Willingly entering the murky realm of darkness and sexualized ecstasy, Dina's closeness to Maum Dulcie forfeits her whiteness so that she gets marked by Marion West as ethnic, potentially even as black, and thereby a woman outside of the boundaries of genteel respectability and proper courtship.

As Bonner's treatment of cross-racial female relationships shows, in the context of the South, white womanhood is an entity that always emerges out of an emotionally conflated space of racialized gender. This is a pre-site where black and white intermingle and where black women form an emotional stronghold and become motherly models of real, tangible womanhood. But this site of interchangeable blackness and whiteness bears dangers as well. White southern girls must eventually separate their gender identities

from the damaging association with blackness, otherwise their respectability and marriage ability is at stake. Compared to Alcott's depiction of cross-racial sentimentality, Bonner's portrayal does not shy away from an intense emotional intimacy that transgresses physical and psychological separations based on race. In the context of celebrating their close affective bonds, however, Bonner often exploits black womanhood in the service of her white heroines. As a result, she either exaggerates black women so that they become one-dimensional types or conflates their differences to the point of leaving readers with a sense of nostalgic yet fictitious revisionism. Bonner's southern fiction eradicates physical distance since the liaison between black and white women is one experienced as a bond of intense emotional and physical intimacy. Because Bonner writes from a place that is radically different from Alcott's, a place in which southern women constantly transgress racialized boundaries before these borders become policed and separated, her suggestion that black and white women redefine and reinforce each other's identity remains convoluted. If Alcott can come to the conclusion that black women are the didactic role models for teaching white women to become "happy and useful," Bonner's excessive sentimental depiction often leaves black women as farces.

### Chapter 3

#### **Passing Into the Future: Interracial Desire, African American Womanhood, and the Shaping of White Masculinity**

The interracial female relationships that Keckley, Alcott, and Bonner describe in their narratives draw heavily on the image of the extended family. Set either in antebellum times or shortly after emancipation, the immediate legacy of slavery marks the bond between African American and white women in these stories. Further, the narratives' themes of interracial sympathy rest on the sentimental mode of compassion and alternative family building so that their models of female alliances follow the lines of sisterhood, intimate friendship, and close intergenerational, maternal bonds. In this chapter, I analyze stories that transcend the sentimental legacy of female bonds more fully by turning to realist novels by William Dean Howells and Charles W. Chesnutt: *An Imperative Duty* (1892) and *The House Behind the Cedars* (1900) respectively.

Conceptualizing and publishing their narratives during the last decade of the nineteenth century when Post-Reconstruction's renewed racism has led scholars to label this era the "nadir" of race relations,<sup>58</sup> both authors take up the literary trope of the tragic mulatto. Unlike the visually marked difference between white and black women that drove the previous chapters, Howells and Chesnutt invent plots about white-looking, educated African American women who are directly implicated in the specter of miscegenation that dominated social anxieties about race status during these decades. Whereas Keckley, Alcott, and Bonner conceive of intra-gendered relationships that thrive on intimacy within the realm of an extended family, Howells and Chesnutt tackle the sexualization of

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<sup>58</sup> By now a commonplace phrase among scholars, Dickson Bruce, Jr. attributes this term to historian Rayford W. Logan (Bruce 1).

the mixed-race female character, white men's desire for her, and the ensuing controversial topic of interracial marriage. In this chapter, I explore how heterosexual cross-racial desire complicates the value previously assigned to black womanhood once race is sexualized and once blackness becomes interiorized under the skin of white-looking African American women. More specifically, I ask what realism gains from aligning its white male characters with African American women light enough to pass, and how or why positioning these men as arbiters of a secretive, invisible black womanhood enriches the realist conception of character interiority.

This chapter is divided into four parts. In the first, short section, I set Howells's and Chesnut's novels in the context of their larger literary oeuvre. I particularly locate these works in relation to previous narratives about race both authors have composed. I briefly analyze one short story by each author – Howells's "Mrs. Johnson" and Chesnut's "The Wife of his Youth" – in order to show how Chesnut and Howells employed an older, sentimentalized, dark-skinned model of African American women to assign value to black womanhood before they moved on to stories that tackled the mixed-race woman. The second section serves as an overview of the literary and cultural history surrounding the status of mixed-race African Americans in the postbellum era. I delineate the trope of the tragic mulatto character that was widely used in antebellum as well as postbellum literature and juxtapose its dominant status as *the* representation of mixed-race interiority in the American imagination with the complex reality of ever-changing laws and customs regarding racial classification of African Americans. Because this chapter marks a significant switch from my focus on visually marked, sentimentalized African American women that guided the first half of the dissertation to

the representation of black women who were able to pass as white, I spend a considerable amount of time contextualizing this switch before I move into my last two sections.

These sections comprise close readings of each novel respectively, with an eye on each author's personal struggle with literary genre and the place of the sentimental within a realist marketplace.

#### Dark-Skinned, Sentimentalized Womanhood in Howells's and Chesnut's Stories

For both writers, particularly Howells, publishing a novel-length narrative that promoted interracial love and marriage was a departure from previous writings. Howells created a rather conventional prose poem on the tragic mulatto woman in 1860, "The Pilot's Story," and in 1871 he tried his hand at the portrayal of picturesque, dark-skinned African Americans via his local color sketch "Mrs. Johnson," but publishing a novel that challenges the tragic mulatto trope was relatively new territory for him. Even Chesnut had more or less maintained the social segregation between white Americans, educated and light-skinned mixed-race Americans, and darker-skinned, poorer ex-slaves in his two short story collections that were popular with his white nineteenth-century audience, one featuring the trickster-like ex-slave Uncle Julius in *The Conjure Woman* (1899), the other portraying life on the color line, *The Wife of His Youth* (1899). Although miscegenation plays a role in many of his color-line stories, interracial sex is either critically treated as a past slave-era transgression ("The Sheriff's Children") or comically by coupling a black man with an Irish woman, a white ethnic group but still one that was treated as inferior to Anglo-Saxons ("Uncle Wellington's Wives"). Even the stories that take up interracial couples in a more somber way with the attempt to show genuine affection between men

and women of different races skirt the final taboo of interracial marriage, either because the girl in question remains unaware of her African American ancestry (“Her Virginia Mammy”), or by melodramatically introducing a long-lost white fiancée (“Cicely’s Dream”).<sup>59</sup> This is not to suggest that Chesnutt was not invested in seriously rewriting the fate of the mixed-race heroine. In fact, *The House Behind the Cedars* is the result of a decade-long process of editing and revising a 51-page manuscript titled “Rena Walden” that Chesnutt was unable to publish in 1890 (Andrews, *The Literary Career* 23-30). In large part due to the taste of his predominantly white nineteenth-century publishers and audience that asked for safely segregated, local color-type portrayals of African Americans, it was only after a long process of revising and making editorial concessions that Chesnutt was finally able to treat interracial love and passing in a more elaborate way in *The House Behind the Cedars*.

*An Imperative Duty* is usually not counted among Howells’s masterpieces. Although his personal politics and his work as editor put race relations squarely at the center – his abolitionist background instigated a life-long active support of African Americans, including his influence in jump-starting the careers of Paul Laurence Dunbar and Chesnutt – Howells’s status as a writer of realist fiction does not rest on writing about race but rather on his skills in portraying the class-based intricacies of the upper echelon of the white middle class. One of the few instances in which he branched out to portraying African American characters after the Civil War and before the publication of *An Imperative Duty* was in the opening story of his autobiographical collection *Suburban Sketches* (1871). “Mrs. Johnson,” a sketch describing the Howellses’ relationship to their

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<sup>59</sup> For a more elaborate analysis of Chesnutt’s stories of the color line, see Andrews’s fourth chapter in *The Literary Career of Charles W. Chesnutt*, especially pp. 100, 88-89, 108, and 105, respectively, for the stories mentioned above.

eccentric black cook, remains safely in the local-color framework and focuses on women who are visually marked as African American over their class and appearance. Similar to Sherwood Bonner's treatment of African American women, Howells admires in Mrs. Johnson a mix of primitive authenticity and sentimentalized maternity that allows him to esteem black womanhood as a welcome complement to the hollowed version of white, bourgeois femininity. Augustus Hoppin's illustration of Mrs. Johnson that opens the collection embodies Howells's sense of her as a cream-colored "matron of mature age and portly figure" who combines an attractive combination of realism and idealism (20). After commenting on the warm but wild quality of her soul, Howells concludes that "[s]he had scarcely any being apart from her affection; she had no morality, but was good because she neither hated nor envied; and she might have been a saint far more easily than far more civilized people" (30). Howells makes the African American domestic a purer, if plainer, person than most by accounting for the simplicity of subjugated black nature that exists prior to such genteel and socially fabricated categories as morality. This feature of blackness possesses an internal value that realist writers particularly cherished. But he is also quick to put this quality into a relative status vis-à-vis the Howellses' superior, finer mind. Consequently, his comment that the picturesque image of the smoking cook "pleased our sense of beauty and moral fitness," acquires a backhanded meaning.

Perhaps a reconsideration of the conflicting forces of the real and ideal at play in American realism offers another way to account for Howells's romanticized praise of the matronly but charming Mrs. Johnson as possessing "something warmer in this old soul than in ourselves, and something wilder, and we chose to think it the tropic and the

untracked forest” (29). Referencing a review of Sarah Orne Jewett’s *Deeplhaven* that Howells had written for the *Atlantic* in 1877, in which he praised Jewett’s style of careful observation and characterization as “so refined, so simple, so exquisitely imbued with a true feeling for the ideal within the real” (“Recent Literature” 759), Michael Elliott argues that realists’ insistence on truthful representation could “give readers the opportunity to contemplate what was ‘ideal’ in lives different from theirs” (41). In other words, realist literature’s aesthetic of authenticity and democratic focus on the quotidian ‘other’ might help to soften class, race, or other usually insurmountable differences by at least acknowledging that value, beauty, even ideality, could exist in lives excluded from the center of middle-class whiteness. Howells’s representation of black womanhood in “Mrs. Johnson” can certainly be read as an attempt to locate an ideal in the raw, somewhat vulgar realness of African American culture and contrast it to the formal impeccability of white womanhood. But it is important to remember that Howells could only make this concession over the body of a visually marked, older, and non-sexualized African American character. It would take him another couple of decades to lift qualities assigned to black womanhood across racialized class boundaries and transpose them onto the image of the highly educated, white-looking, and sexually desirable mixed-race woman.

A similar mechanism of celebrating an older, sentimentalized version of African American womanhood vis-à-vis their light counterparts is at work in one of Chesnut’s most successful color line stories, “The Wife of His Youth.” The story serves as an introduction to the social circle of the mulatto bourgeoisie in the North that occupy most plots of the collection. In this story, identified by Andrews as so successful with

Chesnutt's audience because it stays most closely within the sentimentalized local-color formula (*The Literary Career* 119), Mr. Ryder, an established member of his Groveland, Ohio mixed-race elite, the "Blue Veins," faces an ethical dilemma. At the brink of engagement to the highly educated and white-looking Molly Dixon, Ryder is confronted with a forgotten piece of his past: the wife of his youth, an older, dark-skinned, simple slave woman whom Ryder deemed dead after she helped him escape her master's intention to sell Ryder down the river. Since slave marriages were not legally binding and Ryder's social ascent has only widened a previously existing gap in age and skin tone, the choice seems to be an easy one. Yet, the story ends with Ryder openly acknowledging his old slave wife at the very social ball where he intended to propose to Mrs. Dixon.

During a speech he gives at the ball, Ryder uses his old wife as an example for noble femininity at large, emphasizing in particular her qualities of "devotion and confidence" that sustained her hope in finding and reuniting with him after twenty-five years. But more significantly than Ryder's gesture towards dark, working-class, antebellum African American womanhood as praiseworthy, Molly Dixon, his light-skinned love interest, endorses his decision. In fact, the story emphasizes that Molly's forceful demand in response to Ryder's rhetorical recount of his moral choice – "He should have acknowledged her" (114) – authorizes Ryder's public confession. With this appeal, the almost white Molly not only sacrifices her own happiness and tacitly sanctions the stunt of her suitor's social career, but her acknowledgment of Ryder's dark-skinned wife also echoes the sentimental commitment of white(r) female characters to endorse the preciousness of black womanhood in my previous chapters. Andrews

compares Ryder's moral dilemma to that of Howells's Silas Lapham in that both characters need to stoop down in order to morally rise (*The Literary Career* 115). But the gesture of stooping takes on an additional meaning in stories such as "The Wife of His Youth" or Howells's "Mrs. Johnson." The prized quality that both writers single out in African American womanhood can only be acknowledged in a non-threatening manner to Anglo-Saxon or aspiring white manhood. Through a downward gesture of 'stooping' to dark, old-fashioned, simple characters, these stories defuse the sexual tension and color confusion that arises once interracial relationships can occur on more equal terms relative to appearance, class, and manners.

#### Fictions of Race in the Late Nineteenth Century

What were the stakes for Howells and Chesnut to leave the realm of sentimentalized, antebellum black womanhood and take up novel-length excursions on female mixed-race characters that entail portraying interracial marriage as a viable choice? First and foremost, it would require them to tackle an enduring, clichéd image, the tragic mulatto woman, and rewrite this trope in a realist vein. Nineteenth- and early twentieth-century literature is filled with racially indeterminate, gracious young women and men that play out the fate of the tragic mulatto in the American imagination, making this figure, according to Gabrielle P. Foreman, "both highly ambiguous and extraordinarily ubiquitous" (4). The educated mixed-race character's social in-between status, compounded by the fact that, despite white appearance, he or she was legally treated as black and thus without any or at best marginal rights, led to the prevailing melodramatic stereotype of the tragic mulatto – a sad, hybrid figure that neither fits into

the black nor the white world. One popular storyline, rooted in antebellum slavery times and formally anchored in the sentimental tradition, features the tragic mulatto as a young, sophisticated, racially indeterminate woman. Raised as white and unaware of her African American ancestry, her life is literally destroyed by the revelation that she has black blood coursing through her veins, a disclosure that is often brought on by the death of her white father. Frequently sexually exploited and sold into slavery once their status as white has been denied, tragic mulattos often face death, either through suicide, brain fever or some other form of lethal mental distress, as if to insinuate that their frail, upper-class minds cannot survive in bodies reclassified as black.

Despite the popular connotation of this sentimentally coded image, writers of both races played with variations of the type that reflected the country's most prevalent racial hopes and fears before and after slavery. The most common uses ranged from mixed-race characters' positive function as intelligent race leaders or affective bridge figures between the races to hostile, unflattering images of them as conniving, deceitful and dirty menaces to whiteness and racial purity (Mencke 189). Some of the uses of this literary trope are tied to a particular time period or a specifically raced audience, such as the increasingly negative use of mixed-race characters as polemic symbols for the evils of miscegenation that became typical of the plantation-type literature spearheaded by white Southerners during the 1890s. Normally, the explanation for a positive or negative portrayal seems to lie less in a writer's race affiliation and more in their political leanings, as the shared ideological aim of portraying mixed-race characters as intellectual race leaders and potential peers of the white middle class in both white abolitionist and black literature during the nineteenth century demonstrates.

Thus, a careful perusal of nineteenth-century literature about mixed-race characters defies rather than confirms a clear-cut literary landscape in which positive or negative portrayals neatly map onto racial affiliation. Although the mulatto trope resists easy classification because of its ubiquity and flexibility, for the purpose of my analysis I want to single out two variables that bear significance in distinguishing the multitude of mixed-race characters in American literature: one is gender, the other is period-specificity. Both of these factors help explain why liberal-minded intellectuals like Howells and Chesnut chose to feature mixed-race characters that resist some of the popular stereotypes anchored in the sentimental tradition and instead use them as embodied arguments for amalgamation and against scientific racism's insistence on the inferiority and essential difference of African Americans from Anglo-Americans. Writing during a late nineteenth-century cultural climate that stressed the urgency of drawing and redrawing the color line in the face of a newly freed and diverse African American population, both authors felt the need to use realist fiction as a way to contest the limited choices sentimentally-tinged literature offered mixed-race characters. Whereas these earlier storylines could only imagine guilt-ridden death or dutiful racial uplift work as their protagonists' fate, Howells and Chesnut proposed happiness in interracial marriage.

Gendering the mixed-race character as female proved to be an effective literary strategy. Although one of the first literary treatments of the tragic mulatto type, Victor Séjour's short story "The Mulatto" (1837), portrays a male mixed-race character, the female counterpart of the trope managed to hold a lasting sway over readers because it offered distinct advantages in better signifying the major social problems out of which

this figure arises. Early twentieth-century African American critic and writer Sterling A. Brown commented on the gender disparity in the trope's function. Brown, whom Werner Sollors credits with coining the term "tragic mulatto" in a series of publications between 1937 and 1966, extensively criticized the lack of reality in portrayals of mixed-race characters that leave them in a realm of sentimental passivity contrary to real life (Sollors, *Neither Black Nor White* 223).<sup>60</sup> But the part of Brown's analysis that made the most lasting impact on twentieth-century critics was his point about gender. He argued that male and female mixed-race characters were portrayed differently in the way their biracial identity doomed them, with the former group's emphasis on their intelligence while the female counterparts' main characteristic resided in their beauty (Sollors, *Neither White Nor Black* 224). This difference in dynamics shapes the well-being of the male and female mixed-race siblings in Chesnut's *The House Behind the Cedars* to a considerable degree.

The gendered effects on mixed-race characters led many prominent critics to define the tragic mulatto trope as describing more accurately the plight of mixed-race women, and, moreover, to maintain that, in its female form, the tragic mulatto, labeled mulatta, embodied more poignantly the figure's inherent interstitial status in the face of an inflexible biracial system and a long history of institutionalized sexism. In her groundbreaking study *Reconstructing Womanhood* (1987), Hazel Carby focuses on the historical sexual exploitation of slave women by white men that the tragic mulatta indexes and which enables writers to touch on the taboo subject of interracial sex with more rhetorical effect. But she also emphasizes how, as a literary device, the mixed-race

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<sup>60</sup> Sollors outlines Brown's critiques of the tragic mulatto stereotypes according to six elements. The first two encompass Brown's assertion that the trope's adherence to unrealistic, sentimental conventions was damaging to the social and political standing of mixed-race Americans (*Neither Black Nor White* 223-228).

heroine offers the double-function of expressing and exploring the relationship between the races (89), a twofold role that Ann DuCille labels as “both a rhetorical device and a political strategy” (7). In addition to the historical vulnerability of the mixed-race woman’s sexuality, her external whiteness harks back to another, decidedly woman-centered, tradition of abolitionist polemic. Thus, she often functions as “the most *affective* figure,” because the genteel whiteness of the female mixed-race character can more easily incite empathy within their white readership in acknowledging the humanity of African Americans (Foreman 5). Hortense Spillers has perhaps most forcefully worked through the implicit sexual disadvantages that semantically mark the tragic mixed-race heroine as “exist[ing] for others – and a particular male other – in an attribution of the illicit that designates the violent mingling and commingling of bloodlines that a simplified cultural patrimony wishes to deny” (303). As these critics have shown, the gendered differences of the tragic mulatto trope map onto a larger, male-centered cultural climate that disadvantages women in general. These nuances in power distribution based on sexualized race are important for my own analysis of the mixed-race literary figure as well, particularly for my interpretation of Chesnut’s *The House Behind the Cedars*, a narrative that plays out the success or failure of a mixed-race brother and sister in dramatically different ways.

If gender plays a significant part in the utility and fate of the mixed-race literary character, so does historical context. While the strictly biracial world-view suggested by the tragic mulatto stereotype allows little room for comfortable existence in an in-between category like the interstitial one inhabited by mixed-race individuals, the reality of racial classification was more complex, especially during the postbellum years.

Although the theme of racial mixture stays a constant in the transition from antebellum to postbellum nineteenth-century literature, cultural and political changes affected the way the mixed-race women's embodiment of interracial desire moves from a rather symbolic level to the potential legal reality of interracial marriage. African Americanists William L. Andrews and Dickson Bruce, Jr. attribute this change in rhetoric and tactics to the necessity to adapt to the "specific problems of assimilation and segregation" (Bruce 137).<sup>61</sup>

Many narratives about race relations during the 1880s and 1890s reflect particular fears concerning the hot-bedded question of miscegenation that arose out of the larger political changes after emancipation. The abolishment of slavery that granted African Americans certain constitutional rights brought up new tensions regarding legal and social equality between black and white Americans. Mixed-race individuals stood at the crossroads of competing ideologies that would underpin the so-called "race problem." The prolific Chesnut questioned the ethics of a biracial social system in a three-part series on "The Future American" he wrote for the *Boston Evening Transcript* in 1900. In the last installment, aptly called "A Complete Race-Amalgamation Likely to Occur," he provocatively pronounced "[i]t is only a social fiction, indeed, which makes of a person seven-eighths white a Negro; he is really much more a white man" (134). With such a statement, he forcefully criticized the rigid, pseudo-scientific theories on amalgamation that authors like Thomas Dixon, one of the South's most racist novelists, propagated in their writings. The lines from Dixon's 1902 *The Leopard's Spots* – "One drop of Negro blood makes a Negro. It kinks the hair, flattens the nose, thickens the lips, puts out the

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<sup>61</sup> See also Andrews's discussion of several different strategies postbellum writers undertook to portray miscegenation in their novels in light of the "new post-Civil War racial 'equality,'" among them William Dean Howells's *An Imperative Duty* (*The Literary Career* 152-7).

light of intellect, and lights the fires of brutal passions” (244) – epitomized, in John G. Mencke’s words, “the quintessence of contemporary white racial thought” (209), even if it glossed over the discrepancy between social customs and the law as well as failed to take into account the constantly changing legal regulations regarding the status of mixed-race people since the mid-nineteenth century.

Chesnutt observed in his 1899 speech “What is a White Man?” the force with which conservative custom prevailed, especially in regards to social equality and intermarriage, despite the newfound freedom and rights for African Americans (71). This disillusioning truism became the guiding mantra in his novel *The House Behind the Cedars*, and it also provided the ideological background for Howells’s plot in *An Imperative Duty*.<sup>62</sup> Both novels stage in fictional terms the battle between varying competing ideologies that arose out of the late nineteenth-century’s increasing investment in scientific inquiry, fascination with statistics, data, and theories of evolution. The popular “one-drop rule” signifies one dominant strand of a hodge-podge ideology of scientific racism that attempted to justify the superiority of the white race, perhaps best captured in the image of scientists measuring the width of differently raced and gendered people’s crania to determine their worth. According to the one-drop rule, also sometimes termed “hypo-descent,” one drop of African American blood in a person’s line of descent determines that mixed-race people are classified black, even if their white ancestors and their white looks clearly outweigh their black roots. But the nation’s obsession with

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<sup>62</sup> Despite the documented respectful relationship between Howells and Chesnutt that included favorable reviews from the Dean of Chesnutt’s two short story collections and a rather reserved review of the more radical *The Marrow of Tradition* (1901), we do not have print evidence of Howells’s opinion on *The House Behind the Cedars* (see Andrews, “William Dean Howells and Charles W. Chesnutt” 329). While Chesnutt acknowledged the influence of Howells on his literary career in his late 1931 essay “Post-Bellum, Pre-Harlem,” he did not extensively comment on Howells’s novel in his non-fictional writings, only deeming *An Imperative Duty* “a very pretty novel” (“The Negro in Books” 433). Howells’s less prominent book did appear on the shelves of Chesnutt’s personal library (McElrath, “Charles W. Chesnutt’s Library”).

science and evolution also led to theories like those of John Fiske, who proposed a moderate racial integration doctrine that was built on the same scientific evidence as that used by proponents of black inferiority but applied it to promote positive, evolutionary outcomes of interracial mixing. Assimilationists or “racial meliorists,” among them William Dean Howells and Charles W. Chesnutt, who were skeptical of the arbitrarily drawn race distinctions that fueled nineteenth-century theories of scientific racism, often used theories like those of Fiske to debunk the one-drop rule.<sup>63</sup>

The Post-Reconstruction female mixed-race characters that play a significant role in Chesnutt’s and Howells’s novels thus index the consanguinity of two interrelated cultural images and rituals that mark the literary trope of the tragic mulatto: the practice of racial passing and the prospect of miscegenation through interracial marriage. While none of these, not even interracial marriage, were social topics new to the postbellum era, they unfolded against a changed legal landscape after emancipation.<sup>64</sup> If antebellum treatises on the tragic mulatto tend to use the trope to bring attention to sexual exploitation and the shameful taboo of interracial sex, postbellum civil rights and changing race laws made miscegenation more than a morally regrettable, yet unavoidable

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<sup>63</sup> Both Bruce (173) and Andrews (*The Literary Career* 156-7) comment on Chesnutt’s and Howells’s similar position vis-à-vis race politics and racial amalgamation. For Fiske’s influence on Howells, see particularly Justin D. Edwards (“It is the Race Instinct!” 60-2) and Sarah B. Daugherty (57-8).

<sup>64</sup> Already during the colonial period, the transatlantic slave trade and the resulting presence of both enslaved and free Africans compelled each state to draw up their legal stance on interracial sexual relationships, beginning with documents as early as 1661 in Maryland. For early American laws on interracial marriages, see Carter G. Woodson’s “The Beginnings of Miscegenation of the Whites and Black” (45). In general, Werner Sollors’s edited volume *Interracialism* is an indispensable source on marriage laws and customs between whites and blacks throughout American history. Abolitionist slave narratives and stories hinge on their often light-skinned protagonists’ ability to disguise themselves as white in order to cross the Mason-Dixon line, frequently reinforcing racial passing through a cross-gendered performance. Instances of enslaved African Americans who cross-dress in order to pass play a part in *Running a Thousand Miles for Freedom* (1860), in which Ellen Craft dresses as a white gentleman, Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1852), in which Eliza dresses as a young gentleman, as well as Jacobs’s *Incidents* (1861), in which light-skinned Linda Brent ‘passes’ as a black sailor.

gentleman's deed; they enabled interracial desire, however tentatively, to become a legal possibility through intermarriage.

The individual states' legal definitions of black, white, or mulatto identity during the nineteenth century are cases in point. Chesnutt, a lawyer himself, pointed to the variance different states took in legally defining a white person. Such laws, as Chesnutt contended in his 1899 essay "What is a White Man?" had their roots in antebellum times and testified to the fact that, contrary to the "virulence and universality of race prejudice in the United States, the human intellect long ago revolted at the manifest absurdity of classifying men fifteen-sixteenths white as black men" (69). As Chesnutt's title suggests, the question of what exactly makes a person white was far from universal or straightforward; indeed, racial identity in the United States has always been in flux and dependent on geography. Going through the codes of different states, Chesnutt pointed out South Carolina as a case in which, surprisingly, "the color-line is, in practice as in law, more loosely drawn [...] than in any other Southern state" (71). In addition to ruling that anyone "in whom the admixture of African blood did not exceed the proportion of one-eighth" should be considered white – a rule that most states complied with in theory, if not in practice – South Carolina's addendum made an important difference for those mixed-race Americans who were light enough to pass as white. This addendum verified that in cases of doubt, it remains "for the jury to decide by reputation, by reception into society, and by their exercise of the privileges of the white man, as well as by the admixture of blood" whether or not a person would be legally white (70-71). Chesnutt used South Carolina's legal situation as a decisive plot factor in his novel about racial passing, *The House Behind the Cedars*. He quotes the Supreme Court passages he

invoked in his essay verbatim in the novel so that they could serve as the loophole for the young light-skinned John Walden to move from North Carolina to South Carolina and switch racial identities from black to white. In the words of the town's Judge, an old friend of John's white father, John "would [...] have simply to assume the place and exercise the privileges of a white man" (172).<sup>65</sup>

The varying classification practices of the U.S. Bureau of the Census between 1840 and 1920 provide another official record of the volatile and complex history of national policy regarding its mixed-race citizens. By 1920, the Census had dropped the term "mulatto" as one of its available classification categories it had offered since 1840, reflecting the one-drop rule in that any person with black ancestry was counted as "Negro" (Kinney 27, Davis 12). Similarly, Virginia's 1924 "Act to Preserve Racial Integrity" defined whiteness in relation to intermarriage in the strictest possible terms. White could only mean a "person who has no trace whatsoever of any blood other than Caucasian" (24), thereby, as Werner Sollors suggests, elevating the meaning of whiteness to an "almost mystical level" ("Introduction" 6). Legal documents, such as Virginia's "Act to Preserve Racial Integrity" and government-funded decisions to drop the term mulatto in the 1920 Census, seemed to cement the social implications of the one-drop rule into official policy. While these acts certainly stand as powerful embodiments of America's history of institutionalized racism, they bookend a pre-twentieth-century post-

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<sup>65</sup> Joel Williamson also takes up the case of South Carolina in his analysis of changing race relations between 1850 and 1915. Williamson provides a telling example to illustrate South Carolina's initial, liberal stance on categorizing certain mixed-race people as white. When the state tried to change its formerly loose regulations regarding interracial marriage in 1895 in order to move closer to the one-drop rule, George Tillman, brother of South Carolina's senator, admonished that such a strict decree might embarrass many reputable white residents, who would see themselves classified as black. As a result, South Carolina stuck with its former, more liberal rule of defining blackness around the one-eighth formula (93). For a more inclusive and detailed overview of the individual states' constitutional regulations in regards to race and interracial interaction, see Pauli Murray's careful compilation *States' Laws on Race and Color*, especially the parts on North and South Carolina (342-3, 407, 417).

emancipation era of racial relations that more often than not complicated a simplified biracial system both on the social as well as on the official level.

Despite varying attempts to transform social custom into legal reality, Werner Sollors maintains that “the so-called one-drop rule [...] was never widely applied and many contradictory racial definitions coexisted” (“Introduction” 6). Part of the problem, as the Census counts also demonstrate, had to do with the lack of certainty and visibility when it came to classifying differing degrees of mixed-race people. To put it more simply, the color of a person’s skin could be deceptive; a fact that W.E.B. Du Bois took up in his 1935 essay “Miscegenation” when he analyzed the Census numbers. Du Bois concluded that the 1900 Census had suspended counting mulattos “probably because the plan in 1890 to make a distinction between persons of different degrees of white and Negro blood was officially acknowledged to have been a failure” (468). In general, Du Bois was skeptical of the Census figures and rated their indication that the “mulatto population” had steadily decreased by 1920 as of “doubtful validity.” His distrust in these numbers – according to the Census count, the population of mulattos had dropped by 400, 000 between 1910 and 1920 while the overall population of Negro-classified citizens had continued to rise – alluded to the continuing reality of interracial sex that had made many African Americans exhibit “recognizable traces of white blood” and thereby, although he did not spell this out, able to pass the color line (469).

Charles S. Johnson, editor of *Opportunity*, had wittily remarked on the same Census count in the October 1925 edition of his Harlem Renaissance-inspired magazine. Titled “The Vanishing Mulatto,” his editorial defused the too easily drawn conclusion that the decrease in the mulatto population between 1910 and 1920 would indicate that

the specter of miscegenation was indeed a dying ghostly habit. Johnson asked his readers to consider that, because of their in-between status, mixed-race citizens who are “neither white nor black, but Negroes,” have the choice “to return to the race of either parent.”

While Johnson contended “mulattos fuse into the blacks, that is certain,” he also maintained that “they also fade into the great white multitude,” a successful act of racial passing that most Census takers, in Johnson’s view, were unable to discern (291).

Although Sollors asserts that passing was such a notorious cultural phenomenon that almost all literature about African Americans between 1850 and 1930 were stories about crossing the color line, the numbers of living people who passed as white remain speculative (*Neither White Nor Black* 283). The guesswork and inconsistency around the number of African Americans living as white, ranged, according to Sollors’s and Joel Williamson’s research, from hundreds to millions on account of variables such as geography, age, gender, or intention (for example, daytime passers) but, predominantly, as Sollors concludes by quoting William M. Kephart’s findings from 1948, because “*nobody knows*” (281).<sup>66</sup>

The wild card quality of racial passing explains why black Americans, such as Charles S. Johnson and W.E.B. Du Bois, remained skeptical that the early twentieth-century Census numbers did not adequately reflect the complexity of a mixed-race American society. The Census did, however, attempt to define the term mulatto more comprehensively in the years between 1870 and 1900 by breaking down the category according to the amount of black blood a person supposedly carried. Hence, the line of blackness was drawn at three-fourth or more of black blood; anybody with less visible

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<sup>66</sup> Williamson gives detailed stories of individual people’s motivations for passing, including the above-mentioned part-time passers, as well as the ironic scenarios of Americans who unknowingly passed as white because they were unaware of their African American ancestry (98, 100-103).

black features was categorized as mulatto, quadroon, or octoroon (Du Bois 468, Davis 12). Of course, categorizing people's blood mixture pseudo-scientifically through appearance alone brought with it many problems. My point here is only that the decades leading up to the twentieth century were more sensitive and open to negotiating who would count as white or as black than Virginia's 1924 "Act to Preserve Racial Integrity" might indicate.

These debates and ideological struggles marked the cultural climate in which Howells and Chesnut produced their fictions; a force field around racial identity that enabled writers to use their stories and mixed-race characters to confirm, challenge, or simply rattle the belief in the merit of the color line. The scientific discourses of race in the nineteenth century, in Cathy Boeckmann's words, were "often staged as literary debates," and the stories of Chesnut and Howells join the sides of proponents for racial integration based on social equality, including that of interracial marriage (12). A late nineteenth-century cultural climate that struggled with redefining racial identity after slavery probably also explains why fictions about interracial romance seemed to prefer featuring octoroon characters rather than mulattos or quadroons. The almost white skin of many mixed-race characters with less than 1/8<sup>th</sup> of black heritage, coupled with their upper middle-class education, enabled liberal writers, such as Chesnut and Howells, to use them as embodied arguments for racial integration and against scientific racism's insistence on the inferiority of African Americans. On the other hand, the near-whiteness of the octoroon figure also indexed the discomfort many Americans experienced at the prospect of leaving behind a visually marked racial caste system. Even as late as 1935, Du Bois remarked in his essay on miscegenation that "most

thinking Americans do not hate Negroes or wish to retard their advance” but rather feared “how far complete social freedom and full economic opportunity for Negroes is going to result in such racial amalgamation as to make America *octoroon* in blood” (my emphasis 467).

Yet in terms of literary usage, the figure of the beautiful, near-white octoroon predominantly indexes the desire and ideal sexualized femininity she evokes in the American imagination. Historical reality, such as the popular New Orleans fancy girls’ auctions, as well as the literary representations of octoroons as sought-after mistresses of white, rich men, confirm that their specific mixture of blackness and whiteness was essential in rendering them as “the most desirable wom[e]n imaginable,” not only in terms of sexual availability but also in regards to feminine essence (Brody 22). Among scholars of nineteenth-century womanhood, Carby has perhaps most forcefully expanded on the normative ideal of white womanhood by emphasizing the dialectical relationship on which this construct rests. Accordingly, black female sexuality, even if and because of its exclusion from the cult of “true womanhood,” was crucial in defining the borders of the latter (*Reconstructing Womanhood* 30). This relationship confirms the popular ideal of feminine beauty in the West as white. Indeed, while white and non-white womanhood come to be seen as always standing in relation to each other, suggesting their interdependence and the volatile nature of racializing female sexuality, a pairing of a black and white woman “rarely ‘works’ to the advantage of the former” (Brody 38).<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>67</sup> Both Jennifer DeVere Brody and Daphne Brooks take up the cultural association of black womanhood with sexual licentiousness and how this affects the view of ethnically white women who act outside of proper sexual norms. Brody, who coined the term “blackened women” in order to describe the proximity of black and white womanhood in policing female sexuality, helps us to see how purity remains a concept that is always racialized and sexualized in the cultural imagination: “White woman who are sexually deviant are blackened, black women who are sexually virtuous are never really pure” (43). Brooks takes up

Consequently, many empathetic readings of the octoroon habitually attach this figure's desirability to her whiteness, her mimetic resemblance to the graces of normative womanhood.

But instead of the visible lack of blackness, it seems to be rather the octoroon's "racial surplus and plenitude," to use Foreman's words, that make her more attractive and more valuable than her lilywhite counterparts (5). This is also the governing logic at play in Howells's and Chesnut's novels, in which mixed-race female characters become coveted assets not despite but "*because of the unidentifiable remaining blackness*" (Sollors, *Neither Black Nor White* 237). While the popular exotic and hypersexual stereotypes about black femininity might offer an easy and convincing explanation for why white male characters like those in Howells's and Chesnut's tales find mixed-race women more desirable than their white counterparts, I read these writers as going a step further. They also, perhaps sometimes unintentionally, shake up a binary model of racialized femininity when they shift the ideal from white to black and black(ened) (to borrow a phrase from Jennifer De Vere Brody) womanhood. In her study on blackness and womanhood in Victorian culture, Brody describes the power of Anglo-Saxon men over women, both black and white, as well as these men's complicity in interracial sex as follows: "Because white men controlled miscegenation, they were the ones who made black women and women black" (54). In my reading of Howells's and Chesnut's manipulation of the tragic mulatto image, I want to take Brody's comment further. In their attempt to rewrite the sentimental legacy of the passive, racially inferior mulatto woman in a realist manner, Howells's and Chesnut's male players make *womanhood*

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Brody's terminology to raise awareness of the intersectional nature of race and gender in nineteenth-century identity formations, a process that particularly marks black womanhood as "a site of rumor, hearsay, and wishes" (135).

black in order to service their own attempts at fortifying white masculinity. In the process, they racialize normative womanhood and attach a superior value to the white-looking blackness of mixed-race femininity.

### Imperative Duties and Burning Desires: Howells and Race

Many of William Dean Howells's novels, in particular the popular *The Rise of Silas Lapham* (1885), map the struggle for realism and against romanticism onto the field of gender, so that male, rational voices can successfully curb the "false" sentimental perception of love and duty ingrained in the majority of nineteenth-century middle-class women. But the introduction of race in his 1892 novel *An Imperative Duty* throws a curve ball into Howells's theory and practice of fiction, and my analysis explores the intended as well as unexpected effects sexualized race bears on the Howellsian relationship between form and gender.

The plot of *An Imperative Duty* is quickly told. Dr. Edward Olney, a nerve specialist who resided abroad for the last years, decides to return to the States after losing money in the financial crisis of 1873. Arriving in Boston during summer time, he finds the city empty of potential patients and his only distraction is treating a compatriot he met in Italy, Mrs. Meredith, who incidentally resides in the same hotel as Olney with her attractive orphaned niece, Rhoda Aldgate. Mrs. Meredith seems to be suffering from a nervous breakdown brought on by her niece's engagement to a Mr. Bloomingdale while abroad. While Rhoda happily enjoys spending time with her fiancé's family, Mrs. Meredith confides her sorrows to Olney. The moral dilemma that ails her is a secret she has kept for years: Rhoda's mother was an octoroon woman, making Rhoda partly black

herself according to the strict social definitions of the time. Now that a possible marriage to a white gentleman materializes, Mrs. Meredith feels obliged to disclose Rhoda's ancestry to her unknowing niece and her suitor. It is at this point that the plot begins to accelerate: the aunt tells her niece of her black origin, throwing Rhoda into an identity crisis and leading to Mrs. Meredith's desperate but accidental death by pill overdose. Olney experiences a crisis of sorts himself since the knowledge of Rhoda's blackness propels his former detached interest in her to transform into sexualized desire and the wish to marry her. After Rhoda renounces her original suitor without telling him about her secret, acting out the script of shame and white social death that surrounds the myth of the tragic mulatta, Olney can slowly convince her to give up her plans of doing racial uplift work in the South and instead marry him, pass for white, and move back to Italy.

Analyses of *An Imperative Duty* often compare the text to Frances W. Harper's *Iola Leroy* (1892) because its representation of a mixed-race heroine who proudly chooses blackness seems to counter Howells's white-centered text quite decidedly.<sup>68</sup> *An Imperative Duty* is also often set in the context of earlier stories that might have influenced Howells's decision to write his own race novel, particularly two popular miscegenation stories he extensively reviewed in his "Editor's Chair" column of April 1887: Margaret Holmes Bates's *The Chamber Over the Gate* (1886) and the anonymous *Towards the Gulf* (1887), which Howells identifies as written "by a woman" and whose authorship Debra J. Rosenthal attributes to Alice Morris Buckner (123). Rosenthal provides the most extensive reading of these two otherwise forgotten women's novels in order to show how their treatment of involuntarily passing women, heredity, and the

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<sup>68</sup> After Kenneth Warren's landmark study in which he introduced a comparison between Howells's and Harper's novels (67-9), most critics touch upon this connection. For recent examples, see M. Giulia Fabi (48-63), Julie Cary Nerad (824-35), Debra J. Rosenthal (115-42), and Steven Belluscio (55-87).

consequences of interracial marriage provoked Howells into countering their sentimental mode of expression, which he judged as “too melodramatically”, “immensely pathetic,” and “unfounded in human nature” (April 1887: 76), with his own realist revision. This comparison situates Howells’s revision of the tragic mulatta theme in direct connection to the popular sentimental and feminized examples he deemed inferior.

In addition to understanding Howells’s specific concerns with *The Chamber Over the Gate* and *Towards the Gulf*, I find it even more telling that he places these reviews in one of his columns that decidedly takes up a denunciation of sentimental novels. Many of Howells’s “Editor’s Chair” columns that he penned for *Harper’s Monthly* between 1886 and 1892 encapsulate his conflation of gender with genre, perhaps best illustrated in the mockingly distasteful remark of “banging the babes of romance about” he made to a friend in defense of literary realism.<sup>69</sup> In his columns, Howells expounded upon the abrasive attitude expressed in the “babes” quote at greater length, even if less vulgarly. Realism, with its truthful portrayal of people’s lives, motives, and emotions, contended Howells, would supersede the stronghold romantic-sentimental popular fiction had held over the American readership for the last decades precisely because it would be “without the emotional foolishness of manner or the contorted pseudodramaticism of method which cause the compassionate to grieve over so much of our fiction, especially the lady-fiction” (January 1886: 3).

The “Editor’s Chair” from April 1887, which reviews Bates’s and Buckner’s novels, uses as its starting point a reader’s concerned letter over novels’ unsafe tendency to blow human relationships, abilities, even ideas, out of proportion. From this, Howells

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<sup>69</sup> See Debra J. Rosenthal (115) as well as Edwin H. Cady’s seminal biography of Howells. Tellingly, the first chapter in *The Realist at War* takes the romance babes quote as its title and uses this phrase throughout in order to underscore Howells’s ideological position in his promotion of realism.

goes on to formulate one of his most poignant bashings of “the babes of romance,” criticizing the harm romantic novels might do to readers, particularly female ones, because they embed “idle lies about human nature and the social fabric, which it behooves us to know and understand” (April 1887: 73). Here it is important to note that Howells’s concern over the “lady-fiction,” which made him declare sentimental novels “largely injurious” and a “fungus-growth with which the fields of literature teem everyday” (ibid.), did not necessarily result in a wholesale denunciation of “female scribblers” on Howells’s part. As Susan Goodman points out, many of the regional writers championed by Howells were indeed women (14). A cursory perusal of the “Editor’s Study” alone will show how frequently Howells praised female writers, such as Sarah Orne Jewett, Mary Noailles Murfree (aka Charles Egbert Craddock), or Rose Mary Cooke, for their decidedly realistic and un-sentimental portrayals of fictional characters. More precisely then, Howells’s gendering of sentimental fiction relies on the firm connection between the former’s type of writing and its target audience: women. But such rationalizing nonetheless often typecast female authors who wrote in the sentimental vein, such as Bates and Buckner, as unprofessional and their narratives as dangerously “addictive,” thus centering realism, with its common sense, scientific, and truthful mode of representation, on the masculine side of this gendered binary about literary genres (Glazener, *Reading for Realism* 94-5).<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> Too many critics comment on the gendering of realism in the face of its romantic predecessor for me to mention here in detail. For a seminal discussion of the gendering of the realist writer as masculine in the face of the widespread fear of effeminate artists, see Michael Davitt Bell (17-38) and ch. 3 of Nancy Glazener’s *Reading for Realism*. For influential studies that analyze how realism and naturalism consciously employed feminized analogies to debunk their respective rival genres, see Amy Kaplan’s *The Social Construction of American Realism* and Donna M. Campbell’s *Resisting Regionalism*.

The loaded relationship between gender and literary form that surfaces in Howells's editorial work dominates critics' understanding of Howells's theory and practice of fiction as one based on the feminization of sentimental fiction. But his criticism of sentimentality, and by implication his development of realist fiction, was always deeply influenced by race. For instance, in his apprentice novel *Their Wedding Journey* (1872), the protagonist Basil March, a recurring character in several Howells narratives, proclaims, "the wrecks of slavery are fast growing a fungus crop of sentiment" (163). Through statements like this, Howells references a specific type of southern story telling that romanticizes the Old South as well as the relationship between whites and ex-slaves. Although he never seemed to have openly acknowledged Sherwood Bonner, either negatively or positively, Howells's critique includes the kind of sentimentalized racialism that surfaces in Sherwood Bonner's mammy stories.<sup>71</sup> Howells's accusation in the April 1887 column that romantic novels are a "fungus-growth with which the fields of literature teem everyday" sound eerily reminiscent of Basil March's wording in relation to the "fungus crop of sentiment" that grows out of the remnants of slavery. But Howells does not stop here; instead, his attack on the "largely injurious" romanticized lady-fiction inevitably leads him to critique female-authored melodramas about race, such as Bates's and Buckner's.

The similar wording Howells used in 1872 and 1887 to demote melodramatic race fiction and feminized romantic novels respectively by evoking the image of a creeping fungus point to the trifecta of gender, race, and genre that lay at the heart of Howellsian

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<sup>71</sup> See Hubert H. McAlexander. McAlexander does not take up the above quote from *Their Wedding Journey*, but he makes a similar comment in regards to Bonner's "Two Storms." He contends that "this ultimate periodical romance of late nineteenth-century America" was precisely "the sort of fiction that William Dean Howells kept out of the *Atlantic Monthly*: outrageously plotted, overwritten, and melodramatic" (201).

realism. Too often, however, critics have sidestepped the race element of this triangle in favor of the well-documented connection between gender and genre to explain Howells's literary theory. The April column thus serves as a representative example of Howells's tendency to transpose his gendered criticism onto the field of race, linking sentimentalism to a feminized racial past that the future male realist writer needs to expel through his truthful, common sense portrayal of life. In *An Imperative Duty*, his only novel overtly about race, Howells's specific desire to counterpoint the many fictional examples that took up the loaded history of slavery and miscegenation with his own story that was anything but a "fungus crop of sentiment" finally came to fruition.

Much of the criticism around *An Imperative Duty* queries whether Howells reinforces or resists racial stereotypes through his representation of Rhoda Aldgate as well as through the broader picture he paints of Post-Reconstruction African Americans. The contemporary reviews from the leading white magazines, such as the *Critic*, usually faulted Howells for his "ignorance of the subject," which led to the impression that Howells "likes the race [...] in theory and at a distance" ("An Imperative Duty" 34). Two leading African American women writers and activists, Anna Julia Cooper and Victoria Earle Matthews, also took offense at Howells's "point of view [which] is precisely that of a white man who sees colored people at long range or only in certain capacities" (Cooper 206). These African American women's critique of Howells's representation of blackness shared with white reviewers the notion that Howells had thoroughly failed in the general depiction of African Americans, but not so much in the portrait of the white-looking Rhoda, whose lack of will, according to Cooper, "is an attainment of so many of Mr. Howells' models, [...] perhaps not to be considered as

illustrating any racial characteristics” (202). But the vulgar images of “frog-like ugliness” that Howells attributed to “the best colored society” in a church scene (93) and the pervasive linking of black people’s mental capacity with that of animals (5) riled up Cooper and Matthews, both ardent believers in dispelling demeaning stereotypes through racial uplift ideology. It left Matthews to scornfully exclaim: “This is the height of enlightenment! and from Dean Howells too, litterateur, diplomat, journalist, altruist!” (“The Value of Race Literature” 135). Current readings of *An Imperative Duty* often have similar objections about Olney’s paternal yet also self-centered view point of white superiority, spanning the gamut from blaming Howells for reinforcing racial stereotypes to acknowledging his resistance to them.<sup>72</sup>

Taken as a whole, however, Howells represents Olney, his central character, in a complex light. He is neither just a patronizing white man who believes in biologically determined racial difference nor some forward-thinking anti-essential social constructionist when it comes to race. Steven Belluscio attributes Olney’s self-contradictory tendencies as character flaws that “in the name of realism, Howells would not have [...] any other way” (65). As such, the novel can be both vexing and provocative because it resists a definite stance on race. I side here with Paul Petrie’s assessment that part of the text’s open-endedness results out of Olney’s often selfishly motivated inconsistent and changing attitude towards the meaning of Rhoda’s racial identity (247-8). A letter Howells wrote in 1903 sheds light on this issue as well. “[I]t

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<sup>72</sup> For an overview of the contemporary white reviews, see Martha Banta’s introduction to *An Imperative Duty* (ix-xi). For a listing of recent analyses along the spectrum of positive/negative, see Daugherty (63 n.4) and Wonham (“Howells, Du Bois” 127). Critics such as Nerad even go a step further and point to scholars’ ongoing blind spot when it comes to challenging a “rhetoric of biological difference” in regards to racial passing, thus repeating the historical assumptions about passers as merely performing a white identity that can never truly hide their essential blackness (814-7).

was in ‘An Imperative Duty’ that I had a man marry a woman with a faint trace of black blood,” Howells explains, “It was for a psychological, not a scientific purpose, and I merely argued that a man who really loved a woman would find his love settling any ‘race question’ involved” (Letter to Dr. Whiston 65). Here we see the writer’s desire to treat race as a cultural force that can be overcome and bring people together rather than artificially hold them apart. More importantly, it confirms Howells’s faith in realism as a literary mode that focuses on the psychological unfolding of the genteel mind, thereby enabling him to shift out of the hierarchical local-color frame in which a white narrator focuses predominantly on minority subjects’ physicality and stereotyped behavior. Instead, by making Rhoda Aldgate’s mixed-race status secondary to her white, educated manners and looks, he could represent race, in Goodman’s words, “as a function of class and manners, rather than biology” (30).<sup>73</sup> Through the mutual class expertise Dr. Olney shares with a racially indeterminate lady with hidden hints of black blood, Howells could safely explore both white and black interiority.

From its opening pages, *An Imperative Duty* tries to portray Olney as an open-minded, rational man when it comes to race relations. Howells begins with Olney’s return home from years abroad in Italy. Against the historical background of rising immigration, especially of the Irish, and the waves of African Americans migrating from the South, aided by the collapse of railroad stocks that triggered the financial panic of 1873, Olney’s detached scientific view enables him to assess the American landscape as

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<sup>73</sup> See also Jeffery A. Clymer’s essay on *Imperative Duty*. Clymer supplements the socio-historical background of the 1873 financial panic in order to explain how the impoverishment of the white upper classes contributed to a merging of class and race that makes class “become something that is in the blood” and enables a racialization of the proletarian and immigrant forces as well (35).

one in crisis, in danger of losing its white Anglo-Saxon center of identity.<sup>74</sup> Struck by the proletarian force of Irish immigrants threatening to eradicate the white, republican New England roots of the country, Olney benevolently and more positively feels himself drawn to the black population. Reminded by their dark skins of his sojourn in Italy and coddled by their seeming ability to imitate “the manners of the best among us” (7), Olney’s reflective open-mindedness allows him to defend social equality, though short of intermarriage, in front of Mrs. Meredith. He even off-handedly proclaims to her that if the future holds black dominance in store, “we shall have a civilization of such sweetness and goodness as the world has never known yet” (29).

Although his language falls into nostalgia, even sentimentality, when he imagines African Americans as peaceful, if simpler, replicas of a by-gone American disposition, Olney’s scientific training clearly differentiates him from the emotionally grounded fears of racial integration held by Mrs. Meredith. Self-assured in his scientific outlook, Olney announces that “sooner or later our race must absorb the colored race; and I believe that it will obliterate not only its color, but its qualities” (38). This quote has become one of the most memorable lines of the novel. Because of its imperial tone and its implied sexual context of the ensuing marriage between a white man and a mixed-race woman, it expresses the narrative’s conflicts in a nutshell. Critics especially interested in the text’s allegiance or lack thereof to widespread nineteenth-century scientific race theories also emphasize the traces they detect in this quote of evolutionist John Fiske’s moderate racial integration doctrine.<sup>75</sup> Howells’s support of Booker T. Washington’s reconciliation

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<sup>74</sup> For a closer reading of the significance of the 1873 crisis on Olney’s understanding of national identity and race, see Clymer (33).

<sup>75</sup> On Fiske’s influence on Howells, see particularly Justin D. Edwards (“‘It is the Race Instinct!’” 60-2) and Daugherty (57-8).

politics meshed well with a moderate belief in monogenesist theories and the benefits intermarriage could bring to racial integration by fortifying rather than disintegrating whiteness. But Olney's dismissal of Mrs. Meredith's fear of atavism – a foreshadowing of her guilt over having raised Rhoda as white – predominantly serves to differentiate him from her melodramatic nature and morbid moral absolutism.

The structure of Howells's novel resembles his broader approach to understanding the intersecting triangle of genre, gender, and race that we see at work in his literary criticism. The overriding emphasis on gendering literary genre that dominates his columns before he connects them to race also governs *An Imperative Duty*, embodied here through Olney and Mrs. Meredith. Thus, the novel spends a considerable amount of time delineating them as sparring partners who philosophically vie for the right key to interpreting life's choices before this becomes mapped overtly onto race and transformed into a battle over Rhoda's racial status. Consequently, Howells immediately recasts Olney's scientific discussion with Mrs. Meredith about atavism, which is predominantly a discussion about race, into the language of gender. Although the subject matter of a mixed-raced woman inevitably sexes their discussion of race, Howells transposes a gendered tension onto the discussion partners themselves. He pits Olney as the rational, realistic man against the weak-willed, impressionable woman, and he does so, tellingly, over the topic of literature. Their first meeting in Italy was informed by literary discussion, specifically the difficult moral choices the hero, Tito, in George Eliot's *Romola* had to face.<sup>76</sup> Already then, Mrs. Meredith's literal and minute assessment of Tito's moral duty, undoubtedly reflecting her own ethical dilemma whether to disclose or

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<sup>76</sup> See Pfeiffer, 43-4.

continue to conceal Rhoda's maternal blackness, impressed Olney as having "a conscience of prodigious magnifying force, cultivated to the last degree by a constant training upon the ethical problems of fiction" (17).

The language in which the narrator describes Mrs. Meredith's ethics is reminiscent of the tone Howells employed in his "Editor's Chair" columns that criticize the exaggerated moral heroism of romantic novels as damaging to readers, particularly women readers. Labeling her as "one of those women, [...], to whom life, in spite of all experience, remains a sealed book, and who are always trying to unlock its mysteries with the keys furnished them by fiction," the narrator associates Mrs. Meredith with female readers who "judge the world by the novels they have read" and whose "tiresome" tune "is peculiarly repulsive to such men as Olney" (33). Although it is always dangerous to conflate a writer with one of his characters, especially since Howells himself complained about readers' tendency to see Olney as a direct mouthpiece of his own politics, the doctor's rational, scientific sphere significantly overlap with the ideology of the realist writer.<sup>77</sup> If Howells juxtaposed feminized romantic fiction to the preferable masculine realism in his columns, he implies here that scientists like Olney, approximating realist writers, need to correct the morbid sentimentalism of sheltered women like Rhoda's aunt.

Through Mrs. Meredith's moral absolutism, Howells referred to the problematic use of didactic humanitarianism that realist writers detected in popular sentimental novels dealing prominently with race, gender, or, for that matter, any other

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<sup>77</sup> *Imperative Duty's* first publication in serial form contained a considerable amount of explicit and negative comments about the Irish that Howells deleted for the book publication because of the stir these comments evoked. To his sister Aurelia, he vented his frustration with the outrage of these comments because they were taken as expressing Howells's personal views on the Irish. "They can't see that it is not I who felt and said what Olney did," Howells complained (qtd. in Banta viii).

social question. Referencing Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, Kenneth Warren notes that realists tried to console their ideological struggle with a maudlin aesthetics that they deplored and the political realism they admired in such emotion-heavy novels by sorting out sentimentality and equating it with philanthropically-inclined, northern maids. Like Stowe's Miss Ophelia, these women's moral compass, though steadfast, was often experienced as old-fashioned, isolated from reality, and thus worth belittling. In Howells's own column about romanticized fiction we can register a similar recasting towards the "identification of sentimentalism with the figure of the New England female reformer" that Warren contends became almost a commonplace conflation of gender with sentimentality and abolitionism (89). Noticing that the romantic novels he so detested had recently turned from occupying their heroines with banal love triangles to more pressing decisions concerning social ethics, Howells warned: "More lately she [the romantic heroine] has begun to idolize and illustrate Duty, and she is hardly less mischievous in this new rôle, opposing duty, as she did love, to prudence, obedience, and reason" (April 1887: 74). This quote probably illustrates most forcefully realism's turn from "banging the babes of romance," encapsulated as beautiful, young, irresponsible maidens, to bashing sentimental literature and the female figure that embodied everything realism despised over her aged, benevolent, yet morally fixed and misdirected mind: the New England reformer.

Although Howells does not describe Mrs. Meredith as particularly reformist or even abolitionist, except for her and her husband's willingness to raise a mixed-raced child, the tension between Olney and Mrs. Meredith over the future of Rhoda's self-identification as a white-raised woman with black ancestry plays itself out over the

significance the novel attaches to duty. Howells alludes with his title, *An Imperative Duty*, to one of the melodramatic race novels he criticizes for their unrealistic handling of miscegenation in his 1887 “Editor’s Chair” column, the same piece in which he notes the tendency of romantic novels to let their heroines choose a misguided moral duty to social norms over rational solutions.<sup>78</sup> Howells indicates how irrational and damaging he regards these novels’ advice perhaps most famously in *The Rise of Silas Lapham*, whose central plotline revolves around undercutting the sentimental solution to a love triangle, which usually demands all involved parties to sacrifice and suffer, with the practical “economy of pain” in order to minimize distress. Not surprisingly then, Howells paints Mrs. Meredith as a sentimental, misguided woman whose reading habits have indoctrinated her with a false sense of duty. In her case, her long-smoldering duty has become imperative now that Rhoda stands on the brink of marriage: to disclose Rhoda’s ancestry to the girl and suitor since they might otherwise commit the unpardonable crime of racial intermarriage. Olney perceives Mrs. Meredith’s insistence on this duty as cruel since Mrs. Meredith herself admits that “[i]t will kill her [Rhoda]. But it must be done! [...] He [Bloomingdale] must know who and what she is as fully as I do” (42). Although the narrator later reflects that Mrs. Meredith, as a “daughter of an elder faith,” could interpret duty only in a limited way, he nonetheless leaves the reader with a sobering account of the injury done by women who are guided by the rigid New England sense of right and wrong that romantic novels have misinterpreted as emotional sympathy. “[T]o each must be left the question of how far the Puritan civilization has carried the cult of the personal conscience into mere dutiolatry,” counsels the narrator firmly (132).

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<sup>78</sup> According to Rosenthal, Howells referenced with his title “two lines in *Towards the Gulf*,” the anonymous miscegenation novel that Howells reviews in 1887 (120).

Mrs. Meredith's inflexible idea of duty when it comes to disclosing Rhoda's ancestry reflects the gender duality Howells creates by juxtaposing the rational doctor with the sentimental aunt. Instead of allowing for the scientist's, and by extension, the realist's, acknowledgment of truth as flexible and multiple, depending on individual circumstances, Olney feels that "right affected [Mrs. Meredith] as a body of positive color, sharply distinguished from wrong, and not shading into and out of it by gradations of tint, as we find it doing in reality." As a vessel that harnesses all the negative qualities of sentimental sympathy and morality, Mrs. Meredith strikes Olney as "a woman, [...], [who] would be capable of an atrocious cruelty in speaking or acting the truth, and would consider herself an exemplary person for having done her duty at any cost of suffering to herself and others" (34). Because Howells embodies the moral dilemma that Mrs. Meredith and Olney debate – Rhoda's inadvertent racial passing and the social consequences of aiding race mixing – over the tragic mixed-race woman's body, in and of itself a quintessential sentimental trope, he pits two white people against each other in a war that segregates them on account of their gender and their principles. In other words, which mode to employ to think about Rhoda and act on her secret becomes a matter of translation and appropriation: will black womanhood, here shorthanded through the tragic mixed-race woman, remain in the steadfast hands of white, philanthropic women, and thus stay in the realm of the sentimental past, or will the male realist be able to sever her from the maudlin and cross her over into the realm of future possibility and rationality?

It is no coincidence that Howells opposes his two white characters over the discourse of medicine. As her physician, especially a nerve specialist whose function

involves listening to and correcting women's hyper-sensible minds, Olney exerts a position of power and superiority.<sup>79</sup> Engulfed in the larger discourse of rational science, Mrs. Meredith seeks out Olney's counsel in medical and ethical questions, even if the two disagree over the implication of duty and the aunt's obligation to inform Mr. Bloomingdale. Despite his initial disgust when Mrs. Meredith finally discloses to him that Rhoda "is of Negro descent," Olney quickly adjusts to his earlier more relaxed outlook on race relations, even criticizing Mrs. Meredith's plan to inform Rhoda's suitor, Mr. Bloomingdale, of his fiancée's African American blood. Insisting that "the secret is *hers*, to keep it or tell it" (53), Olney grants Rhoda a surprisingly freethinking agency. As the older woman's doctor and sparring partner in literary aesthetics, Olney rescues Mrs. Meredith's classification of Rhoda's racial identity as tragic and socially inferior from the grasp of feminized sentimentality and instead transposes Rhoda's social whiteness into the rational realm of scientific realism, into a future where individualism trumps race.

Michele Birnbaum, in the context of her analysis of feminized race as illness, draws out most forcefully the connection between the role of the physician towards his female hysterics and that of the realist writer who 'cures' his female readers from sentimental harm. Drawing on infamous nerve specialist Dr. S. Weir Mitchell's belief that physicians need to administer "the real" to their patients, she contends that Olney's

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<sup>79</sup> Early in the narrative, when Olney is called to Mrs. Meredith, he immediately recognizes that her needs are of a mental nature rather than a bodily one. "It went through his mind," the narrator observes, "that it might well be for the nervous specialist hereafter to combine the functions of the priest and the leech, especially in the case of nervous ladies, and confess his patients before he began to prescribe for them" (33). Later on, in an effort to explain the misguided character of elderly women like Mrs. Meredith, the narrator conjectures that, overwhelmed with the scope of such ethical quandaries, they often relied on outside advice "by going first with her secret to her confessor, and then being ruled by him" (132). The narrator quickly comes to the conclusion that this was the case for Mrs. Meredith as well since, like many "shrill-nerved women," she confided in her physician, Dr. Olney (*ibid.*).

role is to “heal the mulatta of the sentimental hyperbole of her ‘tragedy’,” and “secure the boundaries of reality” for Rhoda (11-2). It is certainly true that as soon as Rhoda becomes Olney’s love interest, insecurities about her own racial allegiance quickly cast her in the role of a black hyper-sensible woman in need of a rational doctor’s “racial literacy” (Birnbaum 12). Nonetheless, Mrs. Meredith remains Olney’s erstwhile patient, and it is their initial struggle over the implications of Rhoda’s mixed-race status that informs the doctor’s claim as arbiter of the real, disguised in a discussion of duty. If Mrs. Meredith’s duty entails an imperative responsibility towards New England purity, both in body and conscience, then Olney’s duty necessitates rescuing Rhoda’s secret from the grasp of sentimentality (of course, the implication of duty takes on yet another layer of meaning when applied to Rhoda’s sense of self, which I will discuss later). The clout of the real that empowers the physician, and by extension the realist writer, thus authorizes Olney and Howells to rewrite the tragic mulatta type into a realistic story of common-sense interracial marriage, but it also carries them into a desire-filled sphere that sexes race.

In order to understand Olney’s keenness to grasp the thing about Rhoda that attracts him so forcefully, we should look to Phillip Barrish’s analysis of what he calls “realist dispositions.” Arguing that many realist narratives set up their protagonist or narrative persona to gain intellectual prestige from their experience, Barrish identifies a crucial tension at the heart of the relationship between these figures and their environment. “Claims to what we might call ‘realist prestige’,” Barrish elaborates, “exhibit at their center the assertion of a paradoxical relationship – comprising a unique degree of emotional and cognitive intimacy with, yet also controllable distance from –

whatever category of the experience a given literary work posits as the most recalcitrantly *real*, most intransigently *material*, that life has to offer” (3). Olney’s behavior reflects the vexed relationship Barrish describes. He feels himself drawn to Rhoda because of the assumed material and at the same time elusive blackness that her white-looking body shields from the surface, but he acts upon his desire to obtain the black real of womanhood from a controlled distance. It is this intellectual detachment that enables the realist actor to wrench the real from its sentimentalized grasp.

If Olney’s role in the novel is one of power because he can and will translate Rhoda’s sentimental fate into a realistic account of mixed-race identity, her value remains nonetheless a fleeting, desirable entity attached to the very sentimental qualities of Rhoda’s association with blackness that the realist writer tries to expel. As such, Olney is in constant danger of losing his scientific detachment to the emotional irrationality that marks the realm of feminized sentimentality and which reduces Rhoda to sympathetic but inferior blackness. After learning of Rhoda’s maternal ancestry, Howells describes Olney’s initial disgust as a “profound and pervasive” manifestation of his “unscientific” “race instinct,” in which he questions Rhoda’s beauty in the light of her newly discovered racial association (44). While he can quickly decode his intuitive prejudices, which the narrator symbolically describes as “[t]he thing that had been lurking in a dark corner of Olney’s mind, intangible if not wholly invisible,” and regard Rhoda again “for what she had always been, for what, except in so remote a degree, she really was” (98), the temporary lapse in his rational training considerably shakes Olney’s clear-cut division between male rationality and feminized frenzy evoked by the discovery of her black blood. Olney’s consternation over his own “[s]ensibilities which ought not to have

survived his scientific training and ambition” expresses his annoyance at being made susceptible to the emotional matter he relegates to the sphere of women (45).

To offset any weakness for sentiment, Olney spends most of the pages in the novel reinforcing his common-sense view on race in general and countering Mrs. Meredith’s viewpoint that Rhoda can only be seen predominantly as black rather than white. Similar to undermining the cultural potency of the popular one-drop rule in their discussion of the likelihood of atavism, towards the end of the novel, when Olney tries to convince Rhoda to marry him instead of going South to do racial uplift work, the doctor repeatedly insists that the “infinitesimal” (145) amount of black blood running through her veins does not outweigh the “fifteen-sixteenth” part of white heredity (143). Furthermore, he maintains that she does not look black (144), and, as a southern woman who was raced as white, belongs “incomparably more to the oppressors than the oppressed” (145). However selfishly motivated Olney’s reasons are for preventing Rhoda from identifying as a black woman, he insists that Rhoda was and always has been white, at least socially. Henry Wonham argues that Olney’s “cultural appropriation” of Rhoda’s image of blackness marks an “act that transgresses, without obscuring, the integrity of the color line” (“Howells, Du Bois” 134), but his crossing of social boundaries turns out to be more of a blurred path than Olney would like to admit. His initially conflicted reaction towards Rhoda’s secret illustrates the precarious balance between sentiment and sensibleness. His “inherent outrage” that men like him should be first dragged into Mrs. Meredith’s inner turmoil and, secondly, made privy to such intimate details of a woman’s life as Rhoda’s hereditary effect on her love life, barely masks Olney’s constant dread of reverting back to a sentimental, irrational response that

he detects in his own spontaneous feelings. Adding, “there should be women to deal with them [such situations],” this moment uncovers the constant liability of the realist man to fall back into the trap of sentimentality which can only be countered by reinforcing emotionality as a women’s quality (45).

Despite Olney’s efforts to clinically separate dogmatic sentimental attitudes towards the taboo of racial integration from more tolerant positions, the historical practice of sexualizing the mixed-race woman inevitably complicates the doctor’s sense of duty. Olney might sincerely believe that he can and will treat Rhoda as he has from the beginning of the novel when he assumed her to be a young white lady, but his sexual interest in her tellingly coincides with the revelation of her black ancestry. While he displays a keen acknowledgment of Rhoda’s beauty and charm from the beginning of the novel, the doctor’s feelings at first remain detached and theoretical. Only after Mrs. Meredith tells him that Rhoda is partly black do these aloof observations turn into a concrete desire for Rhoda, spurred on by rivalry with Rhoda’s unknowing fiancé. Thus, the detached nature with which Olney approached the race question in the beginning of the novel quickly transforms into something highly personal. His earlier comment that sooner or later the white race will absorb the black one, grounded in his nineteenth-century scientific belief in the assertion of dominant genes, becomes charged once he figuratively turns himself into a vessel that yearns to erotically enclose Rhoda’s blackness while also neutralizing it through the hegemonic power of whiteness, symbolized in the marriage contract.<sup>80</sup>

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<sup>80</sup> The dynamic at play between Olney’s and Rhoda’s individual impulses to enter into a legal union depends largely on the normative status associated with whiteness but also its “unstable and unbounded nature” (Edwards, *Gothic Passages* 75). As Edwards explains, whiteness attains strength from its variability as a category so that it can include other identities (ibid.), or, in this case, ‘absorb’ those qualities

But why exactly does Olney place such high value in the small part that makes Rhoda black? How does her association with blackness make her a realer, truer, worthier woman than she had been before? Why does black womanhood become – to borrow Barrish’s phrase (3) – the “realest real thing” in *An Imperative Duty* when the novel spends large parts on Olney’s justification, grounded in his liberal view, that race, in Rhoda’s case, does not matter? Although Howells seems to argue that Rhoda is as white as Olney on the grounds that socialization and not biology make the person, in other words that class trumps race, it is not her white identity that ultimately intrigues Olney.<sup>81</sup> In an oft-quoted scene, Olney is taken with “profoundest passion” upon seeing Rhoda in mourning garb for her aunt’s death. The narrator explains Olney’s fascination by way of evoking stereotypes of the enslaved South, black womanhood, and primitive sexuality:

It was the elder world, the beauty of antiquity, which appealed to him in the luster and sparkle of this girl; and the remote taint of her servile and savage origin gave her a kind of fascination which refuses to let itself put in words: it was like the grace of a limp, the occult, indefinable loveliness of a deformity, but transcending these by its allurements in infinite degree, and going for the reason of

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of blackness that seem useful to change or augment white subjectivity. For a discussion of Rhoda’s motivations to participate in normative whiteness via marriage to Olney, see Jeffery Clymer. Clymer interprets Rhoda’s patriotism as one way to obtain the rights encoded in the social contract, usually embodied over the abstracted white male body. Relying on Lauren Berlant’s theory that “[o]ne way that women have tried to mimic the abstract citizen’s body, [...], is by ‘borrowing the corporeal logic of an other through, for example, marriage or racial passing,’” Clymer emphasizes the attractiveness inherent in the marriage contract for minority subjects to partake in hegemonic power (43-4).

<sup>81</sup> Both Pfeiffer and Goodman take up this conundrum in their analyses. Pfeiffer refers to the text’s underlying tension to “juxtapos[e] Rhoda’s ‘imitation whiteness’ against that of its Irish characters” (48). Goodman identifies a larger trend of what she calls “veneering” in Howells’s fiction, which, in *Imperative Duty*, “presents race as a function of class and manners” (30). While I agree with their general aim to emphasize the multiple forces of competing categories of identities that take white gentility as their universal center at the same time that they undermine it, my point is to uncover the centrality and value of blackness that stands at the root of Olney’s desire for Rhoda.

its effect deep into the mysterious places of being where the spirit and the animal meet and part in us. (133)

At first glance, Olney's desire for Rhoda is based on association with unbound, animalistic passion, thus rather stereotypically placing a blackened Rhoda in a position of subservient racialized sex object. The usually derogatory associations with black femininity – here expressed through the “servile and savage origin”, hinting at promiscuity – become connected to attributes of physical lack or otherness, such as a limp or a deformity. But instead of reinforcing each other in their negative imagery, the combination of black essence and otherness propels Rhoda into a transcendent state of beauty, eternal wisdom, and truth. This combination trumps, for example, the “blond presence” and “the tameness of the Northern type,” which Mrs. Atherton, Olney's friend with whom Rhoda stays after her aunt's death, exemplifies (133). Olney takes flaws connected with blackness and reassigns them as the basis for an unconventional yet original womanhood, a realness that produces a feminine ideal which is unexpectedly based on the flawed materiality of the black body.<sup>82</sup>

Yet in order to make this classification of womanhood not only theoretically ideal but realistically desirable, the blackness that so attracts Olney must express itself at a distance, both physically as well as historically. For Olney, the qualities of sensuality and antique feminine grace posit Rhoda as an ideal woman because her blackness possesses a certain elusive, intangible quality that can only be located in her racialized past. His understanding of blackness thus does not rely on a visible reality that is bound

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<sup>82</sup> I align my interpretation here with Birnbaum's keen insight that “Olney metamorphoses the tragic mulatta from aberration to archetypal woman through a kind of alchemic eroticism [...]. She is superior [...] because her link with the primal places her before and, paradoxically, above the more ‘advanced’ and domesticated Anglo woman” (9).

to materiality. In other words, Olney does not value Rhoda so much because the secret of her black lineage manifests itself over the material reality of dark skin or in characteristically racial features, as we might expect from a narrative that relies on mimesis and visible truth in order to access the real. To the contrary, the unmarked quality of Rhoda's blackness is only accessible through a recourse to a sentimentalized past, which is exactly what excites Olney.<sup>83</sup> Hence Rhoda's outer whiteness is predicated on blackness and, according to Olney, makes "such a kind of difference that if I could have you other than you are by wishing it, I wouldn't" (144). Thus, over Rhoda's visually unmarked symbolic blackness the real and the ideal meet to become the "realist real" in Olney's universe.

Especially if read against the background of the opening pages that situate Olney in a position of male crisis writ large, faced with national insecurities brought about by waves of immigrants, neither the Anglo-Saxon women of the "elder American race" nor the "thin, crooked, pale, and pasty-complexioned" Irish girls can compare to Rhoda's combination of wholesome realness (her gaiety, her beauty) and transcendent idealness (her fleeting blackness, her visible whiteness, her hidden sensuality) (3). Paradoxically, then, subsuming Rhoda's racialized past in the act of heterosexual, cross-racial desire points to one way of securing and fortifying the future of a post-Reconstruction white America. Because of this it becomes paramount that Olney takes charge of Rhoda's secret black ancestry. The value of this intangible association with African American womanhood raises Olney's sexual desire for her. But, in order to "absorb the colored race" into the body of white hegemony, it is even more thrilling for Olney to become the

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<sup>83</sup> Wonham argues that Rhoda's blackness gives Howells license to employ figurative imagery that runs counter to his realist dictum. As such "he deploys blackness as a symbolic rebuke to the self-imposed limits of his realist aesthetic" ("Writing Realism" 721).

sole arbiter of Rhoda's blackness, consuming her secret and "obliterating" it. After all, he pleads with Rhoda that her place is not with other African Americans, doing racial uplift work, but better spent towards the improvement of Olney's race, white Anglo-Saxons (143). Here again, the "obliteration" of black characteristics resulting out of his earlier belief in absorbing the colored race gets a deeper layer of meaning: in a social climate of scientific racism, the work of white men like Olney is not to simply blot out black womanhood through intermarriage but rather to enfold its value within themselves while at the same time curbing its more threatening social dimensions.

Olney's patronizing racism eventually leaves Rhoda stuck in a similarly passive role as that of the sentimental tragic mulatta Howells initially set out to criticize. However, Howells attempts at least briefly to explore character interiority outside the realm of normative whiteness. Accordingly, the text shifts focus from Olney's perspective to that of Rhoda at the critical moment of her identity crisis. Although the narrator delves into Rhoda's consciousness for only roughly one and a half chapters, Howells tellingly sandwiches this break in perspective between Olney's initial difficulty regarding Rhoda as the same woman he knew before learning of her black ancestry and his eventual recognition that his love for Rhoda trumps hereditary traits. Martha Banta's research shows that Howells's initial notebook entries from 1883 and 1886 refer to the idea of *An Imperative Duty* as a story written exclusively from the viewpoint of Olney. "When or why Howells decided to use the third-person narrative form is unknown," Banta proposes, "but one can conjecture that he recognized that to fix the subject within Olney's consciousness alone would greatly limit its possibilities" (viii).

Indeed, the pages that allow the reader to glean into the inner turmoil of a woman who just discovered that her whiteness is jeopardized by a small amount of black blood remain one of the most contentious and experimental parts of the text. On the one hand, these pages contain most of the demeaning stereotypical and generalized comments about African Americans to which prominent racial uplift writers Anna Julia Cooper and Victoria Earle Matthews objected. Because the impression of the black church-goers' "abhorrent" faces and odorous "musky exhalation of their bodies" comes from a partly black character herself, the condemnation of African Americans becomes particularly detrimental to any project invested in tearing down the color line, undoing all attempts at achieving a nuanced representation of black individualism or interiority.<sup>84</sup> On the other hand, Rhoda's sojourn through the black neighborhoods of Boston after her aunt's confession chronicles in careful detail the psychological turmoil such revelation exerts on a person's sense of self. The negative emotions of alienation and hate that Rhoda experiences in the company of African Americans adhere to the realist doctrine of truthfully unfolding characters' inner recesses as they interact with social reality. Moreover, Howells's depiction of Rhoda's "two selves [...], one that lived before that awful knowledge, and one that had lived as long since, and again a third that knew and pitied them both" – a first gesture towards the concept of double-consciousness so vital to W.E.B. Du Bois's theories – sets Howells's interest in raced interiority within the context of his broader investment in the representation of the middle-class fractured mind (87).<sup>85</sup>

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<sup>84</sup> M. Giulia Fabi maintains that scenes like these suggest "a wholesale cancellation of black culture" (54).

<sup>85</sup> For the influence of Jamesian psychology on Howells's understanding of double consciousness and the fractured mind, see Wonham's thought-provoking "Howells, Du Bois, and the Effect of 'Common-Sense'." Wonham traces how Du Bois's appropriated Howells's neurasthenic discourse on race, which he used as a counterforce to white anxiety, into a cultural theory about race and psychology.

In a sense, Howells's frank and sometimes even unflattering presentation of Rhoda's duality throughout her identity crisis is quite modern, alluding to stream-of-consciousness ways of capturing a character's mental reaction to an emotional difficulty that defies rational mastery. Most of Rhoda's emotional response, however, follows the scripted psychological journey of the traditional tragic mixed-race heroine. Like these characters, Rhoda initially hopes to deny the immense threat of blackness and blames her aunt for deceiving her "to let me pass myself off on myself and every one else, for what I wasn't" (74). Symbolically crossing a socially impermeable border into unknown racial territory, Rhoda's retreat from her aunt, in addition to the image of an amputated arm used to account for Rhoda's loss of her white self, as well as the girl's feeling that her aunt has killed her, mimics the social, and often actual, death of the female mixed-race character (86, 88, 141). Similarly, Rhoda's concerted effort at mingling and "liking" black people, since she now considers herself as black, reflects the usual plotlines of tragic mixed-race heroines who undergo unbearable spilt identities that either end in death or the irrevocable renunciation of white identity for racial uplift work. Consequently, Rhoda's attempt to "densely surround herself with the blackness from which she had sprung" miserably fails to suppress the disgust she feels towards the African American church members (92). The only way to reconcile her white ideality with her black reality opens itself up through the sacrifice of racial uplift. "I can endure them if I can love them," reasons Rhoda desperately when she visits a black church service, "and I shall love them if I try to help them. This money will help them" (95).

While Howells seems comfortable leaving Rhoda, like Mrs. Meredith, in the role of sentimental prop and actor, respectively, in the drama surrounding black womanhood,

he is adamant about rewriting the script's outcome through levelheaded Olney. Howells epitomizes Olney's superior attitude, his ultimate dismissal of and mastery over the sentimental script, in their proposal scene. When Olney asks Rhoda to marry him, she, still unaware of Olney's knowledge about her past, cannot but cry out to Olney that "I am a negress," to which Olney only calmly replies that it does not matter since he loves her. Immediately, the narrator belittles Rhoda's theatrical outburst, pointing out that "As a tragedy the whole affair had fallen to ruin. It could be reconstructed, if at all, only upon an octave much below the operatic pitch. It must be treated in no lurid twilight gloom, but in plain, simple, matter-of-fact noonday" (139). Here, we see the gender dynamics inherent to Howells's Realism War, played out in fictional form, especially the male realist writer's eagerness to seize the old story of the tragic mulatta type for his own purposes. As such, Howells cares more about the story's outcome than about changing the actual depth of the mixed-race character. In *An Imperative Duty*, white men successfully convert sentimental discourse into the mode of realism, but, in doing so, Howells leaves Rhoda in a similar state of liminal agency and narrow interiority as the sentimental novels he censures.<sup>86</sup>

Consequently, the little time Howells spends on illustrating Rhoda's own experience of blackness ultimately serves his point by denouncing her capability to develop a sensible inner self outside the realm of sentimentality unless safely translated into realist discourse and supervised by Olney. The discovery of Rhoda's blackness might serve as a vehicle for strengthening Olney's sense of self, but beyond functioning as a testing ground for Olney's liberal race politics, blackness stifles rather than enhances

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<sup>86</sup> See also Rosenthal who claims that in translating the mixed-race heroine's story, Howells "reverts to type" (133).

Rhoda's individuality. The narrative's figurative use of the past, present, and future serves as a guiding metaphor for differentiating female paralysis from Olney's dynamic adeptness at using Rhoda's fate meaningfully. After Mrs. Meredith's confession to Rhoda, for instance, "the girl sobbed on and on, and the woman repeated the same things over and over, a babble of words in which there was no comfort, no help, but which sufficed to tide them both over from the past which has dropped into chaos behind them to a new present in which they must try to gain a footing once more" (76-7). Clearly inept at looking beyond the immediate present, both women remain helpless, even speechless. Even more so, after the aunt's death, Rhoda remains unable to imagine a prospect in which she can retain her social status instead of enacting sentimental self-sacrifice. Rhoda's all-consuming efforts to survive and "escape the past" lead her to "shun the future," a female trait that the narrator naturalizes by attributing it to women's passive education (136-7).

If sentimental mentality has literally destroyed Rhoda's capability to propel her into a future devoid of racial sacrifice, Olney's white masculinity and commonsense attitude provide a smooth transition and fresh beginning. He refutes her sense of duty to go to the South and educate other African Americans by reasoning that the "way to elevate them is to elevate *us*, to begin with. [...] No, if you must give your life to the improvement of any particular race, give it to mine" (143). Providing himself as a stand-in for a future in which Rhoda can acknowledge her black ancestry while continuing to live out her whiteness socially, Olney implores, "[b]egin with *me*" (ibid.). After he successfully converts the mixed-race woman's story into the realist future, Howells is less concerned with changing her limited consciousness into a freer, more elaborate

representation of black interiority than he is with expanding Olney's consciousness at the expense of the value he attaches to Rhoda's black ancestry.

Howells's inattentiveness to meaningfully changing the parameters at stake in the representation of the mixed-race woman becomes most pressing when Olney and Rhoda discuss racial uplift work. Rhoda's determination in the church scene to devote her life and resources to helping African Americans remains short-lived. She seems only too ready to give up her plan of finding her "mother's people, [...] to help them and acknowledge them" once Olney proposes to her and insists that her romanticized conception of duty is rather misdirected (142). Because Rhoda's biological blackness becomes a prize Olney needs to secure for himself, Howells performs a double-strike of blotting out African American culture. First, he continually undermines Rhoda's character depth by subordinating her white individuality to the elusively mystifying quality of her blackness. Further, he allows Olney to undercut the value of uplift work educated, white-looking women like Rhoda might bring to freely emancipated African Americans. In her review of *An Imperative Duty*, Anna Julia Cooper's objection to Rhoda's offhand plan to go south because it abounds with "condescending patronage" (208) might have been spurred by Olney's reasoning that Rhoda never "*consented* to be of their [African Americans] kind" and thus has no obligation to devote her resources to uplift work. "If you go down there to elevate the blacks," he maintains, "what is to become of me?" (143). When Olney instantly redirects Rhoda's potential merit to himself and white culture, Howells, in Warren's words, "quietly slides questions of black education into the container of romanticized ideas" (66). More importantly, his realist

aesthetics implicitly makes a negative value judgment about the active, independent roles black sentimental fiction of the 1890s grants its female characters.<sup>87</sup>

Readers' impression of Rhoda as a dependent, weak-willed woman in need of manly protection and guidance only furthers the idea that Howells was either incapable or unwilling to rewrite the mixed-race heroine herself, and not only the structure of her story, into a more willful and individual entity. The narrative events lead us to believe that Howells's priorities lie in extracting the symbolic value of blackness that attracted Olney to Rhoda for the doctor's own self-enrichment, often at the cost of the "elimination of female autonomous decision making" (Fabi 54). During the scene that shows Rhoda in crisis between choosing a marriage to Olney and passing as white or living independently and publicly as a mixed-race woman, Olney "instinctively [...] treated Rhoda as if she were his patient" (145). In their hierarchical doctor-patient relationship, Olney has license to authoritatively decide what is best for Rhoda, including a transfer of her racialized secret that, in his eyes, only ails her, to the male scientist who can benefit from it.

Olney's attraction to Rhoda is thus based on her intangible, invisible, and several generations removed featured blackness, which evokes a mystic sensuality and unaffected innocence. This combination of sensual idealness, backed up by Rhoda's white skin, and African realness becomes a prize that Olney wants to possess for a two-fold reason. First, Rhoda's immense physical attraction sexualizes his desire for her darkened body. Second, like many upper-middle-class white Americans' fascination with ethnic otherness, Olney also yearns to absorb blackness because it represents an

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<sup>87</sup> Comparing *Imperative Duty* to Harper's *Iola Leroy*, Warren argues that Howells's "commonsense position apparently denied the legitimacy of the very public forum that women like Harper sought to occupy and the vocational choices they sought to endorse" (67).

arcane quality of uniqueness deemed capable of expanding his own range of consciousness, both intellectually and emotionally. Rhoda's value to Olney lies in her secret African American ancestry, but acquiring this secret, in the sense of supervising, interpreting, and administering it, becomes the actual clandestine power that sustains white masculine interiority.

*An Imperative Duty* shows how difficult it proved to translate the story of Rhoda's racial identity, at the time most readily accessible through the feminized discourse of sentimentalism, into the rational mode of realism. Howells's frequent recourse to sentimental imagery when it comes to illustrating Rhoda's allure to Olney points to realists' limited vocabulary in regards to black womanhood as well as to the "atavistic element" attached to the image of the female, mixed-raced body that "defies constraint" (Rosenthal 132). Sharing with sentimental race novels the belief that nominal concepts such as blackness and whiteness nonetheless embodied certain essential qualities, Howells did not fully dismantle racial images but rather concentrated on freeing their associated qualities from their referents. In the case of *An Imperative Duty* this means that Olney stays attracted to Rhoda because he understands her to be, at core, a black rather than a white woman. Consequently, Howells's revision of the tragic mulatta trope remains incomplete because as soon as Olney is able to become the arbiter of her secret and ultimately the beneficiary of the value attached to her blackness, there is no need anymore to transplant the mixed-race woman out of her sentimental past.

Olney's desire to become supervisor of her secret, including appropriating its value for himself and the power to disclose it, therefore becomes paramount, especially before Rhoda agrees to their marriage. Thus, the uncertainty if Mrs. Meredith has

actually revealed her niece's origin to Rhoda before she died keenly tortures Olney during their courting days, in addition to his awareness that, unless he marries Rhoda, he has "no claim upon her" nor her secret (135). Because of this, the rhetorical power to withhold or disclose Rhoda's blackness to the outside world becomes the ultimate symbol of trust and proof of love in their courtship. The final condition upon which Olney accepts Rhoda's request of never disclosing her secret is that "you believe I'm not afraid to tell it. Otherwise my self-respect will oblige me to go round shouting it to everybody" (146). Underneath this declaration of genuine love despite a social climate of pervasive racism lurks a significant transfer of Rhoda's secret, and thereby agency, to Olney. Reminiscent of the historically complicit relationship between white men and black women that is fraught with sexual dominion, this transfer only adds to Olney's sense of self, particularly in the way Rhoda's racialized womanhood becomes bound to his white masculinity. The clandestine value of blackness is not hers any longer, neither to worry about nor to lay claim on.

In *An Imperative Duty*, Howells uses Olney to put a stop to the "growing [...] fungus crop of sentiment" that Basil March lamented in *Their Wedding Journey* (163), one that has its roots in the slave past of the country and that Rhoda initially so willingly accepts as the best mode of expression for the revelation of her black identity. As a symbolic bearer of white masculinity, Olney not only "absorbs" Rhoda's mixed-blood female body into the sanctity of white marriage. He also dispels the association of feminized romantic outlooks on real life with his scientific approach to questions of love, race, and social responsibility. In other words, Olney can rescue Rhoda's story from the overwrought passions of the romantic past and translate it more truthfully into the realist

present and future. Despite this clear-cut ending that signals the triumph of rationality, the novel leaves us wondering at what expense the melodramatic racial past has to be exorcised. When Rhoda beseeches Olney one more time to think about the consequences of marrying her, alluding to emotional distress or regret because of her association with blackness, Olney answers self-assuredly: "I'm going to leave all the trouble of that to you. I assure you that from this on I shall never think of it. I am going to provide for the future, and let you look after your past" (148). Thus having found a convenient way to translate the vital parts of Rhoda's story into his rational truth, in Howells's universe Rhoda, and, by extension, African American women, are left stuck in the past. Olney might have felt "as if he had literally rescued [Rhoda] from her own thoughts of herself" (145), but the task of remembering and the psychological consequences of sentimental images in which even Olney cannot help but imagine Rhoda are left to black women.

Triangles of Love and Race: Gendered Blackness in Chesnut's *The House Behind the Cedars*

If Howells's *An Imperative Duty* leaves its mixed-race heroine and white doctor with the prospect of a happy future, albeit one removed from the immediate American scene, Charles W. Chesnut's *The House Behind the Cedars* (1900) squelches realist optimism towards interracial unions mid-way through his narrative. The story opens with the return of John Warwick to his hometown in North Carolina. Warwick, formerly known as John Walden, resides as a successful lawyer in South Carolina where less stringent race laws enable him to assume a white identity despite his racially-mixed identity inherited from a white father and an "old issue free negro" mother (156).

Initially, the lawyer sought to pay a clandestine visit to his mother after a long absence, but upon seeing his sister's light-skinned beauty and grace, he swiftly promises Rena a similarly upward trajectory into the white world if she comes with him. After a year of schooling, Rena, now transformed into the European-sounding Rowena Warwick, falls in love with and gets proposed to by one of John's white friends, George Tryon. Although John can pragmatically subdue Rena's moral qualms about disclosing her African American ancestry to her lover, George ultimately discovers her black identity in a twist of coincidental meetings that lead them back to Rena's hometown where she is publicly known as a beautiful mulatta girl. With the engagement off and George deeply offended by this hair-breadth escape from committing the cardinal sin of interracial marriage, the remainder of the novel tracks the girl's decision to devote her life to racial uplift work. Rena relocates as a self-identified mixed-raced teacher to a small town in North Carolina, which is, unbeknownst to her, also the home of George Tryon's family. Unable to forget neither Rena nor the fact that she is African American, George struggles with his feelings and continues to pursue her outside of the possibility of legal marriage. Yet Rena, bent on protecting her respectability as a light-skinned black woman, breaks under the sexual persecution that comes not only from her white lover but also from Jeff Wain, a greedy and abusive mixed-race man. Forced to flee into the swamps in order to escape either man's fervent sexual desire, Rena eventually dies of brain fever at her mother's home, moments before a repentant Tryon can tell her of his newly won conviction that love conquers social customs.

For most readers, contemporary as well as current ones, the appeal of *The House Behind the Cedars* lies in Chesnutt's intricate representation of the well-known

miscegenation story that chronicles the fate of the tragically mixed-raced heroine. Particularly in the first half of the novel, Chesnutt emphasizes how absurdly the literary legacy of sentimentalism maps onto race. The way in which John Walden uses the literary tombs of European chivalry on which the white South fashions itself is a case in point. Inspired by the “dear old books” in his white father’s library, John self-consciously shapes his white identity after the legend of Warwick the Kingmaker he read about as a young boy in Edward Bulwer-Lytton’s 1843 historical romance *The Last of the Barons* (18, 29). Furthermore, the Walter Scott-themed medieval tournament that serves as the backdrop to introduce Rena Walden to the white, upper-class society of Clarence, South Carolina reiterates Chesnutt’s emphasis on books and fictive stories as tools to be used by white and black characters alike in the making and unmaking of racial identities. The transformation of the young mixed-race girl from Patesville, North Carolina into the gracious Rowena Warwick underscores the “fiction of queenship” that the elite society of Clarence plays up in order to align their southern ideas of inherited whiteness with established European blood lines (61). Like John, who seizes on the cultural implications of Bulwer’s Warwick, Rena’s choice to become Rowena, the heroine in *Ivanhoe* by Walter Scott, “the literary idol of the South” (161), emphasizes the success of the siblings at embodying fictional legends that the South reveres for their symbolic racial purity, that is for their graceful, old world whiteness. But these choices also call attention to Chesnutt’s awareness of the mutability of generic conventions. Thus, when Rena, an “upstart girl who had blown into the town over night” (55), becomes the “Queen of Love and Beauty” and thereby the envy of every rich white girl in Clarence, Chesnutt’s joke on

sentimentalism's racial bias, encoded in its obsession with romantic idealism and pure, white womanhood, hits home.<sup>88</sup>

The second half of the novel undermines this joke and turns to a melodramatic ending in which Rena's hitherto successful passing comes undone at the hands of her white lover, leading to a tragic, and rather genre-typical, death of the mixed-race character. Cathy Boeckmann ties the turn of events in the last half back to John and Rena's seemingly successful manipulation of racial fictions, commenting that "Chesnutt betrays an understanding that the narrative tools which construct identity depend on power systems that lie beyond the passing character's control" (156). This lack of control certainly marks Rena's mired agency, especially as her now public identity as an attractive, white-looking African American woman leaves her vulnerable to the advances of both black and white men. Consequently, the melodrama that catches readers' attention revolves around the triangular relationship between Rena, George Tryon, and Jeff Wain and culminates in Rena's death as the only way the narrative suggests that late nineteenth-century white readers can imagine a mixed-race woman retaining her respectability. Yet the same power systems wielded by white men to crush Rena and force her to identify as black do not affect her brother John in similarly devastating ways. Although John vanishes from the story-line more or less after George's rejection of his sister, the same white man who dooms Rena to forfeit passing, thereby orchestrating her social white death, and, ultimately, her physical death, assures John that his crossing the color line will remain a safe secret. More than that, George even validates John's

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<sup>88</sup> For a more detailed discussion of the way Chesnutt's black characters use well-established stories with entrenched yet tacit racial associations to write themselves into whiteness, see Cathy Boeckmann, particularly pp. 156-162, and Maria Orban. Orban says about the siblings' conscious reference to *Ivanhoe*, "Inside this Chinese box, race identity based on the fiction of whiteness in *The House Behind the Cedars* is, in fact, the fiction of a fiction of a fiction, thus pointing to an endless network of representations" (86).

whiteness despite the evidence against his assumed racial identification: “Personally, I shall never be able to think of you as other than a white man” (153).

In the following pages, I explore how George’s validation implicates John into the game of white masculinity that is played out over the back of black womanhood. What does Chesnutt achieve by inserting a third player, a white-looking yet black man, into the drama of interracial love? How does John Walden’s need for his sister’s presence as a racially indeterminate black woman complicate the value realist writers such as Howells attach to the symbol of African American womanhood? Instead of concentrating on the tragic love triangle between George, Jeff Wain, and Rena, I look at another, more subdued, triangular relationship that reroutes itself over the body of a passing woman: that of John, George, and Rena. Unlike most classic triangle formations in literature, this one does not manifest itself as erotic, that is, driven by two male lovers competing for a woman. Nonetheless, despite the absence of erotic desire for Rena from her brother’s point of view, Rena’s disguised African American heritage is vital to both men’s identification with whiteness and thus intricately connects them. I take Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s analysis and reworking of erotic triangles in her by now classic study of the structures of desire and power, *Between Men* (1985), as my template. Sedgwick’s larger aim is to better understand the “*structure* of men’s relations with other men” by undoing the artificial dichotomy latent in our late twentieth-century categorizations of male bonds into either homosexual or homosocial. Instead, Sedgwick envisions a continuum of desire that encompasses same-sex bonds ranging from sexual ones to emotionally or economically driven relationships based on family, friendship, and social networks (2). What this continuum allows us to see more fully is the struggle for and distribution of

power along gendered, racialized, and classed lines in relationships marked by desire, same-sex or not. In order to show the historically varying yet also quite stable workings of structural relationships between men, Sedgwick relies on the dynamics of erotic triangles in European fiction described by René Girard, as well as Gayle Rubin's assessment of patriarchal heterosexuality as a system of male power relations that operates through the trafficking of women. Of course, Sedgwick's, as well as Girard's and Rubin's, analyses are more complex than I give credit here, but I will filter and zoom in on their most important arguments for my own purposes.<sup>89</sup>

Despite the universalizing heterosexual implication of Girard's erotic triangle – usually two men rivaling for a woman's affection – Sedgwick highlights Girard's insistence that the bond between the two (male) rivals is often more intense than their respective bond to their beloved (Sedgwick 21). In light of Rubin's analysis that patriarchal societies function through the exchange of women from one man to another, thus establishing bonds and creating power boundaries between men, Sedgwick concludes that “the use of women by men as exchangeable objects, as counters of value,” serves primarily to “cement[...] relationships with other men” (123). On the one hand, Rena functions in *The House Behind the Cedars* in rather traditional ways as the valuable object that gets bartered from her father-like sibling John to his friend and soon-to-be brother-in-law, George, exchanging youth and beauty for an even firmer link with the

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<sup>89</sup> For a fuller understanding of Sedgwick's argument, refer to the chapter “Gender Asymmetry and Erotic Triangles,” in which she discusses in depth Girard's claims in his *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel* (1965), as well as the Marxist-feminist underpinnings of Gayle Rubin's “The Traffic in Women” (1975) that relies on a larger critique of male-dominated fields and theorists, such as Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalysis and Claude Lévi-Strauss's pivotal contribution to structuralism.

wealth and prestige of the Tryons.<sup>90</sup> This reading suggests that the “male homosocial complicity,” to use Sedgwick’s words, between John and George serves the former predominantly to gap any social differences (even if their racial nature are unbeknownst to the latter) between a successful, yet nonetheless secretly passing and thereby constantly vulnerable, man in the South and his lily-white equivalent. As Sedgwick reminds us, the trafficking of women not only bolsters two men’s relationship and validates their own value, but it can diminish unequal power relationships that arise out of the participants’ different class or race identities to the point of melding them into cultural likeness and equal social status (132, 160). For Chesnut’s novel, this means that, even after George finds out about John and Rena’s black ancestry, John may remain white and an equal, if alienated, member of Tryon’s social circle.

Certainly, I am not the first critic to point out John’s curiously smooth survival in a story arc that otherwise painfully draws out the emotional consequences of passing on its black characters as well as the racist tenacity of white southern society in maintaining a strict color line. Most critics give a nod or two to John’s exceptional status, attributing his ability to “enter[...] the white world unburdened by the ponderous psychological baggage which virtually all the mixed-blood figures in the late nineteenth century consume their energies wrestling with” to the gender advantages he enjoys compared to Rena’s compounded identity as a mixed-race woman (Andrews *The Literary Career* 165).<sup>91</sup> Similar to the general uncertainty about the number of African Americans who

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<sup>90</sup> John’s mocking address, “Well, children” when Tryon tells him of the engagement (72) and his later ‘test’ of George’s sincerity, telling him “we are new people” – a thinly disguised euphemism for racial identity – are cases in point (83).

<sup>91</sup> See for example, Andrews (*The Literary Career* 164-167), Boeckmann (163-165), and Wilson (73-76). Wilson specifically interprets John’s function in relation to George, arguing that he “equated these two characters” over the gender-themed struggle of sentiment versus rationality in order to be able to transfer

passed as white during the nineteenth and early twentieth century, the sex ratio among passers remains a contested question among scholars, and one that further splits over their representation in real life versus fiction. F. James Davis's matter-of-fact statement that "[m]ore men passed than women," for example, confirms the arguments made by Edward Byron Reuter in 1923 and Charles S. Johnson in 1925, noting that white-looking African American men had to face fewer gender-inflected obstacles, such as care for families and restricted social mobility, and thus could pass in greater numbers.<sup>92</sup> The literature of the time might not confirm the ubiquity of the light-skinned male passer – Chesnutt himself lamented that while "the beautiful octoroon was a corporeal fact; [...] curiously enough the male octoroon has cut no figure in fiction, except in the case of the melancholy Honoré Grandissime" – but in comparison to their female counterparts, they stand out for their unmatched success as white Americans.<sup>93</sup> In addition to Chesnutt's John, James Weldon Johnson's male protagonist in *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* (1912) serves as a prominent example.

Although Werner Sollors advises us to interpret these records with caution since the real-life numbers of passers remain impossible to verify and can be blown out of proportion by their widespread representation in fiction, the point that these scholars, and many of the fictions, try to make in regards to gendered race remains valid (*Neither White*

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"the effect of the tragic mulatta genre to the privileged white male character" so that "his audience would feel sympathy for Tryon" and his ultimate decision to let the "sentiment of love" trump over the "rationality of racism" (74, 83).

<sup>92</sup> In his *Opportunity* editorial "The Vanishing Mulatto," Johnson backed up his proclamation that men pass more easily than women as "reasonable, for they travel more and are not so dependent as women on family connections" (291). Reuter likewise reasoned in "Sex Distribution in the Mulatto Population," a 1923 essay reprinted in his *Race Mixture: Studies in Intermariage and Miscegenation* (1931), that the passing man "is more free in his choice of residence and associates" and because of this less inclined to stay in his social circle of black acquaintances than the white-looking black woman (70).

<sup>93</sup> Chesnutt's quote comes from his second part of "The Future American" series, and the exception he mentions refers to George Washington Cable's protagonist in his 1880 novel *The Grandissimes: A Story of Creole Life* ("A Stream of Dark Blood" 126).

*Nor Black* 283). African American men that were light enough to pass had an advantage in that their assumed white masculinity referenced a firmer, more secure social capital than that of passing women. Nonetheless, instead of stopping at the observation that the light-skinned John may fare better in the postbellum racist South because his masculinity enables him to more easily bypass a racial past that is predominantly focused on the African American woman's body, her symbolically exaggerated sexuality and her reproductive role in birthing babies that may or may not look black, I aim to go further and ask why John needs his sister to begin with in his already established life as a white man.<sup>94</sup>

The triangular relationship and the motivation behind John and George's exchange of Rena that I described earlier suffer, however, from certain shortcomings. The above interpretation rests on the assumption that Rena's value lies in her genteel femininity and her gracefulness as a future wife, qualities that in the postbellum world of *The House Behind the Cedars* implicitly reference a spouse of pure white stock. Yet the narrative makes clear, in the first half for John and in the second half for George, that Rena's value for both goes beyond her role as predominantly *female* pawn; instead it lies in the fact that she may look and act white but is, in fact, not so biologically, even if her white blood outweighs her minimal black ancestry. This revised understanding of Rena's role in this triangle might explain George's desire for her white-looking black body, but it does not immediately illuminate John's need and desire – desire here in the larger, not

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<sup>94</sup> I do not mean to suggest that African American men always fared better than their female counterparts or did not suffer from the stereotyping of race-inflected sexuality; in fact, the racist practice of lynching that marked turn-of-the-century America may even indicate that being a visually black man harbored greater dangers of often deadly violence. Alternately, stereotypes about black female sexuality and sensuality could under certain circumstances also benefit African American women in ascending the social ladder through affiliation with white men, either in marriage or concubinage.

necessarily sexual sense – for Rena, not as a passing woman, but as his African American sister.

The few instances throughout the narrative that describe George and John's relationship before Rena's arrival leave readers assured that the men's bond was already marked by respect and social equality. Indeed, the first recollection, interspersed in the chapter that describes George and Rena's courtship, paints the men's relationship as one of admiration between a younger, twenty-three year old George and the older, more established John. Commenting on John's general "power of attraction" to which the lawyer "owed most of his success," the narrator confirms that the young George believed that "Warwick was the finest fellow in the world" and that thus, "the foundation for admiration had already been laid" before Rena entered their lives (68). A chapter later, John, prompted by George's proposal, tries to convince Rena that keeping her minor black ancestry from her fiancé is not only a pragmatically justified reason, but indeed, morally right. Pushed by the ethical implications regarding the color line in this discussion, John reflects back on his acquaintance with George, including the flattery he received from the latter's deference to him because of the age difference, but John also concludes that their camaraderie is solid enough so as not to threaten his status as a passing man. This includes John's belief "that he might safely disclose the secret to Tryon," even if he ultimately opts against honesty (84). The self-assurance conveyed in John's posture here confirms that the men's bond was already one of equality, if not even superiority on John's part, and that John's role as a white man has neither been questioned by Tryon's circle of white Southerners nor been in danger of discovery, particularly since John's marriage into one of South Carolina's elite white families has

garnered him the necessary upper-class clout of wealth and white pedigree. Why then bring in a sister whose newly adopted identity as a white woman harbors dangers of exposing a decade of successful passing?

The narrative offers two interconnected prominent explanations for John's whimsical, chance-driven decision to offer Rena the life of a wealthy white woman. The first references benevolence as its driving purpose: the love and money of a brother enables his light-skinned sister the same opportunities and privileges he believes are theirs to begin with (78). Simultaneously, the narrative offers the cautionary tale that inevitably accompanies any passing story: that there are consequences and dangers, and that, in John's case, the legacy of black womanhood, even when harnessed and subdued in the white body of his sister, may eventually ruin the passing man's own upward mobility. Yet both of these explanations side-step the more important one, namely, that John's benevolence only thinly masks his own self-centered motives for bringing Rena with him: his loneliness and longing for the African American part of his identity as well as his need to surround his heir, his son Alfred, with a woman of black lineage. Thus, for John, Rena's value as a white-looking black woman rests on her ability to authenticate and simultaneously enrich his and his own son's whiteness.

From the beginning, the narrator marks John's return to his hometown as one mixed with alienation, nostalgia and bitterness. When he tours his old hometown, most of the landmarks evoke traces of the town's pre-Civil War customs and the restrictions slave-law put on African Americans, but John also encounters profound changes, such as seeing "a colored policeman in the old constable's place" (4). John's initial reason for visiting his boyhood home appears to be similarly haphazard and muddled as his feelings

upon returning to Patesville. Triggered by a business trip in the vicinity, John “had yielded to a sentimental weakness” to see his mother against the “principles of abstract right and reason” that usually govern his actions (28). Likewise, the yearning for his mother seems to give way to his resolution to take Rena with him by mere chance. He did not intend to invite Rena to pass with him until after he accidentally mistakes her for a white, charitable young woman; in fact, the narrator remarks that his original purpose to reconnect with his mother only changed into a plan that involves Rena’s passing “since his morning walk” (23).

Yet the initial whim quickly turns into a brother’s benevolent resolution to lift his sister into a life of privilege and thereby preempt the “pull downward” that otherwise awaits Rena if she continues to identify as African American (Bruce 177). Well aware that he represents to his family a dream of opportunity and possibility, spiced with “the thrill of a pirate’s tale,” John argues to his anguished mother that giving up her only remaining child will enable Rena to lead the life her beauty and natural refinement intended for her (21). “She has only to step into my carriage – after perhaps a little preparation –,” John reasons, “and ride up the hill which I have had to climb so painfully. It would be a great pleasure to me to see her at the top” (26). Through the image of the hill, John purposefully employs the popular language of upward mobility that pervaded the rhetoric of postbellum African American self-help philosophy. Even if he ultimately repurposes the original goal of racial uplift by sidestepping the element of race pride, his choice of imagery indexes the general sentiment that was later forcefully condensed in the National Association of Colored Women’s (NACW) motto “Lifting as We Climb.” Surely, John’s class-conscious mother, bound to an open identity as mixed-race mistress

because of her skin color, would only too painfully understand the prerogative implied in transcending this symbolic barrier, and her son uses it as leverage to convince her to send away her daughter (184). Moreover, John's success in climbing, even if with difficulty, this symbolic hill now enables him to pull up his sister more easily. In other words, John utilizes his advantages in order for his sister to enjoy similar privileges that reflect their white father's class standing, defying race laws and custom in turn-of-the-century America.

Even though John holds on to his promise to educate and better Rena's social life – after George finds out their secret, the brother assures Rena that he will send her to a northern school where she “may marry a better man than even Tryon” (181) – the narrative depicts John's benevolent mission early on as fraught with risk. Judge Straight, a loyal friend of John's father who has helped John attain a lawyer's education, indicates most pronouncedly that, essentially, John would be better off without his mother and sister. After talking to John's mother and noting her “pathetic dignity,” the Judge proclaims it a pity that “men cannot select their mothers” (44). He extends this negative view on black motherhood to Rena since he fears that John's decision to take his sister, yet another woman who embodies a hereditary tie to his old life, with him will endanger the man's success in passing. These comments strongly suggest that female kin represent the passing man's biggest hazard, and the Judge's final remark that “this addition [Rena] will weaken the structure,” locates the blame of failed, gendered upward mobility and foiled racial identity squarely on black women (*ibid.*). Rena herself confirms this masculinist truism when she explains to John why she will not attempt to pass any longer after George rejected her. Although Rena's adage that “A man may make a new place

for himself – a woman is born and bound to hers” repeats a broader power imbalance between men and women, the racial implications are hard to miss. As Chesnutt’s story shows, a racially indeterminate African American man may reinvent himself and climb up into the ranks of white society, but the light-skinned woman’s baggage, her bonds with her people, severely restricts the scope of her social rise. Rena’s decision to become a teacher for a rural, black school signals that she may only ascend a hill that is circumscribed by the extent of racial uplift work, always “lifting” as she climbs.

In the end, John’s benevolence backfires despite the precautions he takes before committing to help his sister. In the process, his kind act destroys Rena’s happiness and potentially endangers his own status as a white man. Matthew Wilson emphasizes that despite the obvious similarities between the character John and Chesnutt, himself a light-skinned educated writer and lawyer, the author, who opted against passing as white in his own life, treated John’s behavior rather critically. Wilson argues that through John’s egocentric attitude about passing, “Chesnutt explored the consequences of the denial of family history and connection,” in which the passing man repeated a denial similar to that of the white father who refuses to acknowledge his mixed-race family (75). Through John’s prudent attitude towards Rena, Chesnutt delineates the effects of such a masculinist approach. For instance, the narrator assures us that, even if sprung out of a whimsical mood, John had cautiously calculated the risks of investing in Rena. Ever the pragmatic man of reason, he would not have uprooted her “if she had been homely or stupid” (65). Yet nonetheless, when confronted with his sister’s heartbreak and social downfall, John silently confirms that Judge Straight was right all along. Rena may not have ruined his current standing as a white man, but their betrayal of George Tryon’s

southern pride will certainly spoil the future ambitions John had long harbored of climbing even higher up the social and political ladder (182-3). Thus, the overt message readers receive from John's investment in Rena is that of a brother's misguided benevolence. It is a lesson that once again maps emotions onto gender and whose pitfalls John had been aware of from the start. Musing over the potential recklessness in contacting his mother and risking blowing his cover, the narrator explains that men of "abstract right and reason" like John, should be "careful about descending from the lofty heights of logic to the common level of impulse and affection" (28-9). Like Howells's Olney, who pits his masculine rationality against the feminized sentimentality of Rhoda's guardian aunt, Chesnutt's John endangers his secure social status by allowing himself to enter into the sphere of feminized and racialized emotionality.

While this valuable reading of John's misfired benevolence toward his sister neatly leads up to the drama of Rena and George's forbidden, interracial desire in the novel's second half, thus conveniently writing off John, it side-steps the brother's underlying self-centered motives in enabling his sister's passing. John, a widower, wants his sister to act as refined baby nurse for his son, Albert, "lending grace and charm to his household" (65). In this role, she completes his desire as a wealthy white man to comply with Victorian ideals about family: if he is unwilling to marry again, his son needs a fitting surrogate mother/aunt (24). Although John admits that Rena's success in his white circles "had gratified his pride, and justified his course in taking her under his protection," the more pressing reason reflects his whimsical decision to see his mother that sets the narrative's plot in motion (77). After a decade of passing and life as a widower, John feels lonely and yearns to share his secret with an "old compatriot" who

understands and reminds him of his past without threatening to destroy his future through visibly black looks or manners (66). This “purely psychological” drive sheds light on John’s motives for helping Rena (ibid.). Beyond alleviating his loneliness, it betrays how John’s identity as a white man may not be contingent on Rena’s white-looking blackness, but the narrative nonetheless suggests that his white masculinity, and more importantly, that of his son, will be fortified by a silent embrace of the past that is encoded in Rena’s invisible African American presence.

Albert’s whiteness plays a pivotal role in John’s own identity as white and in his decision to take Rena with him. Although Chesnut’s late nineteenth-century audience would most likely understand Albert’s racial identity as African American according to the prevailing custom of the one-drop rule, the narrative’s overall tenor urges readers to consider the legal situation and the authority of the law throughout the entire story arc. The more lenient South Carolina laws that Judge Straight cites and that enable John to rightfully exercise a white identity draw the color line at 1/8<sup>th</sup> of African American heritage. This would make Albert, the son of a white woman and an octoroon man, automatically white, despite his 1/16<sup>th</sup> percentage of black blood, which even the more stringent laws in North Carolina would consider inclusive of whiteness (171-2). As much as the narrative’s appeal lies in the tension between custom and law and the force of the former, Albert’s whiteness remains a highly prized possession that is fragile at core. Although John’s regret after Tryon’s discovery of their African American heritage revolves primarily around his own stunted political ambitions, his son’s precarious racial status entered John’s calculations earlier (182). When he contemplates how best to deter Rena from disclosing their black ancestry to her fiancé, John deliberates that “the future

of his child must not be compromised,” but the concern for his son remains overshadowed by his deliberate use of Albert as a wager to manipulate Rena’s silence, drawing on Rena’s compassion for “the innocent child in your arms” (81-2).

Moments like these in the narrative point to John’s confidence in his own lawfully assumed whiteness and the one that his deceased wife, with her established pedigree of genteel Southernness, has bestowed on Albert. John’s confidence seems to be at odds, however, with the repercussions surrounding interracial unions between black men and white women as well as the racial classification of their children. Wilson attributes Chesnut’s *fait accompli* in “smuggl[ing] past his white audience, Albert” to the fact that the construction of John’s character and confidence in regards to labeling whiteness relies on a scientific disbelief in atavism (92). But, more importantly, the narrative skirts the particular problems surrounding John’s marriage to a white woman by relegating it to the past and to the fact that John’s wife never knew about John’s racial status before she died. Taking the white woman out of the present might have been one way for Chesnut to avoid the hot-button topic of interracial sex between an African American man and a white woman that was almost always polemically reframed as rape. This particular issue catapulted many white Americans into hysteria at the thought of white, elite women “lusting” for black men, all in alliance with the accepted sexual double standard that simultaneously protected white men’s illicit relations with black women. Sexual partnerships between white women and African American men were becoming more commonplace after the Civil War since the death toll of the war had considerably depleted the number of white men available for marriage and economic support (Williamson 89-90). Nonetheless, these cross-racial unions occurred predominantly

within the lower economic classes and seemed to be rare occasions among upper-class women, a fact that Martha Hodes rightly attributes to “white Southern ideas about female purity,” encoded over the planter belle’s virginal body, as well as the simple fact that elite families likely had greater cause to safeguard their daughters’ sexuality and better resources to keep such transgressions out of the public eye or court (5).<sup>95</sup>

After years of successful passing as white man and husband, John thoroughly inhabits a normative masculinity that even allows him to look back at his former life as a black boy with a distanced partiality routed through gender. John’s yearning for a black past is mapped onto African American women, and it governs the beginning scenes in which John re-enters his family’s space as a white man. Despite the overriding tenor of familial compassion that we get from reading the sentimental reunion scene between John, his mother, and Rena, John’s act of brotherly love is not without violence. John’s revelation that he is a widower but has a son initially only helps to strengthen the bond between the estranged man and his mother and sister. Cooing over information on the baby’s weight and looks, John’s strategically voiced comment that the motherless Albert “needs some woman of its own blood to love it” promises to bring the family members together in intergenerational harmony (23). Yet John’s mother, despite her urge to care for her grandson, soon detects that John’s inclusive-sounding remark will actually divide her family even more. After all, who will count as a woman of Albert’s own blood?

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<sup>95</sup> James Kinney observes that literature about white women and black men usually upholds this class barrier as well, as is the case in Harriet E. Wilson’s *Our Nig* (1859) in which Nig’s lower-class white mother marries an African American man. More importantly, Kinney goes on to assert that despite the historic evidence of such unions, white writers shied away from depicting this taboo, even if it involved only the lower classes. Thus, before Chesnut presents John Walden’s marriage to a wealthy white woman, one that tellingly remains under the shroud of secrecy, only one other African American author, J. McHenry Jones, depicted upper-class interracial unions between a white woman and a black man positively. With *Hearts of Gold* (1896), “Jones is apparently the first novelist before World War I openly to defy the ultimate taboo – that is, to maintain that a wealthy, educated, upper-class American white woman might freely choose to marry a black man” (192).

Although according to the one-drop rule, Albert would have to acknowledge his paternal African American ancestry and thus belong to Molly Walden's blood, the claim of his maternal side, historically a more important and loaded one in determining a child's race, is unmistakably white. Here, as always, Chesnut plays up the hypocrisy of racial status and the fluidity and ambivalence of identity. The powerful remnant from slavery that children will always be classified according to the mother's racial status ensured that mixed-race children of African American women remained disenfranchised, yet the same logic becomes muddled once a white mother is involved. Although during colonial times, the rule that children follow the mother applied equally to the mixed-race children of free white women, thus making them free as well, stringent nineteenth-century ideas about white women as strongholds and carriers of racial purity put the equation of mother-child racial status in question once confronted with dark-skinned children of white mothers.<sup>96</sup> Despite the cultural force of the one-drop rule that dominated the post-war decades, Molly is justified in wondering whom John includes in sharing Albert's blood. Because of John's successful racial tour-de-force and his marriage to a wealthy southern woman, Albert needs to be white lest his racial identity jeopardize the reputation of his mother's family and John's own safety. Molly, whom B. Omega Moore terms another "long-suffering matriarch" guilt-trapped into "the ultimate maternal sacrifice" (215), is thus painfully aware that Albert's entitlement to whiteness

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<sup>96</sup> Both W.E.B. DuBois and Carter G. Woodson mention the fact that colonial law ensured the freedom of mixed-race children if they belonged to a free white woman (DuBois 467, Woodson 45). Martha Hodes expands her research into the antebellum and postbellum years, where she asserts, "In the antebellum South, white women who gave birth to children of partial African ancestry had confounded racial slavery, yet such imperfections in the social structure had not significantly threatened racial hierarchy. But the case was different for white women after the Civil War. With only the one-drop rule to guard white supremacy, all white women had to give birth to all-white children" (199).

will prevent any of John's relatives that are too dark to pass, including herself though not her daughter, from being acknowledged as his kin (24).

In the heartrending scene of letting go, Molly Walden quickly notices a harsh undertow. John's interpellation into whiteness enables him to manipulate the color line out of a purely biological realm into one where appearance and skin color dominate. The result is that he firmly positions himself and his sister on the opposite side from his darker mother, in the process paradoxically confirming the logic of the color line that separates Molly from her grandson. The ensuing dreadful realization that Molly will not only be barred from caring for her grandson but also loses her daughter in the process, resembles the violent separation scenes characteristic of antebellum slave-auctions (Myron 96). When Molly "threw herself at her son's feet" and begs him not to take Rena away from her, she and John are reenacting a scenario of gendered white-black relationships (24). John assertively exercises a white masculinity that eerily alludes to the callousness of men who carelessly destroy black family ties in order to satisfy their own individual needs and who index an antebellum practice of seizing beautiful African American women as mistresses. Although John does not desire her in a sexual sense, Rena's role will be that of "mistress of his house" (43).

In a sense then, the driving force of motherhood inherent in Victorian ideals of turn-of-the-century America explains John's desire to break up his original black family in order to complete his own white one. Requiring a "woman of his own blood" to raise his son, the irony and ambivalence of this statement in a racial melodrama of passing is hard to miss. On the one hand, Rena, being of his own blood, is not so different from the light-skinned African American nurses who already take care of his white son. Even if

Rena's immediate family connection and class status make her a preferable candidate to educate John's heir, the brother appreciates Rena's connection with Albert because it ensures a link to their black past, albeit one blanketed in upper-class education and compassion (64). Rena herself plays up her tie to African American womanhood when she rhetorically asks George to compare her to Albert's nurse, a "good-looking yellow girl," in an effort to test his color-blind love (85). On the other hand, John's insistence on surrounding his son with a woman of his own blood points to the value the brother sees in Rena's near-whiteness, a combination of beauty, grace, shy simplicity, and love for "weak creatures" (64). While these attributes characterize the sentimental make-up of the tragic mixed-race character and usually circumscribe her into a social existence below whiteness, John sees "the undeveloped elements of discord between Rena and her former life" as attributes that enhance whiteness once they are transplanted into a fitting environment where they lend Rena "a rill of the Greek sense of proportion, [...] the perfect adaption of means to ends" (65). Despite the emphasis on whiteness, John's insistence on Rena's qualities as surrogate mother reference a historically embedded need for African American women to do the work of nurturing white offspring into genteel Southernness and upper-class manhood, one that leaves them squarely in a state of liminality.

Returning to the triangular relationship between John, George, and Rena, Albert thus functions as an important extension of John, further cementing the bond between two white male figures demanding the attention of a light-skinned African American woman. John, acting for and with his white son's future in mind, acknowledges the value of black womanhood in raising Albert lovingly and "intelligently," especially if such

maternal femininity is rerouted through the body of a white-looking woman (23). Little Albert, like the passing John and his upper-class friend George is yet another white “man” who competes for the care of an African American woman – in a last attempt to convince Rena to come back with John after George’s discovery, the brother strategically puts pressure on Rena when he says that “Little Albert is pining for you” (179). The underlying sexualized meaning in the language of pining for Rena implicates Albert into the game of white masculinity rivaling for the beautiful mixed-race woman. The dynamics of this child-adult trio acquires a deeper meaning in the aforementioned scene in which Rena compares herself to Albert’s African American nurse in order to hypothetically test George’s affection for her regardless of social status. To her question if George would love her if she was Albert’s nurse, her lover replies: “If you were Albert’s nurse, [...] he would have to find another within a week, for within a week we should be married” (86). On the surface, the irony of George’s reply lies of course in the likeness and, ultimately, the meaninglessness of racial identities that Chesnutt plays up in this novel and that he so adamantly defended in his non-fiction writings. George *is* at the brink of marrying a woman like Albert’s nurse since the racially indeterminate Rowena Warwick shares African American kinship with the servant. In light of Albert’s role as a future stand-in for his father, however, the above comment speaks more directly to the rivalry between two white men for the mixed-race woman. Rena, in the guise of the black nurse and as a white-looking black woman, represents a cherished object George is ready to fight for and whose affection he will not share with another person, even if in this scenario infatuation splits itself into sexual desire for a blackened woman and the maternal compassion found in African American women as caregivers. Similar to

Howells's Olney, who detects a fortifying essence in black womanhood that will strengthen the Anglo-Saxon race if "absorbed" in interracial marriage, George pictures himself in a rivalry with Albert for a prize that fosters, affects, enriches and is ultimately consumed by white American masculinity.

If Albert is the future of an American manhood that draws strength from embracing African American womanhood, then what can his racially ambivalent status as categorically white yet also minimally mixed-race tell us about men like John, whose precarious whiteness demands the blackening of his sister's racial status and depends on bartering her racialized sexuality to George? A rather staged scene right before Rena and George's doomed meeting in her hometown illuminates once again Albert's role as ominous future arbiter of black womanhood, as well as John's impending exit from the drama of interracial desire and reinforced white masculinity. After receiving respective letters from Rena and George that inform the helpless John about their individual journeys to Patesville, John spins a coin to ask rhetorically if a chance meeting will lead to the exposure of the siblings' African American heritage. At the moment of spinning the coin, Albert "crept behind his father and was watching the whirling disk with great pleasure." Albert, who "felt that he would like to possess this interesting object," intervenes in this moment of melodramatic chance and "stretched forth his chubby fist and caught it ere it touched the floor" (103). This seemingly insignificant scene holds important symbolic value for the fragility of white masculinity that is represented through John and the objectified value of blackened womanhood the male characters desire in Rena and aim to possess. Here, the interesting object becomes a symbol for Rena, one that little Albert, like George, cannot resist and "would like to possess." Rena's

womanhood becomes a sought-after commodity approximating the vexingly elusive “real thing” realists often locate in their representation of minorities or other subjects they deem closest to the experience of material life. Like the value realist writers attach to such material experiences and translate into mysterious sources of authenticity that a predominantly upper-class white audience craves and wishes to absorb into dominant discourse, Rena’s invisible blackness signifies an intangible currency vital for American manhood.

In addition, the little boy out-stages his father by removing him and his former role as supervisor of George and Rena’s courtship from the scene. Little Albert catches the coin, holding the future in his hands so-to-speak, though how well he will fare in the game of white masculinity and to what means he will interpret and use mixed-race womanhood once he is grown up remains speculative. Obviously, Albert cannot influence the outcome of this specific tragic melodrama of interracial love, but maybe his symbolic catching of the coin points to the possibility of eventually rewriting the conventional story of the mixed-race character in a more realistic fashion, one that does not demand the sentimental death of its heroine. Such a reading would speak to Chesnut’s decade-long struggle with how best to represent the mixed-race woman in a truthful voice that would nonetheless appeal to white readers. The decisions regarding the structure and form of his story have consequently evolved from the more realistic tone of the initial “Rena Walden” short story to the sentimental-didactic overtones of its final product.

Unlike *The House Behind the Cedars*, “Rena Walden” lacks the presence of John and George and focuses on a manipulative mother who forces the naïve Rena into

marriage to the shady mulatto Wash Wain, a union that, similar to the chain of events in the final product, ruins Rena's reputation and causes her death in the arms of Frank, a faithful family friend. Chesnutt first reacted with frustration to the advice he received in 1889 from his friend, George Washington Cable, regarding the "Rena Walden" plot. Cable urged him to revise the story with the tastes of a white audience in mind. Similarly, Richard Watson Gilder objected in 1890 to the "brutality in the characters, lack of mellowness, lack of spontaneous imaginative life in the people," which, according to the *Century Magazine* editor, made "Rena Walden" a "crude story, not a thoroughly human one," (qtd. in Andrews, *The Literary Career* 25, 27). A believer in realism and its mantra to present "life as I have known it," influential arbiters of the genre such as Howells, Gilder, and Cable seemed to suggest that Chesnutt was missing the mark and overdoing the truth white publishers and readers were willing to accept (Letter to Howells 146). Aware of the hypocrisy inherent in these remarks regarding the representation of African Americans, a disheartened Chesnutt responded to Cable: "I suppose I shall have to drop the attempt at realism, and try to make my characters like other folks" (66).<sup>97</sup> As such, the little scene of Albert's intervention reflects Chesnutt's struggle with the racialized conventions of genre and his hope to replace the sentimental tragic mulatto story arc in the future with a more realistic portrayal of mixed-race interiority. Yet Albert's role as progeny in a line of passing men who rely on African American womanhood complicates Chesnutt's intervention in the sentimental story of black femininity. While the racially indeterminate African American woman receives a revered status for her embodiment of genuineness, her agency is nonetheless liminal.

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<sup>97</sup> For Chesnutt's tension with the Howellsian school of realism, see also Wilson who draws on Amy Kaplan's insight that realism's intent was not the shock value of otherness but rather a point of view that ameliorated otherness into digestible chunks suitable for a middle-class white audience (62-63).

John reappears only once more in the novel, when he visits the convalescent Rena and unsuccessfully tries to convince her to move out West with him. Rena declines another shot at inventing a white persona for herself since this would again involve a permanent separation from her mother. She opts instead to live as a light-skinned African American woman doing racial uplift work. In an effort to thank their black neighbor Frank for his discretion and protection of Rena's secret, John's last act is to gift the simple-minded man with a new mule. Frank's father Peter, an ex-slave of John's father, cannot but help to remark in a jealous tone how much such a pompous gesture is "lack rale w'ite folks." Yet the narrator puts this comment into perspective. The last remark readers hear about John is that "Warwick paid for the mule, and the real white folks got most of the credit" (188). The sardonic tone of this aside reflects the ambivalent position in which Chesnut leaves John mid-way through his narrative. John's efforts to marry his sister to a wealthy white man, who can bestow upon her the cultured life she deserves, have failed, and so have his future political ambitions as a white, influence-wielding lawyer in South Carolina. Yet the price John pays does not come at the cost of his own white identity. After all, George has assured him in his letter that he will always think of John as white, and readers might conjecture that John and Albert remain secure in their home in Clarence or start anew out West, with even greater possibilities. Instead, the cost of keeping up with George and retaining his own whiteness comes in the form of extracting the value of his sister's elusive African American womanhood for his own purposes. Rena's blackness becomes the object of barter between these two men in holding on to and enhancing John's white manhood (via the promised status increase through affiliation with the Tryon family) as well as

strengthening George's in the act of cross-racial consummation, much like the intangible attraction Olney locates in Rhoda's shielded blackness and mixed-race essence.

John's dissatisfactory exit has puzzled scholars, because his supposedly guilt-free continuance of racial passing clashes so vehemently with his sister's tragic ending. Given the decade-long production history and revision process that led to the publication of the 1900 text of *The House Behind the Cedars*, scholars like Andrews, Wilson, and Charles Hackenberry have looked to another of Chesnutt's novel-length stories of racial passing for its thematic likeness, *Mandy Oxendine*, a slim manuscript that remained unpublished in Chesnutt's life time.<sup>98</sup> A rejection letter from Houghton Mifflin in February 1897 makes *Mandy Oxendine* Chesnutt's first novel, but more importantly, these dates show the simultaneity of the production process between this novel and the constantly evolving "Rena Walden" story that was also initially rejected by publishers because it lacked the sentimental overtones a white readership expected in stories about mixed-race characters.

*Mandy Oxendine*'s rejection by Walter Hines Page in 1897 does not come as a surprise. Page admitted that at Houghton Mifflin "we recognize the elements of truthfulness, and some novelty of situation in this," yet he explained that "we are not able to persuade ourselves that we should find publication a safe venture" (qtd. in Hackenberry xv). In this story, Chesnutt presents two light-skinned African American characters and their different choices to overcome racial restrictions. Tom Lowrey chooses education and a black identity while his childhood friend and love interest Mandy Oxendine decides to pass as white and marry a wealthy white man. Although the

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<sup>98</sup> Exact dates for the production process of *Mandy Oxendine* are hard to verify, but Hackenberry concludes that it was probably written during 1896 but "could have existed, in one form or another, as early as 1889" (xv).

narrative quickly destroys Mandy's dream of becoming a white lady – her white lover attempts to rape her, Mandy is imprisoned on account of murder only to have Lowrey step in, save both of them and propose marriage – Chesnutt's narrator never condemns Mandy's decision to pass as morally wrong. Despite many melodramatic twists and turns and Mandy's return to Lowrey, the narrator closes the story by emphasizing that the couple may choose to identify as black in the North or pass as white elsewhere (112).

Mandy's readiness to pass and her ultimate reward of a light-skinned husband who is willing to pass with her, uncommon in the literature of the day, contrasts starkly with the passiveness and sacrificial nature that leads to Rena's eventual death, especially with the version of Rena that Chesnutt had initially presented in his short story "Rena Walden." As such, Mandy and Rena present two poles along the trajectory of the female mixed-race character, "showing the conventional and unconventional routes an enterprising young mulatto could take," but neither story, according to Andrews's research, "told the whole truth about the mulatto's disjunctive social situation in the South," which would only be accomplished in the final version of *The House Behind the Cedars* (*The Literary Career* 147).<sup>99</sup>

When we encounter John Walden in *The House Behind the Cedars*, his guilt-free attitude and pragmatic reasoning towards passing thus echoes Mandy's boldness in *Mandy Oxendine*, modified by a switch in gender. The change from a female to a male assertive passer only seems to strengthen the narrative's overall effect of mapping emotions onto gender and portraying a questionable, yet seemingly successful ascent of the male passer enabled by the sacrifice of a passing woman. If we consider the

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<sup>99</sup> See also Wilson, who has written more recently about *Mandy Oxendine* and its relationship to *The House Behind the Cedars* as well as Chesnutt's overall racial politics (46-49).

publication history of *Mandy Oxendine* and *The House Behind the Cedars*, we may read John as a disguised passing woman, that is, we may understand his function as indexing strong-willed, self-confident mixed-race womanhood. The former triangle between two men bartering a passive mixed-race woman for their own individual gain then switches into one dominated by the power struggle between two African American women for their entry into the world of whiteness and privilege; a struggle that leaves one woman blackened and dead on account of the other's social ascent.

Reading Chesnut's story in light of intra-racial female relationships that battle over the meaning and value of black femininity aligns the central conflict of *The House Behind the Cedars* with the plot lines presented in many of the black uplift narratives produced by African American women writers during the 1890s. These stories often feature an array of African American women characters that differ in skin tone, education, and class status, but usually center on a racially indeterminate, beautiful African American woman who proudly identifies as black and participates in racial uplift work. Despite the seeming favoritism towards white-looking skin that stands for middle-class respectability and education, these narratives also often include visually black female characters who function as inspirations for their heroines because of their blackness, becoming the metaphorical backbones of this genteel African American womanhood. If a potential reading of John includes interpreting him as a stand-in for bold, assertive African American women, such as Mandy Oxendine, who are not afraid to pass, we can think of this relationship as a conflict between two mixed-race women debating the choices for black advancement and the structures, both societal as well as literary, that need to be shaped, manipulated, or torn down to achieve racial equality.

Who will be left behind and who will be resurrected and in which form? In the next chapter, I extend this question by exploring the writings of African American women who were both outspoken activists for racial uplift work as well as producers of fiction that has often been pigeon-holed within the sentimental genre. I investigate how these writers respond to and challenge the realist conception of black womanhood as mysteriously attractive, valuable, and authentic, especially in conjunction with portraying a genteel black womanhood that advances the race overall yet seems to assert its own import on the backs of their darker sisters.

## Chapter 4

### “The Highest Ideal [Is] Always the True Real”: Black Uplift Fiction and the Figure of the Dark-Skinned African American Woman

The heroine of Frances E.W. Harper’s novel *Iola Leroy; Or Shadows Uplifted* (1892) shares with Chesnut’s Rena and Howells’s Rhoda the physical attributes of fair skin and the deportment of genteel ladyhood, enabling her to easily pass as white. In fact, Iola’s introduction as a pretty girl with a Creole complexion, lavish, well-coifed long hair and blue eyes makes her, in the words of a fellow-slave’s admirer, “jis’ ez white ez anybody’s in this place” (38). Iola’s scripted exterior whiteness is no exception among the rise of black, female-authored stories during the 1890s; as Claudia Tate notes in her seminal study *Domestic Allegories of Political Desire* (1992), out of the eleven Post-Reconstruction novels she analyzes, ranging from narratives by Frances E.W. Harper, Amelia A. Johnson and Katherine D. Tillman to Pauline Hopkins, “ten of the heroines are either pale-skinned mulattas or racially nonspecific, which implies white identity” (62).<sup>100</sup> Although the fiction of African American women writers during the 1890s shares with Chesnut and Howells the goal of dispelling the image of the tragic mulatto by uncoupling the element of tragedy from its association with African American identity, their plotlines differ decidedly. Unlike the choices presented by these male authors – either to marry happily into whiteness or die trying – their female characters decidedly refuse to pass and instead find fulfillment in the black community. Yet through their appearance, the protagonists of these female-authored narratives, such as the racially indeterminate women in Alice Dunbar-Nelson’s short story collections *Violets and Other*

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<sup>100</sup> Tate also includes Emma Dunham Kelley, a writer who has only recently been discovered to have no black ancestry, and her novels *Megda* (1891) and *Four Girls at Cottage City* (1898) in her analysis.

*Tales* (1895) and *The Goodness of St. Rocque and Other Stories* (1899) or the pale-looking mixed-race Iolas, overwhelmingly do not challenge the script of whiteness.

While the uplift stories of African American women authors are not wholly devoid of darker-skinned women, these characters often remain side notes (Tate 63). It is to these supporting characters and dark-skinned women that I turn my attention in this chapter. Instead of confirming their role as marginal, I analyze the integral relationship between the fair heroines and their darker sisters and mothers for understanding African American womanhood in black women's literature and social activism during the 1890s. My analysis of Victoria Earle Matthews's lesser-known short stories and Frances E.W. Harper's *Iola Leroy*, heralded by the black community in its day as one of the most important race novels, explores how the ideal of the educated race woman, often indexed as light-skinned, is deeply dependent on other representations of black womanhood that surround, contrast with, and enrich the heroine's white-skinned black femininity.

I pay special attention to the temporal dynamics at play in black women's uplift fiction. The focus on the past, present, and future of the race maps directly onto the skin color of the female characters. While the fair heroines control and preserve the present of the black woman's universe, her darker ex-slave mothers and aunts represent a purer African American womanhood that will become idealized in the dark-skinned, educated woman of the future. According to this logic, the white-looking heroines inhabit a transient position, aiding in shaping rather than embodying the ideal future African American woman. In a sense, the narratives I interpret suggest that "black is beautiful," a sentiment usually associated with the black self-determination and anti-assimilation stances prevalent in twentieth-century African American cultures like the Harlem

Renaissance and the Black Arts Movement of the 1970s. African American women's representation in these narratives thus links intimately with the politics of color and a purposeful use of temporal metaphors.

The question of how best to represent the race's past, especially its plainspoken, uneducated, and often dark-skinned members did not come without its own internal controversies. Before I move into a closer analysis of Matthews's short stories and Harper's *Iola Leroy*, I want to spend some time analyzing the historical and literary debates within the African American community, and specifically within the black club movement, that took up the intersecting lines between the past and the present and between the representation of color.<sup>101</sup> These debates revolved predominantly around the public image of African American women. Literary representation offered one important tool for shaping not only a dignified image but also for working through the tensions between the dark-skinned ex-slaves of the past and the often light-skinned black elite of the present. Especially in the field of imaginative literature, black writers had to face rampant stereotypes about "darkeys," then dominant among white writers who centered their stories around a by-gone, glorified master-servant relationship and presented a pigeon-holed rendition of the folksy slave.

An editorial in *The Woman's Era*, one of the most influential print journals within the black women's club movement, illustrates the internal struggles over celebrating or

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<sup>101</sup> The 1890s, often referred to as the "Woman's Era," remains one of the most fascinating and complex periods within nineteenth-century history of gender and race relationships, and my of necessity succinct overview can hardly give justice to the manifold developments and depths of the conflicts and highlights that mark this age. Among the numerous secondary works that discuss the roots and trajectory of black feminism, I rely in particular on Paula Giddings's *When and Where I Enter: The Impact of Black Women on Race and Sex in America* (1984), Deborah Gray White's *Too Heavy a Load: Black Women in Defense of Themselves, 1894-1994* (1999), Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham's *Righteous Discontent: The Women's Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880-1920* (1993), and Elizabeth McHenry's *Forgotten Readers: Recovering the Lost History of African American Literary Societies* (2002).

negating the race's folksy roots that were most often indexed over dark skin. In 1894, the editorial took up the vexing question of "Negro Folk-Lore." Trying to judge the "value" of ethnographic work concerning black folklore, the editors concluded diplomatically after they presented both sides of the question that the "preservation of anecdotes and songs" will not harm but only help to "dignify the race." "There are those who believe firmly that the sooner the colored man loses and *forgets* his characteristics, the better it be for himself and other Americans," the editorial began, referencing George W. Cable's advice to "make all haste to drop those marks distinctly negroid." The piece immediately contrasted, "Others believe just as firmly that the best good of the race is served by preserving all characteristics that are worth preserving," implicitly referencing a critique of the color-consciousness within the black middle class that often equated light skin and white manners with progress and intelligence whereas dark skin signaled backwardness and inferiority ("Negro Folk-Lore" 9). The two arguments shown in this editorial map directly onto the tension between, and the seemingly uneven distribution of, the light- and dark-skinned characters that populate black fiction by female authors from the Woman's Era. While the focus on racially indeterminate heroines seems to confirm a trend by black writers to heed Cable's advice and adopt white gentility as much as possible, stories like Matthews's "Aunt Lindy" (1889) and side-characters like Harper's Aunt Linda in *Iola Leroy* – perhaps not unintentionally these two dark-skinned figures share a phonetic similarity – help us to gain a more refined understanding of the mosaic of differently colored and educated female figures that makes up these writers' conception of African American womanhood.

The intersections between color, temporality, and representation also shape my argument about literary genre and the ways in which black and white writers pitched realism and sentimentalism against one another in an effort to find the best, truest mode of representation for black womanhood in specific and black-white relationships in general. In black women's writing of the 1890s, the color of the characters becomes a symbol for the past pain and future potential of the race, best embodied over the bodies of dark-skinned women. The mode of expression that these writers chose for capturing the value of the folksy, plain black characters of the past was that of the sentimental since its emphasis on empathy and identification enabled African Americans of the late nineteenth century to bridge the often gaping divide between ante- and postbellum generations and their different levels of education. I argue in this chapter that against the popularity of realism in the mainstream literary market, sentimentalism remained these writers' register of choice for illustrating the raced nature of womanhood and for reinforcing the present and future bonds in the African American community, in large part because sentimentalism enabled them to address and transgress the issue of colorism.

#### A Woman's Era

In 1893, Frances E.W. Harper boldly proclaimed that "to-day we stand on the threshold of woman's era, and woman's work is grandly constructive" ("Woman's Political Future" 43). Harper spoke at the World's Congress of Representative Women, part of the Columbian Exposition in Chicago, where she was one of the few African Americans invited to address the audience. Because her listeners were primarily white women and men, Harper phrased her arguments for women's influence and power in

race-neutral and inclusive terms. Likening woman's recognition of her own strength and importance during the nineteenth century to the impact the discovery of America exerted on the Old World, Harper celebrated woman as a competent wielder of cultural authority and safeguard of moral truth. As "the highest ideal [is] always the true real," Harper elucidated, "so to woman comes the opportunity to strive for richer and grander discoveries than ever gladdened the eye of the Genoese mariner" (ibid.). These were powerful words from a member of a doubly disadvantaged group on account of her race and gender, and while Harper confirmed woman's prowess and exclusive access to spiritual truth and moral perfection for this specific occasion in terms that put race on the backburner, her words also reflected a broader sentiment within the African American community during the late nineteenth century that celebrated the abilities of its women.

Yet the goal of emphasizing the value of African American women as a group proved to be full of conflict as well. Black women needed to negotiate their alliance with white women, including if and when to insist on their difference from white culture. More importantly, they also needed to come to terms with their own internal differences that played themselves out over generational and educational diversity, usually accompanied by the specter of color consciousness symbolically dividing African American women along class lines. The politics of color masked itself in debates over education. Cultural capital became a factor between the intellectual elite that preached (and practiced) respectability and the poorer classes that were in constant danger of straying wayward, ethically as well as sexually. Much of this myopia had its roots in the historical conflation of skin color with social class which led to an African American upper and middle class that was overwhelmingly mixed-race and economically more

affluent because of its white blood ties. Economic stability and white heritage also translated into better education, a fact that formed the bedrock of the famous NACW motto “Lifting As We Climb” and the philosophy behind W.E.B. Du Bois’s concept of the “Talented Tenth.”

Thus united through their race but often differentiated by their skin color, the educated class’s mission lay in imparting their intellectual and financial capital onto the poorer, traditionally darker-skinned masses, lifting the image of the race as whole. Despite the general wish to represent racial solidarity and unity, historian Deborah Gray White points out that “the different classes of black women were allied, not united,” being keenly aware of their cultural differences that often manifested over the marker of light skin (78). Even *The Woman’s Era* with its goal of uniting the women of the race betrayed this class snobbism in their editorial “Greeting” in the inaugural number. The editors rationalized that their journal fulfilled a “need [...] as a medium of intercourse and sympathy between the women of all races and conditions;” but they undermined this all-embracing mission when they singled out the particular needs of “the educated and refined, among the colored women,” for such intellectual stimulation (“Greeting” 8). Although this status consciousness was never spelled out as color consciousness, the frequent portrait photographs of eminent race activists convey a conflation of light skin with class and cultural refinement. White notes in her study of African American women’s organizations that “[n]o records speak of the complexion of the NACW’s rank and file, but it seems clear that before 1920 most of the club leaders were light-skinned, and a few, [...] could and did occasionally pass for white” (79).

Despite these internal struggles, black women's unifying identity as a disenfranchised group in a racist, white culture, coupled with their insistence that blackness was not necessarily a mark of inferiority, stands out. The bond between mother-daughter generations of African American women in this struggle is especially noteworthy. For example, Harper was already approaching her seventies during the last decade of the nineteenth century. She could look back on a successful career as an educator and writer that started at mid-century and had made her one of the prominent role models of strong, Christian African American womanhood. The women who came of age during or after the Civil War and rose to social activism during the 1890s certainly looked to her as an exemplar of how to tackle the intense racism and sexism of the Post-Reconstruction U.S. A glance at titles like Gertrude E.H. Bustill Mossell's *The Work of the Afro-American Woman* (1894) or Victoria Earle Matthews's 1897 speech "The Awakening of the Afro-American Woman" alone confirms the centrality of the black woman for the discourse of race around the turn-of-the-century. Likewise, the name chosen for the newspaper that was most instrumental in centralizing black women's local activist efforts and providing them with a printed record of their literary and political achievements, *The Woman's Era*, echoed Harper's spirit and exuded hope and confidence through its title.<sup>102</sup> Anna Julia Cooper further underscored the pivotal role black women played in exposing the intersectional nature of race and gender when she powerfully claimed in 1892: "Only the BLACK WOMAN can say 'when and where I enter, in the quiet, undisputed dignity of my womanhood, [...] then and there the whole *Negro race enters with me*' (31).

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<sup>102</sup> *The Woman's Era* evolved out of and was closely affiliated with Boston's New Era Club, founded by Josephine St. Pierre Ruffin in 1890 (Davis, *Lifting As They Climb* 237). The club's motto was "Help to make the world better" ("Club News" 4).

These titles and quotes form the bedrock of black feminist thought, because they foreground the idea that African American women and men can only advance if even the most disadvantaged member of their group can be treated with respect. Cooper's awareness of black women's dual marginality in a climate which seemed to discount their agency shows, as Sherita L. Johnson reminds us, that many black women during the late nineteenth-century were "under-acknowledged agents of change" (2). Against the background of renewed racism that marks the Post-Reconstruction period, their optimism and sense of empowerment remain a testament to the vibrancy with which black women found their own individual, as well as a united, voice. The sexualized racism that confronted black women on a daily basis was thus instrumental in spurring their determination to create a public image of dignified and distinguished womanhood (McHenry 201). Ida B. Wells's anti-lynching campaign, prompted by the lynching of three black businessmen in Memphis in 1892, was a launch pad. Wells's charges exposed the common justification for lynchings – that black men's unruly sexuality led to the rape of white women – as a smoke screen for the actual economic factors and fears about the stability of white, male supremacy in the face of black progress during Reconstruction. While Wells's campaign helped dispel stereotypes about black male sexuality, Paula Giddings points out how inextricably such protest was linked to "challeng[ing] presumptions of the immorality of black women" (31). "Nobody in this section of the country believed the threadbare lie that Negro men rape white women," Wells asserted while simultaneously calling attention to the sexual double-standard at play in the history of white-black sexual relationships (*Southern Horrors* 52). "This rape of helpless Negro girls and women, which began in slavery days," Wells stressed, "still

continue[s] without let or hindrance, check or reproof from church, state, or press”  
(*Crusade for Justice* 70).

Wells’s accusations made her a target for white racists and required her to exile herself from the South, but her outspoken defense of African American integrity in general, and particular her emphasis on the unspoken sexual exploitation of black women, mobilized African American women throughout the country. Thus, under the impetus of Victoria Earle Matthews, then president of the Woman’s Loyal Union of New York and Brooklyn, black women organized a testimonial to honor Wells in New York City on October 5, 1892. The news report from Boston’s Woman’s Era club in the inaugural edition of *The Woman’s Era* confirms that the inspiration for black clubs coincided with Wells’s very public campaign. The report read:

There are so many questions which in their application to the race, demand special treatment, so many questions which, as colored women, we are called upon to answer, more than this, there was so much danger that numbers of women would be over-looked unless some special appeal was made to them, that in February last, at the time Miss Wells was creating so much interest in her crusade against lynch-law, it was a good time to carry out the club's idea, call the women together and organize, not for race-work alone, but for work along all the lines that make for women's progress.” (“Club News” 4)

Wells’s determination to speak for the race while publicly counteracting the negative image of black women proved to be the main catalyst for many African American women

to band together despite their differences and develop a group consciousness that expressed their grievances as raced and sexualized women.<sup>103</sup>

Defending black womanhood as well as redefining the parameters of an abstract womanhood to include African Americans became the goal of black uplift organizations. The setting of church institutions and women's clubs – social networking places with didactic and reformist intentions modeled after similar white women's organizations popular since the mid-nineteenth century – provided a framework for black women to enter the social scene as autodidacts, educators, political activists, and writers. Or, as the members of the Bethel Church in New York City phrased it, as women “taking intelligent cognizance of the inner life of the race.” “Self-respect based upon truth is the foundation we seek to lay,” they added (“Letter of One Thousand Women of Bethel Church, New York” 8).<sup>104</sup> Because black women often combined their literary, oratory, and performance skills in order to effectively shape their political agenda, Elizabeth McHenry argues that the majority of them became “literary activists by engaging in print culture in the context of black women's clubs” (202).

One way to represent the integrity of African American womanhood was to look at the past and honor enslaved women's moral virtue despite the odds weighed against them. These nods to the past generation of African American women, to the enslaved mothers of the current generation, were part of a larger color symbolism at work in the rhetoric of the Woman's Era. Although most of the examples given did not categorize

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<sup>103</sup> Giddings notes that the immediate aftermath of the testimonial led Victoria Earle Matthews, Josephine St. Pierre Ruffin, and Susan McKinney to proclaim plans for the formation of clubs in New York City, Boston, and Brooklyn (83). For background on Ida B. Wells's anti-lynching campaign, see specifically Giddings (17-31) as well as Schechter's thought-provoking study on Wells-Barnett, especially pp. 81-120.

<sup>104</sup> For an excellent analysis of the black church's role of in the organization of African American women, see Higginbotham, especially chapters 5 and 6 (120-184).

these older women as necessarily dark-skinned, the condition of slavery symbolically “blackened” all enslaved women against their white counterparts, at least in the eyes of mainstream American culture. Some of the African American elite seemed to take over the conventions of color-coded class superiority for representing the black woman of the past and present. In *The Voice of the Negro*’s 1904 “Woman’s Number,” Addie Hunton drew on the recent past in order to present “Negro Womanhood Defended.” Evoking the “darkness” out of which the African American woman emerged, “bewildered by temptations and trials awaiting her,” Hunton reasoned that without “fireside training nor home life, driven to and fro at will in a world of poverty and ignorance, it would have been strange and unusual had she not, in many cases, fallen by the wayside” (281).

Throughout the essay, Hunton rides a fine line between inclusion and exclusion. On the one hand, she proudly defends black womanhood from the notions of “moral weakness.” But while she willingly takes “up the gauntlet of defense” and excuses sexual transgressions of the lower classes, she nonetheless excludes herself from this group on account of her class.

Recourse to the past that emphasized black women’s perseverance under slavery could serve a dual function, criticizing rampant sexism and racism against black women while simultaneously emphasizing their claim to membership into the club of respectability intimately connected with white ideals of femininity. Fannie Barrier Williams, an active club member from Chicago and eventual co-founder of the National Association of Colored Women (NACW), was another of the few black women chosen to address the World’s Congress of Representative Women. Williams took this occasion to emphasize how far black women had come since the days of slavery in which they “were

not allowed to be modest, not allowed to follow the instincts of moral rectitude, who could cry for protection to no living man.” Only thirty years later they had, in her view, “so elevated the moral tone of their social life that new and purer standards of personal worth have been created, and new ideals of womanhood [...] are everywhere recognized and emulated” (“The Intellectual Progress of the Colored Woman in the United States Since the Emancipation Proclamation” 113). According to female spokespersons for the race like Williams, the black woman’s past was not something to be ashamed of; rather it helped mold her character and pave the way for a new, purer form of femininity.

Similarly, in describing the process of what she called the awakening of the Afro-American woman, Victoria Earle Matthews marveled at the expediency with which black women succeeded in morally uplifting the race more or less single-handedly since the abolition of slavery. “[T]hese women, starting empty handed, were left to make Christian homes where a Christian citizenship should be nurtured,” Matthews explained during her speech at the Annual Convention of the Society of Christian Endeavor in San Francisco in 1897. “The marvel is not that they have succeeded, not that they are succeeding, but that they did not fail, *utterly fail*,” Matthews continued, evoking again the importance of black women’s tasks as guardians of morality (152). Directed at her audience of white Christian women, Matthews’s critique touched upon the general lack of help and support black women were faced with both within as well as outside of their race, but the resistance from their white sisters in the struggle for black women’s rights put African American female activists in a particularly challenging position.

Modeling the clubs after the tradition of white women’s reformist organizations, black women were keenly aware of the racism that excluded them from participating

equally in the white clubs and made their own organization necessary in the first place. Fannie Barrier Williams acknowledged “the power of organized womanhood” as the “highest ascendancy of woman’s development,” both to work cross-racially as well as within their own race to become “contributors to all the great moral and intellectual forces that make for the greater weal of our common country” (“The Intellectual Progress of the Colored Woman in the United States Since the Emancipation Proclamation” 110-11). Yet she also regretted that it was still necessary in 1893 to address the question of black women’s morality to a white American audience and to be “placed in the unfortunate position of being defenders of our name” (112). Victoria Earle Matthews pleaded for white women’s “assistance in combating the public opinion and laws that degrade our womanhood because it is black and not white” and criticized that the current laws regarding interracial relationships “serve as the protection of the white man, but they leave us defenceless [sic], indeed” (“The Awakening of the Afro-American Women” 154). Within the context of a black progressive audience, Josephine St. Pierre Ruffin, editor of *The Woman’s Era*, was more straightforward in laying the blame on white women’s complicity in perpetuating sexualized racism. She countered that the repeated resistance from white southern women to admit black sisters into their clubs “on the grounds of the immorality of these [black] women,” has led to “an army of organized women standing for purity and mental worth” (14).

Ruffin’s language had special authority in the context of her role as steward of *The Woman’s Era*, the news organ that was instrumental in enabling black women to present a united front. For this specific occasion, Ruffin spoke as the President of the First National Conference of Colored Women, held in Boston in July 1895. The

conference was an attempt to extend the mission of *The Woman's Era* to bring together the individual clubs through one centralized organ. The convention helped solidify the local clubs into federal groups and eventually led to the formation of the National Association of Colored Women (NACW) in 1896. The immediate impetus to gather collectively in 1895, however, was spurred by yet another assault on black womanhood. The infamous "Jack's [sic] letter," in which J.W. Jacks, president of the Missouri Press Association, described black women as possessing "no sense of virtue and being altogether without character," riled up the African American community (qtd. in McHenry 192). "Our indignation should know no limit," wrote Matthews in *The Woman's Era* ("New York" 3), especially since Jacks had singled out their idol, Ida B. Wells, to exemplify that African American "women are prostitutes and all are natural liars and thieves."<sup>105</sup> The 1895 conference was symbolic of the determination with which black women set out to combat the virulent racism that affected them on all social levels, but above all, questioned their virtue. More than merely reacting to defamation, the women meant to lead by example of their intelligence and integrity. Ruffin rationalized that the conference's aim was "to break this silence, not by noisy protestations of what we are not, but by a dignified showing of what we are and hope to become that we are impelled [...] to make of this gathering an object lesson to the world" (14). As Ruffin's comments suggests, black women were acutely aware of the stigma of the past, and because of that they purposefully looked to the future in order to influence their public image.

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<sup>105</sup> For more information on Jacks's letter, see White 23-4, and McHenry 191-2, 362.

The rhetoric of past, present, and future in these women's oral and written activism was thus central for crafting a representation of their womanhood. Focusing on women's role as mothers – creators of life and shapers of moral men and women – bolstered black women's image, precisely because motherhood connected the virtues of past black women with the dignity of future ones. Matthews's choice imagery of motherhood in "The Awakening of the Afro-American Woman," in this case that of a Spartan mother who "was expected to build a home for 4,500,000 people, of whom she was the decisive unit," was thus a common symbol for expressing the dignity and value African Americans sought to establish. In so doing, they aimed to counter the stereotypes of promiscuity and hypersexuality that carried over from slavery times and naggingly persisted in the popular white imagination of the Post-Reconstruction U.S.

To the African American audience Fannie Barrier Williams addressed in a 1904 article for *The Voice of the Negro*, Williams stressed the special work black women accomplished in educating the race intellectually and ethically. In this important capacity, black women "will thus become the civic mothers of the race" ("The Club Movement Among the Colored Women" 101). Gertrude E.H. Bustill Mossell dedicated her influential *The Work of the Afro-American Woman*, part informative history complete with biographical information on individual race women, part treatise on women's role as wives and intellectuals, part poetry, to her daughters. By highlighting her daughters as the main beneficiaries from the inspirational work of the black women she recorded, Mossell's wish that "they may grow into a pure and noble womanhood" linked directly to the powerful role of motherhood in shaping virtuous black femininity.

While African American women had to defend their intelligence and leadership capabilities in the face of white racism, they simultaneously had to contend with flippant paternalism from within the race as well. Sexism within the structures of African American uplift organizations and political movements has been a long-standing factor in the history of black feminism, and women like Williams and Matthews were not afraid to confront double discrimination. Their insistence on the authority and civic power of African American women and mothers thus functioned as a shield against the unwillingness of many black men to recognize women as equal partners in the fight for civil rights. Despite the praise bestowed on the women of the race in the emerging encyclopedia-like texts that aimed at chronicling the progress of African Americans since slavery and served an important function in celebrating blackness and acknowledging positive role models, pride in black women's public work remained circumscribed by the popular "helpmeet" image that relegated women to the sphere of the home and heart.<sup>106</sup> Anna Julia Cooper succinctly argued that the woman of color "is confronted by both a woman question and a race problem," lamenting that "as far as my experience goes the average man of our race is less frequently ready to admit the actual need among the sturdier forces of the world for woman's help or influence" (134-5).

The frustration with chauvinism black women experienced from African American men spanned the gamut from their relegation to secondary roles in public offices to equal access to higher education, as well as a general objectification of their sexuality. Titles of speeches like that of black church activist Nannie Helen Burroughs,

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<sup>106</sup> Who-is-Who publications, such as I. Garland Penn's *The Afro-American Press and Its Editors* (1891) or G.F. Richings's *Evidence of Progress Among Colored People* (1902), often devoted a chapter to the work of women, titled "Afro-American Women in Journalism" (Penn) or "Prominent Colored Women" (Richings). For a discussion about the helpmeet role and the larger question of black women's place in public work alongside men, see White 44-58; Higginbotham 8, 41, and 120-49; and Giddings 114-6.

“How the Sisters are Hindered from Helping,” held at the National Baptist Convention in 1900, expressed structural gender inequalities within the church reform movement (Higginbotham 150-2). Anna Julia Cooper “fear[ed] that the majority of colored men do not yet think it worth while that women aspire to higher education” (75) – a sentiment backed up by the exclusion of women from the newly established prestigious American Negro Academy in 1897 (Giddings 116). Victoria Earle Matthews concluded her passionate answer to an opinion article on the demoralizing effect of novel reading on women by turning the male writer’s insult back onto African American men’s wanting manners towards women. Arguing that novels cannot harm “even our stigmatized women,” Matthews exclaimed: “Where is the Negro man’s chivalry? Discuss that!” (“Novel Reading Defended” col. B).

Club women’s vexation over the sexism within the African American postbellum community often concentrated on the alleged preference of African American men for light-skinned women, emulating the beauty ideals of Anglo-Saxon society. In the 1904 “Woman’s Number” of the *Voice of the Negro*, Nannie Helen Burroughs bitterly accused that “[t]he white man who crosses the line and leaves an heir is doing a favor to some black man who would marry the most debased woman, whose only stock in trade is her color, in preference to the most royal queen in ebony” (277).<sup>107</sup> Aptly titled “Not Color But Character,” Burroughs criticized the too-often causally understood relationship between moral class and skin color. Evelyn Higginbotham has argued that black women’s adoption of white female ideals of purity and modesty signified at once a conservative and radical impetus, embedded in what she calls “the politics of

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<sup>107</sup> For more examples, see Giddings 114-7.

respectability” (187). While respectability coupled with the “culture of dissemblance” – to use Darlene Clark Hine’s phrase for the self-protective silence black women erected to guard their inner lives – seemed to reinforce white ideals of feminine grace, the fact that African American women claimed rightful membership into this coveted and racially exclusive club was a subversive gesture in and of itself (194). As Burroughs argued, respectability was less a hallmark of immutable qualities such as birth and skin tone than of character. And character, founded on manners and decorum, or as Tate labels them, “deportment,” could be learned, meaning that the racial implications inherent in the values of middle-class femininity were mutable, fluid, and socially constructed rather than set in stone (60).<sup>108</sup>

Despite club women’s sensitivity towards color consciousness and their drive towards an inclusion of dark-skinned women into categories of respectability, the fusion of color with class remained an internal, largely unacknowledged problem within female uplift organizations themselves, one that betrayed difference rather than unity. These examples lay bare the contradictions at play in black women’s philosophy of uplift. On the one hand, uplift was invested in including darker-skinned women with the category of respectable and dignified womanhood. On the other hand, it was deeply implicated in their own reinforcement of class and color through the lineage and visual appearance of many of their leaders. Redefining African American womanhood remained a radical, daily unsettling task indeed. These conflicting currents of self-representation also translate into the literary production of these activists and thus drive the seemingly lopsided preference for racially indeterminate female protagonists that populate the literature

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<sup>108</sup> See also Higginbotham (192) and McHenry (203).

of black women authors during the 1890s. But these tensions help emphasize the complementary relationship between the darker-skinned women of the past and future and the light-skinned ones of the present. Moreover, they also map onto a larger debate about literary genre that transcends the internal question of self-representation and thrives on a dialogue with white American conventions about the validity of either sentimentalism or realism for best capturing the core of African American characters.

#### Race Literature, Dark-Skinned Characters, and the Value of Sentimentalism

Victoria Earle Matthews was one of the key players that dominated the social scene of the Woman's Era. Matthews's physical appearance as a "tall, lank straight haired girl, with large, soulful eyes," coupled with her intellectual ambitions, puts her in good company with the many light-skinned, well-educated middle-class African Americans that populated the social scene as well as the fictional universe of the 1890s (Keyser 208). Yet her stories and literary theory, exemplified in her narrative "Aunt Lindy: A Story Founded on Real Life" (1889) and her highly influential essay "The Value of Race Literature" (1895), insist on carving out a space for the inner lives of an older, dark-skinned generation of African Americans. Born a slave in 1861 in Georgia and residing in New York City since 1873, Matthews was known for being an avid reader who became "in spite of untoward circumstances an educated, cultured woman" (Keyser 210). One of her biggest achievements was probably the founding of the White Rose Mission that arose out of her involvement with the settlement movement. Started in 1897 in New York City as a place where girls and boys of color could receive educational and domestic training, as well as instruction in social manners and decorum, the White Rose

Mission targeted especially the multitude of migrant workers that flooded in from the rural South to the urban centers of the North. Because these migrants were often naïve and without means, the mission concentrated after 1900 on helping African American girls, particularly those who had just arrived in the city, find a safe boarding place and thus circumvent their falling prey to prostitution or exploitative labor.<sup>109</sup>

While the White Rose Mission may remain Matthews's biggest living monument, she was already a highly respected personality by 1897. In this year, she was celebrated for her various achievements, such as journalistic engagements for black and white newspapers, short stories, a pivotal role in the founding of the Woman's Loyal Union of New York and Brooklyn in 1892 (a woman's club over which she presided), and an active role in supporting the efforts of the *Woman's Era* to organize black women, which led to her being titled National Organizer and Chairman of the Executive Board of the NACW in 1896.<sup>110</sup> Much like the one she had organized five years earlier for Ida B. Wells, in 1897 Matthews was honored with a big testimonial dinner. According to the *New York Age*, guests paid tribute to her versatility and centrality in African American women's social activism. She had been part of "every public movement touching Afro-American women" for the last decade and "the first to bring before the women of the country the crying needs of the downtrodden sisterhood" (qtd. in Kramer 255). The *Woman's Era* lauded her as the "star" of the decisive First National Conference of

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<sup>109</sup> Even after Matthews's death in 1907, the White Rose Mission continued to play an important part in New York's social welfare institutions for African Americans. Carried on at first by her co-worker Frances R. Keyser, the mission was maintained in reduced form well into the 1980s (Kramer 260, 266 n.85).

<sup>110</sup> In *The Afro-American Press and Its Editors*, Penn singles out Matthews as unique among black women writers, especially since her journalism was in high demand by both white papers, such as *The Times*, *Herald*, *Detroit Plaindealer*, and *Southern Christian Recorder*, as well as black newspapers, like *The Boston Advocate*, *Washington Bee*, *New York Globe*, and *New York Age*. Penn also lists the magazines that "readily found place in the[ir] columns" for her short stories, including *The A.M.E. Church Review*, *The Waverly Magazine*, *The New York Weekly*, and *The Family Story Paper* (375-6).

Colored Women in 1895 (“Woman’s Era Club Resolutions” 15), but Frances R. Keyser’s comment that “possibly no woman was more greatly misunderstood” points to the fact that Matthews’s blunt manner and immense success alienated many of her black contemporaries (215).<sup>111</sup>

Although literary scholars have increasingly begun to acknowledge her important role as literary activist in their studies of nineteenth-century black women writers, especially in order to paint a picture of the organizational and intellectual life of black women around the turn-of-the-century, Matthews’s fictional works remain overlooked. That she was a prolific writer, both in terms of her journalism as well as in her role as author of numerous short stories, is a fact that all the prominent record books of that time emphasize. Representative publications like Mossell’s *The Work of the Afro-American Woman* highlight in particular Matthews’s narrative “Aunt Lindy: A Story Founded on Real Life,” which was originally published in January 1889 in *The A.M.E. Church Review*. Because of its immense popularity among black middle-class readership, the story was reissued in book form in 1893 with illustrations by Mary L. Payne.<sup>112</sup> Likewise, as the author of the highly influential essay “The Value of Race Literature,” presented at the First Congress of Colored Women in 1895, Victoria Earle Matthews became, in her own way, as much an arbiter of African American literary taste as William Dean Howells was to represent for mainstream American letters. Lauded by her

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<sup>111</sup> For biographical information on Matthews, see Keyser’s entry in Hallie Q. Brown’s *Women of Distinction* (208-16), and Elizabeth Lindsay Davis’s *Lifting As They Climb* (232-3). For a thorough account of Matthews’s involvement in the social welfare movement, see Steve Kramer’s excellent essay “Uplifting Our ‘Downtrodden Sisterhood’: Victoria Earle Matthew and the New York City’s White Rose Mission, 1897-1907.” Kramer also details the negative comments some of Matthews’s actions elicited from contemporaries, as well as Matthews’s own sensitivities and awareness of her unpopularity (256).

<sup>112</sup> See Tate for the publication history of Matthews’s short story (260, n.18, and 270, n. 1). According to Tate, the A.M.E. Book Concern first issued the story in pamphlet form in 1893. During the same year, it was published as a single work by J.J. Little & Company, Astor Place, New York City.

contemporaries as the “Queen Bee” who “has stirred our best women as no other women has done,” Matthews’s charisma and passion for educating and disseminating literature to her fellow-citizens were striking, even if her race and gender limited her influence to the relatively small circle of black, middle-class women intellectuals and her political activism took precedence over her literary productions (“Social News” 5).

Elizabeth McHenry confirms Matthews’s centrality when she evaluates the significance of Matthews’s treatise as “nothing less than a manifesto of the woman’s club movement itself” (192). Alongside Anna Julia Cooper’s essay “One Phase of American Literature” in her acclaimed *A Voice From the South*, Matthews’s tract remains one of the most comprehensive meta-narratives of late nineteenth-century African American literature (192). Matthews’s essay, originally a speech meant to rouse black women into literary activism, is less nuanced than Cooper’s. Whereas Cooper carefully delineates literary achievement into two groups, those writing for art’s sake – and being true artists – and those who preach and write didactically, which leads her to bemoan the ongoing absence of black writers in the first category (“In literature, we have no artist for art’s sake”), Matthews approaches the subject in more pragmatic and broad terms (181-2, 223). Her aim is to stake out the territory of race literature against that of American literature, inclusively opening her speech with the definition of race literature as “all the writings emanating from a distinct class – not necessarily race matter” (126). Matthews’s is a project invested in recording the progress of the race and in proliferating the literacy of its members, thus this type of literature does not necessarily need to “mean things uttered in praise,” but it “does mean though the preserving of all the records of a Race,

[...] cherishing the material saving from destruction and obliteration what is good, helpful, stimulating” (144-5).

Matthews’s essay was a natural culmination of her investment and influence in African American edification. Throughout her life, Matthews emphasized a broad-based educational effort to record, circulate, and consume writings about African Americans by African Americans. Her friend and co-worker Frances Keyser recalled how a library at one of her employers represented a pivotal opportunity for the “book-loving Victoria” to feed her hunger for educational improvement (209). Her own expansive collection of “books written by and about the Negro in America” that furnished her White Rose mission home, was, according to a white reporter, “One of the most unique special libraries in New York” (qtd. in Keyser 215). Coupled with *The Woman’s Era’s* feature article on Matthews in its second number, which praised her as “quite an authority on literature, art, history and philosophy,” naturally leading to “her determination to write a series of text books, historical primers for the youth of the race” (Frazier 1), it is no wonder that in the aftermath of the 1895 conference, the “Social Notes” column of *The Woman’s Era* evaluated the intellectual efforts of Matthews and Cooper differently. Matthews, they wrote, was “a born leader,” whereas the “calm, thoughtful, and analytical” Cooper was “the student” (“Social Notes” 19). Matthews’s tract was an expression of such leadership.

In “The Value of Race Literature,” Matthews thus aimed broadly to establish an African American canon. This literature would act, in her own words, as “a counter-irritant” to white American literature and would correct harmful stereotypes (“The Value of Race Literature” 136). Its defining characteristics are thus encoded in the larger

postbellum struggle over literary form and the ideological battle over realism, that is the control over racialized images, including their value and authenticity. Her orientation towards recording and archiving was fueled by the necessity to combat existing prejudices about the race, especially the stereotype of the servant-like, dialect-spewing “Darkey” that manifested itself through American literature. While she conjectured that the effects of race literature would effectively “enlarge our scope, make us better known wherever real lasting culture exists, [and] undermine and utterly drive out the traditional Negro in dialect,” the more important function touched upon mending the battered psychology of a recently emancipated people. Accordingly, Matthews’s explanation that the specific history of African Americans “make a Race Literature a necessity as an outlet for the unnaturally suppressed inner lives which our people have been compelled to lead,” form the center piece of her treatise (131).

In her essay, Matthews illustrates the need for rendering the inner lives of blacks with a scathing critique of an unnamed short story published in “‘Harper’s Magazine’ some years ago” (132). According to Matthews’s summary of the plantation-style story that features “the typical ‘Darkey’,” the crux of the sketch revolves around the relationship between the old black man and his former “Marse Wilyum” who cheated his ex-slave into paying him too much for a “humble cabin and garden patch” (132). Once the black man finds out that his trusted former master had cheated him, he leaves his cabin disillusioned, waving away the question of a friend why he did not stand up for his rights. Here Matthews intervenes to interpret the pathetic-sounding conclusion. While she restates that the “most general view is that the old man had no manhood, [...] no spirit or, as the Negro-hating Mark Twain would say, no capacity of kicking at real or

imaginary wrongs,” she deems these predominantly white understandings of a black disposition as false. Instead, Matthews contends, “*We* know the true analysis of the old man’s words,” claiming simultaneously the need for African Americans to seize control over their literary representations as well as their authority in detecting truth and inner motives (my emphasis 132). “With one sweep of mind he had seen the utter futility of even hoping for justice from a people who would take advantage of an honest aged man,” Matthews asserts, “That is the point, and this reveals a neglected subject for analytical writers to dissect in the interest of truth the real meaning of the so-called cowardice, self-negation and lack of responsibility so freely referred to by those in positions calculated to make lasting impressions on the public” (133). Although Matthews leaves it open when the story she refers to had been published, and her vague comment in the 1895 speech that it was published “some years ago” might suggest that her narrative “Aunt Lindy” had already been written, the two stories work in tandem and underscore Matthews’s urgency to render the inner lives of African Americans more visible in the literature of the day.

In the years after its publication, “Aunt Lindy” was often counted, alongside Frances Harper’s *Iola Leroy* and Anna Julia Cooper’s *A Voice From the South*, as one of the few examples of race literature that already existed and of which African Americans could be proud; it thus held a valuable modeling function (Mossell 60-1).<sup>113</sup> For modern-day readers, “Aunt Lindy” seems sentimental and is similar to the many local color stories of the postbellum era that depict ex-slaves as quaint, simple-minded folk in subordinated harmony with their former masters. This might be one reason why literary scholars who explore black late nineteenth-century women writers often mention “Aunt

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<sup>113</sup> For general praise on the significance of “Aunt Lindy” and the import of Matthews’s stories on race work, see Penn (276) and Gould (14).

Lindy,” due to its popularity and the frequency with which the primary sources of this time herald Matthews’s story, but do not engage with it in more detail. Yet the story acts as a fictional rendition of Matthews’s philosophy on the function of fiction, valuing sentimentalism favorably against realism in representing the black woman of the past. In addition, the enthusiastic response to “Aunt Lindy” by club women like Mossell or Medora M. Gould necessitates us to look deeper into the structure of this story.

The story opens in the aftermath of a devastating cotton mill fire in Fort Valley, Georgia – Matthews’s own birthplace. The local doctor seeks a quiet asylum for one of the severely injured strangers who was caught in the fire and brings the unconscious man to one of his trusted nurses, Aunt Lindy. A former slave, bereft of her children who had been sold away from her, Aunt Lindy and her husband Joel lead a modest life on their small lot, helping others and suppressing “their grief from an unsympathizing generation.”<sup>114</sup> Rather predictably, Aunt Lindy’s patient turns out to be her former master, and in the moment of recognition, Aunt Lindy needs to come to terms with her pent-up anger and grief. Yet instead of giving in to easy temptation and ending the life of the weak, unconscious man in an eye-for-an-eye act of vengeance, Aunt Lindy, reigned in by the music of near-by evening worshippers, forgives “Marse Jeems.” Vengeance is God’s work, she reminds herself, and subsequently puts all her skills into nursing her former master back to health. Marse Jeems, left “marvel[ing] at the patient faithfulness of these people,” repays the couple accordingly so that from then on, “they never knew a sorrow,” culminating in the safe return of one their children, “beyond a doubt, through the efforts of the silver-haired stranger.”

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<sup>114</sup> I use the hypertext version of this story, which follows the rare book publication from 1893. The online text is made readily available by *The Online Archive of Nineteenth-Century U.S. Women’s Writings*.

The sentimental ending that recasts former slave and master in harmony yet maintains a hierarchical relationship through Marse Jeems's financial benevolence is steeped in a Christian tone of forgiveness and personal subordination. At first glance, then, this tale is complicit with passive representations of African Americans like those in humorous yet ultimately racist local stories by white writers, such as the popular tales by Thomas Nelson Page, Joel Chandler Harris, and Ruth McEnery Stuart. Its tone sounds far away from, almost contradictory to, the vigor and proud self-determination with which black activists of the Woman's Era seized on reworking their mammy and Jezebel stereotypes into more positively expansive and less submissive representations.<sup>115</sup> Despite the story's gentle voice and demure character, the black community, especially club women, did not seem to perceive Matthews's sentimentalism as glorifying unequal antebellum race relations and thereby standing in contradiction to a new, independent black selfhood. Instead, they celebrated Matthews's story as an example of realism, of positive image-making in the spirit of race literature. Mossell recommended in *The Work of the Afro-American Woman* that this "beautiful little story [...] is deserving of careful study," precisely because it "giv[es] a vivid and *truthful* aspect of one phase of Negro character" [my emphasis] (61).<sup>116</sup>

Medora M. Gould, regular editor of *The Woman's Era* literature column, erudite in contemporary American literature and critically aware of its conventions, also reviewed "Aunt Lindy" favorably alongside new publications by Mary E. Wilkins and Henry James. As Elizabeth McHenry has most extensively shown, Gould's dominating selection of white Anglo-American or Anglo-European writers in her column reflected

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<sup>115</sup> See also Wallinger 195.

<sup>116</sup> Wallinger contends that "Aunt Lindy" "exemplifies an ideal shared by Matthews's fellow black women intellectuals" (195).

black middle-class Americans' general desire to "tap into the aura and prestige with which [European history] was associated" (227). Accordingly, they deemed the literature that documented that history authentic and real (227). Yet they also actively challenged the white-controlled boundaries of "real literature" by promoting their own writers alongside established Anglo-American authors, expanding and appropriating the definition of American literature in the process (228-38). While Gould's commentary regarding "Aunt Lindy" that "the interesting little story is laid in the South, and the narrative is a pathetic illustration of 'Coals of fire'," betrays the overall orientation of her column towards favoring classical, "real and serious" literature, such as Shakespeare, George Eliot, Sir Walter Scott, or her contemporary, Howells, she nonetheless acknowledges the realism inherent in "Aunt Lindy." Thus instead of criticizing Aunt Lindy's benevolence as too idealistic, as her phrasing of the "pathetic illustration" might suggest, Gould rather sees the heroine as "a typical woman of the negro race," indicating that women like Aunt Lindy are indeed authentic and representative of black womanhood and not exaggerated exceptions (14).

Comments like these from black female intellectuals highlight again the aesthetic debates over what types of literary representations would count as "real" in which American writers after the Civil War engaged so passionately. While arbiters of American (white) literature like William Dean Howells and Frank Norris propagated realism and naturalism against an overtly didactic sentimentalized and feminized style, black women challenged such a simplistic dualism by locating realism and authenticity within the aesthetic confines of emotional and spiritual appeal. Both Hazel Carby and Claudia Tate have conceptualized the tension between literary form and aesthetics in their

foundational studies on nineteenth-century black women writers. They emphasize that because of the dominant negative images about African American womanhood these writer's authorial strategies relied on an overtly pedagogical tone that went beyond a mimetic approach that merely mirrored society and instead actively molded "new stories about the personal lives of black women and men" (Carby, *Reconstructing Womanhood* 95; Tate 9). Tate's terminology of political desire, which expresses itself through a surface story that adheres to sentimental and domestic values typical of antebellum woman's fiction, especially through the trope of marriage, remains, alongside Ann Du Cille's *The Coupling Convention* (1993), a major paradigm for understanding the depth of black women's Post-Reconstruction literature. Tate's awareness of the aesthetic gap between modern-day and contemporary readers in locating the meaning and form of political desire especially helps to better understand the claims to realism and self-representation Matthews makes in "Aunt Lindy." Explaining that "[w]hereas contemporary readers frequently regard politics as simply an exercise of power over others, the political desire in these black female texts is the acquisition of authority for the self in both the home and the world," Tate gives us a template to come to terms with the seemingly complicit passivity that marks Aunt Lindy's forgiveness (8). Like Matthews and her contemporary black readers who can decode the "real" meaning behind the old man's passivity in the *Harper's* story she critiques in "The Value of Race Literature," so are the readers of "Aunt Lindy" asked to see beyond simple-minded forgiveness and peer into the emotional and spiritual struggle that lead to the woman's act of compassion in the face of unspeakable personal loss. Matthews translates the acquisition of authority into a representation of the inner lives of African Americans.

As such, the political force and the claim for a realist representation of African Americans lies in Matthews's insistence on showing her readers the emotional and spiritual struggle it cost Aunt Lindy to overcome her vengeance. The illustration of the woman's inner struggle thus functions as exactly the emotional outlet and corrective to the one-dimensional portraits of African Americans Matthews called for in "The Value of Race Literature." Unlike the black stock images of plantation-type fiction, Aunt Lindy does not miraculously "just act" – either in committing murder or submitting to divine order – but Matthews takes time to show her readers *how* Aunt Lindy comes to her decision. In other words, like many realist writers, Matthews focuses on a moment of inner crisis, drawing out the conflicting emotions and thoughts that finally lead to her action – to abstain from personal vengeance and rather follow the gospel of forgiveness. The story's brevity invites readers to overlook the paragraphs devoted to Aunt Lindy's inner struggle, especially since its language, with expressions like "demoniac gleams of exultation" and "glaring eyeballs," remains aesthetically closer to the register of melodrama than to the quiet, semi-distanced voice of realism.

Nonetheless, the fact that Matthews draws out Aunt Lindy's inner struggle through three full paragraphs, not shying away from depicting her protagonist in rather unflattering terms, whose "blood was afire, her tall form swayed, her long, bony hands trembled like an animal at bay," is in and of itself an aesthetic-political statement. Matthews grants people of color the same emotional breadth, the same realness, as their white counterparts. This intention was not lost on Gertrude Mossell, who summarized "Aunt Lindy" for her readers in *The Work of the Afro-American Woman*. "Then begins the awful struggle in the mind of the poor freedwoman," Mossell explains, "The dreadful

tortures of her life in bondage pass in review before memory's open portal. [...] In these beautiful words, Mrs. Matthews *shows* us the decision" (my emphasis 62). Matthews's determination to represent in detail emotions, motives, and turning points in the lives of African American characters thus is an attempt to elevate black characters out of their marginal fictional roles into full-fledged figures that are driven by complex inner lives.

Matthews's style in representing the inner life of Aunt Lindy differs from that of eminent white realist writers. She still adheres to the sentimental tendency to portray emotions over exaggerated tangible facial or bodily expressions rather than trying to capture the intangible, abstract thought processes in small gestures or insignificant objects. While this reliance on melodramatic features might strike us as rather uncreative and conservative in advancing a dignified, serious image of African Americans, it represents a hitherto overlooked strategy that was more common than we assume. More importantly, this technique was more effective in shaping a larger discourse on race literature than literary scholars have credited it. According to Matthews, "the spirit of romance, and even tragedy" are inevitably a part of the literature- and image-making of race literature since historically "our race on this continent can never be disassociated" from an emotionally laden past which will translate into a simple story, "thrown into strong relief by the multiplicity of its dramatic situations" ("The Value of Race Literature" 131). Unlike realism, race literature thus relies on emotionality to best and most truthfully represent the reality of the black experience.<sup>117</sup>

Matthews's critique of the *Harper's Magazine* story in "The Value of Race Literature" served as a spring board for a larger critique on white-authored fiction about

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<sup>117</sup> See also Wallinger 192, 199.

African Americans, including not only typical plantation-type local stories or the ironically flippant tone of Mark Twain, whom Matthews's accused of "Negro-hating," but also literature about blacks by public supporters of the race. Accordingly, Matthews's critique of harmful literary representations of African Americans includes William Dean Howells's *An Imperative Duty*. While she does not extend her accusations of Twain's "cowardly villain" images to Howells, Matthews is nonetheless annoyed at "all this tergiversation and labored explanation" necessary to render a mixed-race woman lovable in a white man's eyes and the "Othello like charm" of ignorance necessary to portray the African American masses (134). Anna Julia Cooper shared Matthews's wholesale critique of white authors, including those "champions of the black man's cause," like Albion W. Tourgee and George Washington Cable, because they could not transcend a didactic and preacher-like tone (188). This included Howells, who she deemed an "artist for art's sweet sake," but who nonetheless failed with *An Imperative Duty* "because he gives only a half truth" (201, 203).

Completing the trinity of women writers deemed by Mossell the first producers of real race literature, Frances Harper fictionalizes the dilemma Matthews and Cooper broach in their essays. Towards the end of her novel *Iola Leroy*, Iola asks her lover, Dr. Frank Latimer, how to best be "of lasting service to the race," since her failing health prevents her from continuing her work as teacher in the South. His immediate suggestion is to "write a good, strong book" that inspires African Americans because it comes from one of their own and controls the self-representation of the race at a level that surpasses the existing novels by white writers. "Authors belonging to the white race have written good racial books, for which I am deeply grateful," Latimer contends, "but it seems to be

almost impossible for a white man to put himself completely in our place” (263).

Through Latimer, Harper expresses the dissatisfaction shared by many black literary activists with the patronage system of white writers and supporters of the race.

Reminiscent of the contentious antebellum relationship between white abolitionists and ex-slaves over agency in their literary representation, women like Matthews and Cooper specifically emphasized the harm that such books could do in perpetuating racist images. Despite their open allegiance with African Americans and their cultural clout to propel black writers such as Charles W. Chesnutt or Paul Laurence Dunbar into the American mainstream, the well-meaning representations of blacks by eminent realists like William Dean Howells or George Washington Cable were, according to female critics, in the end, degrading for the race as a whole.

Matthews’s essay “The Value of Race Literature” is thus an outspoken plea against existing forms of realism by white writers, what Gene Jarrett calls aptly “minstrel realism,” as well as a call for African American literature to correct romanticizing and caricatured tendencies by focusing on the development of black American’s inner life.<sup>118</sup> In other words, defining race literature against white-authored fictions about race was one way to actively contest the meaning of realism with its claims for truth and authenticity. Ironically, while stories like “Aunt Lindy” strike us as overwhelmingly sentimental and thus stand in contrast to the conventions of nineteenth-century realism, Matthews suggests that portraying the inner lives of black characters in emotional and spiritual

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<sup>118</sup> Gene Jarrett analyzes how insidious forms of racism in the guise of white supporters of the race often “united racialism and realism in a romantic relationship” in their own writings (33). Jarrett coined the term “minstrel realism” following the tendency of white mid-nineteenth-century viewers to regard minstrel shows performed by African Americans “as racially authentic and realistic,” leading to the analogous expectation that literature by African Americans should confirm the romanticized tone and caricatured images of the plantation tradition, all the while deeming them authentic and realistic because they were written by ‘insiders’ (17, 32).

terms comes closer to capturing the real core of the black experience than existing white literature about African Americans. The style of “Aunt Lindy” and similar productions of the Woman’s Era strays away from the documentary and sociological impulses of realism. These works re-align their definition of reality once more along the sentimental image of “the human heart” in order to anchor the moral framework of a character in authentic truth.

The character of Aunt Lindy and the lessons from “The Value of Race Literature” represent strong incentives to insist on taking the representation of the folksy slave out of the hands of white authors and reclaim the antebellum slave experience for the purpose of stimulating the current members of the race. Looking to the “unsung” heroes and fictionalizing the common black person in dignified ways that signify emotional depth rather than stupidity thus became a pressing task for black writers. One example of bringing to light an older female role model in order to inspire the young women of the race into activism was Victoria Earle Matthews’s sketch on Harriet Tubman in *The Woman’s Era* Souvenir number, expressly produced for the First Annual Convention of the National Federation of Afro-American Women, held July 20-22 1896 in Washington, D.C.<sup>119</sup> As part of their “Eminent Women Series,” Harriet Tubman’s portrait followed the one in remembrance of Harriet Beecher Stowe’s birthday. Labeled “noble mother of Israel” and an “almost unknown, almost unsung ‘Black Joan of Arc,’” Matthews presents her sketch on Tubman’s life as an example that would “bring such pressure to bear upon our great body of Afro-American Women, that a great unrest will seize our women, that

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<sup>119</sup> The sketch appeared twice; once in the June 1896 number and again in the July 1896 issue. The June version is longer yet lacks the valuable cut that it announces for the reprint of the sketch in the Souvenir Program.

the cry, ‘What shall we do to elevate, purify and upbuild our race?’ will burst spontaneously from thousands of earnest hearts all over this land” (3.2 (June): 8). Next to using Tubman’s brave example as a rallying cry for her fellow-women, Matthews also emphasizes how relatively unappreciated women like Tubman, who had not been in the limelight of the antislavery circuit, have remained among African Americans. Referencing Frederick Douglass’s expression of admiration for Tubman, particularly since, unlike him, she “labored in a private way [...] in the night,” Matthews closes by urging that “we owe it to our children, to uncover from partial oblivion and unconscious indifference the great characters within our own ranks. The fact that we know so little that is creditable and truly noble about our own people constitutes one of the saddest and most humiliating phases of Afro-American life” (ibid.).

Matthews’s positive representation of hard-working, humble, and dark Aunt Lindy is thus a direct implementation of her directive to record, honor, and look up to one’s literary predecessors in order to make race literature. In “The Value of Race Literature,” Matthews laments the inability of current black writers to produce uplifting, original race literature, provocatively asking “Are we adding to the structure planned for us by our pioneers?” Directing her glance again at the past and the task of recovering the wealth of black heritage through artists other than the well-acclaimed (and honored by whites) Phillis Wheatley, Matthews urges: “Do we know our dwelling and those who under many hardships, at least, gathered material for its upbuilding? Knowing them do we honor – do we love them – what have they done that we should love? Your own Emerson says – ‘To judge the production of a people you must transplant the spirit of the times in which they lived’ ” (137). Here Matthews asks her black audience not only to

engage in the task of archiving the race's history more actively, but she also validates the work of those antebellum, often less privileged African Americans, deeming them worthy as role models for her contemporaries. With "Aunt Lindy," Matthews may have tried to "transplant the spirit of the times" of an older generation of humble black women into her fiction in order to enrich the lives and spark the activism of current African American women.

In a sense, Matthews anticipates a core insight of black feminist thought – to honor one's foremothers and uphold their traditions and alternative forms of creativity – spelled out by Alice Walker in her 1974 Essay "In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens." Walker ponders the unacknowledged, yet highly creative spirit of her overworked mother and countless other African American women, and comes to the conclusion that "We have constantly looked high, when we should have looked high – and low" (239). Like Walker, Matthews's creation of Aunt Lindy urges her educated late nineteenth-century readers to look 'low,' and by doing so, lift the image of elderly, dark-skinned, ex-slave women like Aunt Lindy into the orbit of contemporary black middle-class activism. While Matthews renders Aunt Lindy in dialect, a stereotypical marker of age, region, class, and education, the modest, simple-minded Lindy is nonetheless introduced in stately terms. Matthews's description of Aunt Lindy as "a tall, ancient-looking negro dame" at once marks her as dark-skinned and racially unmixed, hinting at the primitive simplicity so characteristic of white, patronizing local color depictions of hard-working slaves, while simultaneously imbuing her through the appellation "dame" with the grace and respect reserved for genteel women. Through this combination of high and low attributes, Matthews transplants the folksy black woman out of her degrading local color

niche and elevates her into a possible template after which contemporary literary activists could model the future African American woman.

#### Stopover Tragic Mulatta: Encircling the Mixed-Race Heroine in Blackness

Compared to the single focus on an elderly and formerly enslaved woman in Matthews's short story "Aunt Lindy," Frances Harper's novel *Iola Leroy* provides a wider character repertoire, illustrating an array of African American generations. Among the many side-characters, Harper gives, however, special recognition to Aunt Linda, the jovial, motherly cook. Aunt Linda shares with Aunt Lindy the markers of dialect and old-fashioned simple-mindedness that stand in stark contrast to the sophisticated Iola and her many fictional light-skinned sisters. Readers encounter Aunt Linda in the pose of a black, female stock image – an "elderly woman" who sits on the porch, "darning stockings, the very embodiment of content and good humor" (153). Harper undermines this literary stereotype from the very beginning through her validation of alternative expressions of smartness and literacy. For instance, Aunt Linda famously asserts her mental sharpness when she confesses that she cannot read the newspaper, "but ole Missus' face is newspaper nuff for me" (9). Throughout the novel, Aunt Linda's dialect-heavy street-smarts continue to contrast with the next generation of educated race leaders, such as Iola, her brother Harry, and her Uncle Robert, but Aunt Linda's repeated appearance alongside Robert and Iola as 'voice of the common people' and the well-received advice she bestows on them emphasize the honor, respect, and dignity Harper locates in these older, racially marked types of black women for the future of the race.

In her introduction to *Iola Leroy*, Hazel Carby argues that “Each [of Harper’s characters] carries an aspect of the history of the black community in his or her individual story” that, taken together, make up the “historical force” of the race (xxiii). This collective sense of history is reflected in the novel’s intricate plot. *Iola Leroy* bridges ante- and postbellum time by following the protagonist, Iola, and interweaving her romantic-domestic story of becoming a woman and falling in love with more political side-plots, which involve slave resistance, the fight against black disenfranchisement, the quest for lost family members, and the fraught, often economically driven relationship between former masters and their emancipated slaves. Beginning on the eve of the Civil War, with many flashbacks to the days of slavery and the unfolding of African American life during the Reconstruction era, Harper’s novel presents a panorama of nineteenth-century intra- and interracial relations. Thematically, the novel is infused with and driven by the major social movements of the time – women’s rights, temperance, racial uplift, education reform, and the quest for black self-determination and social equality. Because of its multi-faceted approach in style, including language patterns (black dialect next to Standard English) and literary form (political slave narrative and domestic realism), diverse characters, and multiple themes, *Iola Leroy* had the potential to appeal to black and white readers alike, “reach[ing] multiple audiences simultaneously” (Foreman 74).<sup>120</sup>

Harper published her novel toward the end of her career, after literary successes with poetry, the short story, and serialized novels, as well as a long life as teacher, temperance woman (she was actively involved in the Woman’s Christian Temperance Union), and anti-slavery lecturer. William Still, black abolitionist, “father” of the

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<sup>120</sup> Foreman specifically references the theme of “white slavery,” a hot-button topic concerning the seduction of white, naive women into forced prostitution, over which white audiences could connect with the sexual exploitation of enslaved women like Iola (74-6, 81-6).

Underground Railroad, and a friend of Harper's who wrote the introduction to the novel, predicted that her earlier immensely popular books, like *Poems on Miscellaneous Subjects* (1854), *Moses: A Story of the Nile* (1869), and *Sketches of Southern Life* (1872) would "be by far eclipsed" by *Iola Leroy*. "This last effort," Still argued, "[...] will, in all probability, be the crowning effort of her long and valuable services in the cause of humanity" (3). Rather than eclipsing her previous works, *Iola Leroy*'s strength and appeal lies in the fact that it is a culmination of the literary styles, voices, and characters she had brought to life in the past, especially her dialect pieces and her political speeches (Boyd 170-1). Aunt Linda, with her outspokenness, common-sense attitude, and dialect-infused voice, for example, strongly resembles Aunt Chloe from *Sketches of Southern Life* (Boyd 152-4). As Johnson points out, Aunt Chloe herself was a fictional potpourri of the many black women who impressed Harper with their ingenuity, "illustrat[ing] a continuum of marginal social actors in the making of the South" (34). Likewise, many of the characters' names are distinct references to living nineteenth-century people active in the political and social scene of the day. The most obvious example is, of course, the protagonist's name, Iola, which references the pen name of the beloved and courageous Ida B. Wells. As P. Gabrielle Foreman argues, these "homonymic" connections were not lost on an educated black readership that prided itself in archiving and celebrating its heroes (76). Thus, naming in *Iola Leroy* always has a dual (or triple) function that enriches each character but also alludes to the interrelations that are instrumental in conveying a collectively black American perspective and that marks the interconnectivity between fictional characters and real members of the Woman's Era social circle.<sup>121</sup>

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<sup>121</sup> See Foreman (93) and Carby, who point out that the literary activists of the 1890s, despite their individually differing approaches and ideologies, need to be understood as a collaborative force. "What

Iola's storyline is a reworking of the long-established tragic mulatto trope. With *Iola Leroy*, Harper joins Howells's and Chesnut's efforts in *An Imperative Duty* and *The House Behind the Cedars* to unravel the hyperbolic tragic element from this literary figure through a more realistic and multi-dimensional unfolding of character. Yet Harper's realism differs from the conception(s) of these male writers, not only because she adheres stylistically to a mix of sentimentalism and realism (and does so without the self-conscious element at work in Chesnut), but especially in her treatment of the mixed-race heroine's romantic involvement with white characters.<sup>122</sup> In the conclusion to *Minnie's Sacrifice* (1869), an earlier story that shares many similarities with *Iola Leroy*, Harper actively set herself apart from those writers who "have been weaving their stories about white men marrying beautiful quadroon girls, who, in doing so, are lost to us socially" (91, also qtd. in Foreman 80). Like Howells's *Rhoda*, Iola grows up wealthy and believing herself to be white. Unaware that her mother, Marie, is partly black – in the register of the time, she is categorized by her brother-in-law as a "quadroon girl" (70) – Iola's identity crisis is set in motion by her father Eugene's sudden death, spiraling her mother and herself into a fate of enslavement that is orchestrated by Eugene's brother, Lorraine. These events take place at the onset of the Civil War, and after emancipation and the sexual ordeals of her enslavement the story hints at, Iola's foremost task is to reunite with her family. While Iola is also entangled in romantic courtships, first with the

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each of them wrote and lectured about influences and was influenced in turn by a wider constituency" (*Reconstructing Womanhood* 115).

<sup>122</sup> Steven Belluscio points out that despite *Iola Leroy's* allegiance to romance and sentimentalism, these qualities make the novel "paradoxically more realistic" than Howells's *An Imperative Duty* (56). He is not alone in pointing out that Harper's expansive and diverse view of African American culture makes it more realistic than the novel's usual characterization as romantic and sentimental. See for example Boyd (177) and also Foreman (74). See also Tate's general argument that black women writer's use of sentimentalism did not mean that their writing lacked political intent and realistic representation (19-20). Rosenthal makes a similar argument, specifically comparing Howells to Harper (137).

white Doctor Gresham, then later with her future husband Doctor Frank Latimer, marriage, unlike in Howells's and Chesnutt's stories, is never the overriding factor in Iola's search for identity. Early on, Iola is set in her decision to align herself openly with African Americans despite her racially indeterminate beauty and her ability to pass. In fact, rejecting the proposal of Doctor Gresham twice throughout the novel because it is contingent on her passing distinguishes *Iola Leroy* from *An Imperative Duty* and *The House Behind the Cedars*. Unlike these narratives, Harper's tale is structured by uplift ideology and characters that proudly and without regret choose a black identity, a decision that is rewarded with an equal partnership and a happy ending.

Harper's conceptualization of racially indeterminate African American womanhood during the second half of the nineteenth century thus differs decidedly from that of Howells and Chesnutt. As much as Iola's story is interwoven with other plotlines throughout the narrative, so is her character make-up contingent on other female figures in the novel. Although Harper's title suggests that this narrative is first and foremost about Iola, the protagonist is not an isolated figure like Rhoda and Rena who have few or no other African American female peers. Instead, Iola's status as heroine is supported by and enhanced through many different representations of African American womanhood whom Harper positions alongside temporal metaphors. She highlights in specific four female characters to illustrate the past, present, and future of African American womanhood: Aunt Linda, Iola's mother Marie, Iola herself, and her friend and eventual sister-in-law, Lucille Delany. These characters can be grouped in two different sets, once over their skin color, and once over their generational status.

Both Aunt Linda and Marie represent an older, antebellum cohort of African American women. Even though Aunt Linda seems to be more of a peer to Iola's grandmother, Linda and Marie have come of age and lived the majority of their adult lives as slaves; their experiences are thus very different from the younger Iola and Lucille, who bloom into womanhood during the Reconstruction era and for whom the possibility of racial uplift and promise of social equality are real. Yet Lucille and Linda share the often stigmatized dark skin, rendering them without question as "fully" and unmixed African Americans, whereas Marie and Iola are light-skinned enough to pass into the socio-economic security of whiteness if they so desire. Such fluid, rather than fixed, allegiances with mixed-race and black identity that cross back and forth between generations help to make more complex the novel's seemingly narrow invocation of the racially indeterminate heroine Iola as the "ideal" African American woman. Instead, the grouping and interaction between these four women invites readers to understand the educated, mixed-race woman of the present as a transitory placeholder, a woman-in-progress, for the eventual African American woman to come. A woman like Lucille, whose combination of dark skin and educated activism signifies both the authenticity of folksy slaves and points to a future that is less dependent on white values than that of the beautiful mixed-race woman.

Critics often compare Harper's *Iola Leroy* to Howells's *An Imperative Duty*. This comparison makes sense since both novelists write against the tragic mulatta stereotype, present racially indeterminate heroines who have been raised as white, and offer alternative endings to the otherwise deadly passing story. Especially the nearness in publication – Howells published his novel in serialized form in 1891, Harper's came out

in 1892 – invites such an association, even if, as Rosenthal asserts, no evidence exists that Harper and Howells knew each other personally or acknowledged each other’s work publically (136). Nonetheless, the two proposal scenes in Harper’s novel in which white Doctor Gresham asks Iola to marry him, fully aware of her mixed-race status, evoke the discussion between Doctor Olney and Rhoda in *An Imperative Duty*, although with an important twist. Like Olney, Gresham is a liberal Northerner who displays open-mindedness about the equality of the races. Harper’s doctor even conveys the same attitude of desiring to consume the qualities of blackness into the body of whiteness, almost verbatim echoing Olney in a discussion about social equality. Here, Gresham confesses, “I sometimes think that the final solution of this question will be *the absorption of the negro into our race*” (228, my emphasis). Also like Olney, Gresham becomes interested in Iola because of her striking beauty and elegance, markers he mistakes for the quintessence of white southern femininity. When he learns that Iola is partly black, he comes, after careful deliberation, to the conclusion that her mixed-race identity elevates her instead of making her repulsive to him. The racialized sorrow that marks her face becomes an asset, so that Iola becomes “his ideal of the woman whom he was willing to marry” (59).

The similarities do not stop here. Gresham also suggests the idea of passing to Iola, wishing to hide her black identity from everybody but his own desire. While he initially accepts Iola’s decision to do uplift work and prioritize a reunion with her family, he eventually becomes as territorial as Olney does when Rhoda suggests to go down South and help “her people.” During the second proposal scene, which takes place several years after the first and towards the end of the novel, Gresham objects to Iola’s

repeated argument that she will not “forsake” her people by marrying him. “If you love your race, as you call it” Gresham protests, “work for it, live for it, suffer for it, and, if need be, die for it; but don’t marry for it. Your education has unfitted you for social life among them” (235). Unlike the passive Rhoda, of course, Harper’s heroine is more steadfast and outspoken. In both scenes, Iola is firm, even though tempted by his offer, in her resolve to *choose* blackness.<sup>123</sup> The decisive factor remains her allegiance to her family, especially her mother and her visually and linguistically black-inscribed grandmother, whose association would make any attempt at passing into white society suspect at best (235). Her dying sister Gracie’s plea to “stand by mamma,” becomes a mantra throughout the novel, denoting the younger generation’s reverence for their parent generation, especially since the maternal African American body was marked by the antebellum slave law that any child would follow the mother’s legal racial status (108, see also Foreman 89). Rosenthal, who describes the rapport between Howells’s and Harper’s creative processing of the same ethical dilemma as a “literary call and response” (136), certainly hits the nail with this phrase in order to describe the important differences in their mixed-race heroines’ reaction to the offer of white marriage. In Harper’s case, the result is a powerful affirmation of black female agency within a larger context of maternal loyalty and racial uplift.

Against the background of battling over the textual representation of the mixed-race heroine and the ethical implications of passing, it makes sense that the scenes between Iola and Doctor Gresham comprise some of the key episodes of the narrative. Gresham’s opinion that Iola embodies the ideal woman functions as a powerful sentiment

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<sup>123</sup> Julie Neraud points out that Iola’s socialization as white means that she needs to actively “turn to” or pass into blackness rather than simply return to it (836).

that adds to the novel's overall impression that the protagonist Iola is a role model for the new African American woman. It is inviting to read these scenes as mouthpieces of the novel's conception of ideal black womanhood, especially since Iola's racially indeterminate beauty indexes so many of the Woman's Era's female leaders and role models who themselves were light enough and raised genteel enough to pass as white. But Gresham's invocation of Iola's feminine perfection remains only an outsider perspective, and one that reflects a historically contentious white masculine desire for the mixed-race woman. Thus, it is important to remember that Iola herself corrects this white-inflected beauty ideal. For her, Lucille Delaney, her brother's girlfriend who is dark-skinned and of "unmixed blood," embodies the ideal woman (199). Iola's comment places the representation of African American womanhood firmly out of the hands of (white) men and into a self-directed path that allows black women to shape their own future images. Lucille, Iola insists, is "*my* ideal woman" (242, emphasis mine).

Iola's admiration for the dark-skinned, "pure" Lucille is a key moment of destabilizing the color hierarchy within a black community that often confirmed the association between light skin and racial leadership. This internal critique that questions the image of the mixed-race woman as natural expression of a new elite black womanhood comes rather late in the novel, but Harper cautiously prepares for a re-evaluation of the intelligent, empathetic mixed-race heroine as the present and future ideal of the race. Harper's juxtaposition of Iola with her mother Marie, both examples of racially indeterminate, genteel women, is especially instructive in this regard. Marie represents an older generation of African American women, firmly inscribed in the southern slave order, and because of this, her and Eugene's courtship forcefully illustrates

the limits of mixed-race women's ability to self-define a black womanhood that is not dependent on and subsidiary to white womanhood.

Similar to Gresham's attraction to Iola, Eugene Leroy is smitten with his slave Marie because her light-skinned black femininity suggests a superior external "white" womanhood that is enriched by its mystic black qualities. While Gresham's erotic admiration for Iola's mixed-race identity remains restrained in order to denote a postbellum, liberal-minded sentiment of respect for African Americans, Eugene's desire for Marie expresses itself more freely and in more embellished, melodramatic images. Eugene, a wealthy Southerner with a sexually active and unrestrained past, comes to Marie after "the paths of vice" have acquainted him with "the death of true manliness and self-respect" (68). Almost sick enough to die and disillusioned by his lewd past, gentle Marie nurtures him back to life, impressing him with her unwavering piety in the face of abandonment, enslavement, and the loss of her mother and brother. Marie's distinct experience as slave, cloaked under the attractiveness of her light skin and her spiritual purity, thus becomes a desirable combination for Eugene, one that trumps his impressions of the shallow and irresponsible nature of white women, an indictment that includes southern genteel ones as well as European prostitutes (64, 68). In Eugene's white masculine eyes, Marie thus becomes a better, purer, and more desirable version of womanhood than the white ladies his social position prepared him to marry, so much that he "resolved, over the wreck and ruin of my past life, to build a better and brighter future" with Marie (68).

Eugene's act of substituting the mixed-race female object for the white original, deeming it a superior replica, is tied to religious imagery and Marie's enthralled response

to the Bible. To his brother's question what exactly made Marie different and better than the beautiful ladies of the upper echelon, Eugene expresses the difference as "something such as I have seen in old cathedrals, lighting up the beauty of a saintly face. A light which the poet tells was never seen on land or sea. [...] In her presence every base and unholy passion died, subdued by the supremacy of her virtue" (69-70). Reminiscent of the awe-infused envy Sherwood Bonner dramatizes in her short stories about the relationship between adolescent white southern girls and their black mammies, Eugene esteems Marie most when he sees her "rapt expression" upon reading the Bible, signifying a "loving response to sentiments to which I was a stranger" (71). While the corresponding situations in Bonner's stories lack the explicit element of sexual longing for the African American women at work in Eugene, their characters share a desire to extract the mystifying, spiritual black qualities and reroute them into the body of white femininity, ready to be owned or consumed by white women and men alike. As such, Harper's representation of Eugene's desire for Marie illustrates the objectification of the relatively helpless mixed-race girl – the curse of beauty and sexual subjection. At the same time, Harper shows how white desire for mixed-race African Americans only helps to stabilize white womanhood as normative against and through the passing woman's eroticized and idolized body. Eugene thinks Marie superior to his own female peers because his "quadroon girl" looks like a white woman while additionally embodying the values culturally connected to white womanhood; the very same values that he finds lacking in his actual upper-class female counterparts.

The import of detailing Eugene and Marie's relationship lies, like in Harper's illustration of Gresham and Iola, in supplementing the African American woman's

*response* to these white male invocations of her femininity. Marie, whose education in the North in preparation for becoming Eugene's wife was influenced by antislavery rhetoric, is described as constantly challenging her husband's laissez-faire attitude concerning slavery (Eugene, very much like Stowe's Augustine St. Claire in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, opposes slavery but decides that freeing his unprepared slaves would only do them a disservice). Still, Marie's agency remains restricted to patronizing conversations with her husband to whose guidance she eventually demurs. Unlike Iola's situation of enslavement, which involves sexual advances and likely rape at the hands of her changing masters, Marie's circumstances seem at first less disempowering. Whereas Iola reacts with resistance to the sexual propositions of her masters and is described as "a reg'lar spitfire" (38), Marie's response is less defiant, in large part because Eugene courts her, seems to genuinely love her, and provides her the choice of becoming his wife (though we can only speculate what he would do if Marie had not agreed to his proposal). But this choice, however marred in unequal power relations and even if based on sincere love, makes Marie complicit in the idolization and sexualization of the mixed-race beautiful woman. Aware of the tangled and complex history of light-skinned African American women's implication into sexual relations with white men, Harper highlights Marie's complicity over her acquiescent compliance to the decorum of white womanhood, acting, speaking, and behaving throughout the first half of the book like a compassionate, submissive white lady.

Marie's representation as beautiful mixed-race woman is thus a very different one from Iola's biracial status. Even though Iola, the "spitfire," seems by nature more outspoken than her mother, Harper does not free her from complicity either. After all,

Iola defended slavery against her northern school friends when she believed herself to be white –internalized racist assumptions that Iola needs to come to terms with when she learns of her mother’s heritage (97-8, 106). But unlike Marie’s case, Iola’s re-racing provides an opportunity for personal growth; a process that makes her exclaim that she is “a wonder to herself” and enables her to consciously choose, “after a fiery ordeal,” a black identity (114). Marie, on the other hand, partly because of her age and her association with antebellum slavery, remains a passive and compliant character before and after emancipation. Unlike her daughter and son, whose identities only fully emerge through their public choice of aligning themselves with the black race, Marie’s age, her generational affiliation with a pre-Civil War mentality, and her own complicity in concealing her children’s African American heritage, bar her from such self-celebratory and self-affirming choice.

Instead, the whitened Marie needs to be “blackened” through the authority of other African American characters once she re-enters the scene after her brother-in-law has enslaved her and, as the narrator invites us to conjecture, taken her as his mistress (192). While Harper immediately has Marie declare her support in black solidarity, it is her children’s changed point of view regarding their mother’s race that sets into motion’s Marie’s “blackening.” Harry, for example, explains to his Uncle that his initial “shrinking” from identifying as black was overcome because of the “love for my mother” (203). Her children’s political activism and racial choices propel Marie to shift from the voice of a fully whitened beautiful mixed-race woman to the rhetoric of a black “us.” This is illustrated when Marie supports Harry’s preference for the dark-skinned Lucille, proclaiming, “Young women like you always fill my heart with hope for the future of *our*

race. In you I see reflected some of the blessed possibilities which lie within *us*” (200, emphasizes mine). While Marie and Iola are both racially indeterminate and thus fall into the stereotyped category of the beautiful mulatta, Harper uses the generation gap between mother and daughter to show an evolving spectrum of mixed-race womanhood with gradations of complicity in the upholding of white beauty ideals. Iola may emerge on the far end of this spectrum as the educated, outspoken, light-skinned female race leader of the present, whereas Marie’s passivity and internalized whiteness place her on the opposite end fully inscribed in the loaded history of the antebellum mixed-race woman.

It would be wrong to conclude that because of the more critical view of Marie’s complicity Harper evaluates mother and daughter into ‘worse’ versus ‘better’ mixed-race heroines. The narrative is too complex, self-reflective, and diverse to allow such a clear-cut and static judgment of character. Harper’s characters, after all, are on journeys towards a distinct black identity and they all personally grow along the way. Especially each individual’s awareness of their race’s past and their cognizance regarding the possibilities of the future preclude a definite condemnation of an entire social subset. Hence Marie is allowed to adopt a more inclusive “us” rhetoric, and Iola’s paper on the “Education of Mothers” held at the *conversazione*, an intellectual evening with formal discussion and exchange on “subjects of vital interest to [blacks’] welfare” (243), further confirms the present generation’s interest in and respect for their predecessors, especially those biracial as well as unmixed women who were barred to different degrees from the tools of black self-realization (253).<sup>124</sup>

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<sup>124</sup> Marie joins in Iola’s discussion of the future of the race – a future that is contingent on the sacrifices of the past – confirming that “if [...] pain and suffering are factors in human development, surely we have not been counted too worthless to suffer” (256).

Despite Harper's inclusive message that particularly shows the new generation's respect for the difficult choices of antebellum African American mothers, the complex entanglement of beautiful mixed-race women in the sexual politics of white masculinity makes it more challenging to fully endorse them as role models for a proud black future. Harper's novel was also not the only textual adaptation that included an intricate critique of the mixed-race heroine's complicity, signaling the thematic need to gauge the tragic mulatta type in black women's uplift fiction of the 1890s. Victoria Earle Matthews's short story, "Eugenie's Mistake," published in the *A.M.E. Church Review* in 1891, likewise broaches the particular tension between involuntary passing mixed-race women like Iola and their light-skinned older counterparts who orchestrate or are at least knowingly implicated in depriving their children of a black heritage. Matthews's story adheres more fully to the genre of romance than Harper's mix of realism and sentimentalism, and thus "Eugenie's Mistake" represents its characters in the register of melodrama and paints their motives and emotional range in more one-dimensional terms.

"Eugenie's Mistake" features another involuntarily passing young, wealthy southern woman. Adele, born in the West Indies, motherless, and educated in France while her father settled in Louisiana, returns to her father's estate upon his death. Shortly thereafter the rich heiress meets and falls in love with Royal Clifford, who is devoted to her but carries a dark secret of his own: his mother, similar to Adele's who is described as a mulatta slave whom Adele's father married in the West Indies, is an octoroon woman who became the mistress of Royal's white father. In the fashion of true romance, the story features a villain, Eugenie, who feels scorned by Adele for taking away the man she secretly loved, and who exposes Adele's maternal heritage to her in the hopes of ridding

herself of a rival. Eugenie's plot seems to work out at first; Adele, horrified by involuntarily having betrayed her husband, whom she assumes to be white, returns without explanation to her old confidante in France, Madame Charmet. Despite his wife's inexplicable and inexcusable departure, Royal does not turn, as hoped, to Eugenie. Instead, he blames his own racial secret, which his overbearing mother swore to keep under wraps, for Adele's departure and remains feeling guilty and heartbroken. Eventually, Royal finds out Adele's real reason for leaving – her mother's racial legacy – hunts her up in France and confesses his own mixed-race identity. Both reconcile, vowing to turn their backs on the racist limitations of the US and instead live happily in France.

Although less developed than Iola and more demurely painted in the romantic tradition, Adele also copes reasonably well with the lie that has falsely determined her life and accepts her black heritage without too much drama. Hannah Wallinger sees this lack of lamentation about “belonging to the black race” as an intervention into the usual melodramatic stereotype of the tragic mulatta, pointing out that Adele's escape to France is not about the “social consequences for herself,” but rather concern for her husband's reputation (195). Through the twist ending, revealing both lovers to be of color and remaining happily married, Adele and Royal confirm the desire for African American partners so vital to the racial uplift ideology of the late nineteenth century. Upon learning that Adele carries black blood in her veins, Royal ecstatically exclaims, “if this be true, I can begin to live over again” (265). Far from being disappointed that the other partner's assumed whiteness was a lie, both Adele and Royal seem to cherish each other even more because of their underlying blackness. Likewise, the strong critique of the racist system

of the United States that breeds stories of cloaked and mistaken identity like theirs – “What a country America is” both wonder (268) – and their resolve to remain in France point to the determination of postbellum mixed-race individuals to reject a binary racial identification system. Their firmness in “collecting a few old relics” like Adele’s Mammy with them to France further points to their embrace of a dual heritage in which familial association with visually dark African Americans does not have to signify shame or become a social death sentence.

Royal’s mother, only referred to in the text as “Madame Clifford of Clifford Hall” to indicate her status as mistress whose lover “gave her everything but his name” (268), remains less positively characterized than Adele and Royal. The narrator introduces the woman we later find out to be “an octoroon” as a “proud, aristocratic mother,” who is “[h]aughty and cold” and whose only redeeming quality seems to be her utter devotion to her son, whom she deems “a superior being” (260-1). From this initial description, the rifts between mother and son appear to stem from an arrogant mother who considers most women unworthy of her son’s assets, confirmed by Royal’s vague accusation that his mother may have been responsible for his wife’s sudden departure (263). Of course, the tension between mother and son turns out to emanate from a different source: Royal’s mother insisted that he keep his biracial identity hidden so as to go through life with the privileges of a white man, including a desirable marriage to a genteel southern woman.

It is this motherly request, appearing like coercion to the audience and the conflicted Royal himself, that make this older mixed-race woman seem to be a selfish and negative character, one whose complicity in upholding the ideals of whiteness is a slap in the face of racial uplift ideology. Royal’s comments about his by then deceased

mother that he is “a mere waxen figure, shaped by an overambitious but fond mother’s desires” confirm his own conflicted feelings (265). This unfavorable evaluation of his mother’s motives verifies how he experienced her request as severely limiting his freedom of self. These characterizations invite readers to conclude that mixed-race women like Royal’s mother are counter-productive to the race pride of a generation of Adeles, Royals, and Iolas. As an exaggerated and less flattering version of Marie, the early death of Royal’s mother seems to suggest that the white complicity of these older types of beautiful mixed-race women presents a problem for the message of race pride in black women’s uplift fiction. This problem needs to be either resolved through the death of antebellum mulatta types or through a concerted effort in “blackening” them by other trusted members of the race.

Matthews’s romantic style in “Eugenie’s Mistake” pigeonholes her characters with over-the-top traits. As a result, they can appear static and limited. Nonetheless, the negative image of Royal’s mother as an example of misdirected complicity in the perpetuation of white ideals is not the whole side of her story. True to Matthews’s program in her essay “The Value of Race Literature,” the resurrection of the past and the truthful representations of an older generation of African Americans function as pillars for the future building of race consciousness. Royal’s mother points to the complex black past. While her actions seem morally wrong, Matthews ensures that her readers can empathize at least in part with her motives. In explanation to Adele, Royal confesses, “*my mother was an octoroon*, but, being ambitious for my future, prayed me tread life under a mask, for her sake” (268). Through the perspective of Royal, his mother’s

entanglement in the lure of whiteness becomes a forgivable trait because her actions bespeak the desire and sacrifices of a mother for a better future for her children.

In hindsight, the aforementioned rift between mother and son acquires a deeper meaning. Provoked by Adele's absence, Royal seems to accuse his mother of meddling. Knowing from the reader's perspective that Royal believed Adele left because someone conveyed the secret of his biracial identity to her, Royal's accusations of his mother ("Mother, what have you done?" [...] What more would you? any more command, any injunctions?") turn into charges that a jealous mother has given away his black heritage so as to keep him for herself (263). Royal's allegations are soon softened, however, when he notices his mother's genuine shock at this accusation and her guilt at seeing her son come undone mentally. Their exchange remains ambiguous, perhaps intentionally so, but his mother's stammering plea for Royal to forgive her (maybe for her demand to withhold his black heritage? Maybe for her overbearing mothering?) pave the way for their reconciliation. Compelled by the "anguish in her broken voice," Royal excuses himself, "I was mad to blame you. I see no fault in you save your too great love for your child" (ibid.).

Matthews gives the otherwise harsh image of Royal's mother a softer hue by appealing to her readers' reverence for maternal sacrifice. However misdirected, the plight of the mistress of Clifford Hall is the plight of a mother, and the specter of white lies that unites mother and son in sorrow after Adele fled leaves the "once stately dame, broken-hearted and comfortless," eventually leading to her death. This mixed-race character has to die not because she suddenly finds out that she belongs to the black race

but because her complicity in negating her and her son's African American identity may have led to his mental and emotional ruin.

The death of Royal's mother is steeped in the sentimental voice of melodrama. It is a sacrificial death that allows Matthews to propel Royal and Adele into a future where feelings of shame for being African American are resisted. Instead, this heritage becomes a proud asset. Not surprisingly, Harper also registers Marie predominantly through the conventions of sentimentalism. As a beautiful mixed-race woman during the antebellum South, gentle and demure Marie must endure hardship (re-enslavement and later consciously giving up her life of white privilege) in order to transition from the tragedy of the mulatta to the fulfillment of black self-identification. The balance between sentimental elements and the register of realism that marks the work of many of these black women writers supports their use of the mixed-race heroine as a transitional figure. Especially the older maternal models of beautiful mulattas are sacrificial characters that need to be either given up in death or consciously re-raced in order to move on to the realism of the present and the hope for the future.

Because of the high presence of light-skinned and racially indeterminate characters in black female uplift fiction, their work is routinely interpreted as exhibiting a high color-consciousness in favor of confirming the value of whiteness. Critics charge these writers of simply "copying" a Victorian template of genteel womanhood onto the body of black women than resisting it. Yet a closer look at Harper's *Iola Leroy* and Matthews's short stories suggests that their authors adopt a Victorian template only to "blacken" it and thus subtly yet significantly change its import. This conflict plays out over the intricate and complex critique of the tragic mulatta image, an identity that

instead of being conceived as static and stereotyped is imagined along a spectrum as contingent, plural versions of mixed-race womanhood who collectively signify the transition away from the tragic mulatta ideal towards a future black womanhood. This spectrum is circumscribed on both ends by representations of African American womanhood that lean towards visually dark skin and relative racial purity. Harper's Aunt Linda and Matthews's Aunt Lindy signify one end of this spectrum, whereas Harper's Lucille Delaney, the novel's representative of the ideal future black woman, denotes the other end. The older, folksy black women like Linda and Lindy seem to be less complicated to uphold as authentic role models of a past black core than their white-skinned counterparts. Whereas the educated mixed-race heroine bears the cross of her own entanglement in the politics of whiteness, the dialect-speaking, straightforward, and simple dark-skinned ex-slave woman is in this regard easier to romanticize for her originality, and her unmixed darkness as a visual sign of black pride makes it easier to be lifted into the rhetoric of late nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century African American identity.

The light-skinned protagonist Iola is thus embraced by two darker-skinned women that denote the past real and the future ideal: the authentic folk wisdom of ex-slave Aunt Linda and the exemplary intellectualism of the racially unmixed Lucille Delany. Iola's draw towards Aunt Linda, the "spirit of restfulness" and the "motherly" feelings she experiences in the older woman's way, is another variation on the narrative's theme of locating motherhood as a site of respect and elevating it into a symbol for the black past and future alike (169). Like Gracie's request to "stand by mama," Iola's comfort in Aunt Linda's company signals her respect for an older, working-class

generation of African Americans, but it also refers to another mother figure frequently evoked in stories about slavery, the black mammy. Subsequently, Aunt Linda's maternal kindness recalls for Iola "the bright, sunshiny days when she used to nestle in Mam Liza's arms, in her own happy home" (ibid.). Of course, Iola's transference of her feelings for her own mammy, when she still believed herself to be white, to Aunt Linda is loaded with unspoken power relations between white girls and their black caretakers (relations that we have already seen at work in Bonner's stories) and sentiments that only seem to confirm a hierarchy between the light-skinned, educated Iola and the folk (Carby, *Reconstructing Womanhood* 78). But these continual existing social differences between Iola and women like Aunt Linda and Mam Liza, even after Iola changed racial affiliation from white to black, make the narrative's point even more powerful. In accordance with Matthews's call to cherish the past in order to fully understand the present and build the future of African Americans, Iola stands by *all* her African American mothers and motherly substitutes she encounters throughout her life, consciously remembering and aligning herself with each of them.

Lucille Delany, the ideal future woman in *Iola Leroy*, draws her esteem likewise from her investment in motherhood. A college graduate, smart and invested in the race politics of the day, Lucille conceives of the importance of women in educating the race and opens "a school to train future wives and mothers" (199). Lucille's type of activism politicizes motherhood because she understands its pivotal role in the advancement of the race; as such, Lucille prefigures Fannie Barrier Williams's 1904 call for black women to "become the civic mothers of the race" ("The Club Movement Among the Colored Women" 101). By becoming a pioneer in her field and opening such an institution,

Lucille herself is a ‘civic mother.’ More importantly, her conception that black mothers constitute the moral backbone of the race position her close to the coveted value of realism and authenticity that female race leaders like Matthews saw ensconced in maternal literary figures such as Aunt Lindy or Harper’s Aunt Linda.

The dark skin and unmixed racial appearance of Lucille provides a strong visual connection to Aunt Linda. Coupled with her educational background and engaged political activism, Lucille’s blackness symbolizes the ideal of the future without losing the reference to the race’s beginnings. When Harper celebrated womanhood in her 1893 speech at the World’s Congress of Representative Women, she loftily proclaimed that “the highest ideal [is] always the true real” (43). Titled “Woman’s Political Future,” one wonders if Harper conjured up in her mind the image of the fictional Lucille Delany when she spoke these words. As *Iola Leroy* makes clear, the merging of past and future qualities of black womanhood finds expression over Lucille’s “combination of earnestness and youthfulness.” Her intelligence and “suavity” make her an ideal woman because this perfection is enclosed by her dark complexion, anchoring the ideal and the real – the material suffering and quaint wisdom of an older, visually marked generation of African American women – successfully in the bodies of postbellum black women (199).<sup>125</sup> The praise Iola and Harry, the narrative’s white-looking stand-ins for the

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<sup>125</sup> On a more subtle level, Iola herself embodies the kind of ideal-real interplay that manifests itself over light versus dark skin. After all, Iola shares her name with the pen name of Ida B. Wells. Foreman notes that Wells’s journalistic persona as “Iola” became so entrenched with her private identity, that “she was known simply as ‘Iola,’ and, [...], she even signed her correspondence with her adopted name” (92). Primary documents of the day characterize the brazen Wells as beautiful and smart (Giddings 115). Thomas T. Fortune, editor of the *New York Age*, for example, describes her in the Victorian vocabulary of the day as “girlish looking in physique with sharp regular features, penetrating eyes, firm set thin lips, and a sweet voice” (qtd. in Giddings 24), but in comparison to Matthews, Mary Church Terrell, or Alice Dunbar-Nelson, Wells was not light enough to pass as white (White 93). Thus, Harper’s choice to name her white-looking mixed-race heroine Iola plays with her late nineteenth-century audience’s associations who would undoubtedly relate the fictional Iola to her darker-hued real-life counterpart, “Iola” Ida B. Wells.

present intelligentsia of the race, bestow on Lucille, calling her “one of the grandest women in America,” and “one of the most remarkable women, [...] She is [...] lovely; [...] wise; [...] [and] excellent” respectively, is an admiration that, although it points to the future, is ultimately linked to the past and the reverence for its folksy, dark-skinned women (244, 198).

When Iola, during her conversation with Doctor Gresham, inserts her own point of view in the white man’s eroticization of the light-skinned mixed-race heroine as the ideal woman, she resists her own objectification. But she also actively changes the ever-complex dynamics between white and black womanhood when she asserts Lucille to be her ideal woman. While most of the writers I analyzed in the previous chapters used the concept of black womanhood to enrich but ultimately stabilize white femininity as real, the fictions by female writers of the Woman’s Era answer these appropriations in new ways. They create models of womanhood that both depend on and reject white womanhood while simultaneously celebrating some and critiquing other forms of black womanhood in order to accommodate the wide-ranging array of skin tones that make up the race at the turn-of-the-century. The quote from Louisa May Alcott’s *Work* that began my dissertation needs to be re-evaluated in the face of black women writer’s intervention into cross- and intra-racial conventions of sentimentalism and realism. In Alcott’s *Work*, Christie’s husband David tells her upon his deathbed, “I thought of *you* in her place,” denoting the ideological closeness of white women like Christie (“*you*”) and African American women (“*her*”). My selected postbellum writers reworked this closeness by destabilizing the superiority of white womanhood without fully undermining it. The ideologically loaded presence of beautiful mixed-race heroines in the uplift fiction by

African American women like Harper and Matthews seems to throw David's comment back into the face of its own referential whiteness. The Iolas of the 1890s seem to rather say, "I thought of *her* [the dark-skinned woman] in our place," gesturing towards their own complicity in white beauty ideals and towards the sentiment that "black is beautiful."

## Conclusion

My dissertation shows the longevity and effectiveness of a postbellum sentimental mode that thrived alongside and within realist forms of expression. My analyses also help trace the symbolic importance of African American womanhood for a broader redefinition of American womanhood in general. Instead of continuing to circulate and confirm the centrality of white, upper-class femininity through their writing, the diverse set of authors I explore insist on the authentic value of black womanhood for encapsulating American core values. We perhaps see this most forcefully in the debates around the public image of the black woman at work in the African American female activists of the 1890s because they combine the plain, working-class images of the older, dark-skinned slave of the past with the educated, lady-like deportment of the future black woman in order to elevate their race's battered image against white-centered, racist slander. But even white writers like Alcott or Bonner believe that the material hardship embodied in the legacy of slavery, together with an intangible quality of almost spiritual mysticism, makes African American womanhood a truer, more authentic model for the future American woman.

In this way, the figure of the African American woman serves to show that within the history of race representation in nineteenth-century American literature, realism and sentimentalism intersect in intricate ways over the bodies of black women. Both genres are invested in achieving a true, genuine representation of emotions and character through a combination of showing an ideal that is infused by the real. The contentious history of race, embodied so poignantly in the African American woman, serves as the connecting factor that makes realism and sentimentalism clash at the same time that they

paradoxically become more like one another. When these genres battle over the symbolic value of black womanhood, the “realest real” remains steadfastly in the hands of those writers who can encapsulate the value of black virtue and womanly dignity through an acknowledgment of the powers of cross-racial emotion as well as realistic, down-to-earth characterization.

Alongside my interpretation of nineteenth-century genre history, my research has also made me acutely aware of the changes in the representational history of the African American woman throughout antebellum and postbellum America. The momentous legal victory of emancipation following the Civil War was a major factor influencing the different portrayals of African Americans in the political, social, and representational sphere by white and black writers alike. However, the dominant antebellum images of black women as mammies, Jezebels, or tragic mulattas took on a curious afterlife in fiction by postbellum writers who were abolitionist in sentiment and generally liberal in their views of racial integration. Most of the texts I analyze revolve around the relationship between white and black women and the shifting power relations between their cultural images alongside the spectrum of American womanhood. My dissertation charts a structure of tension and ambivalence in these literary attempts to describe a genuine relationship between women deemed normative and universal because of their white skin and those deemed outside of said boundaries on account of their enslaved status. Elizabeth Keckley’s unstable position as employee and confidante to Mrs. Lincoln, as well as Sherwood Bonner’s depiction of her mammy as awe-inspiring mentor yet also jolly servant, are examples of such ambivalent appropriations of blackness that

seem to proffer whiteness despite their message of black independence and black women as models of ethical behavior.

What my research has particularly alerted me to is that the legacy of the mammy, the nurse, or the fair-skinned mistress took on a new level of signification under the guise of elevating post-slavery African American women into desirable partners of interracial unions and inscribing them into seemingly more egalitarian kinship-based relationships in which sisterhood is extolled externally across races as well as internally within the black community. My interpretations of William Dean Howells's and Charles W. Chesnutt's passing novels are perhaps the most obvious example here since they blatantly take issue with the stereotype of the tragic mulatta in an effort to offer more realistic and dignified images of the mixed-race character by suggesting the possibility of respectable interracial marriages against the odds of rigid social conventions. Yet the inevitable sexualization of the authentic value and realness brought about by their white male characters' desire for the intangible, ephemeral blackness of their white-looking love objects compromises the intention of making social equality a reality. Instead, the male characters in these novels become the ultimate arbiters of racial identity and use black womanhood in the service of fortifying white masculinity.

Such new forms of appropriation, which only thinly veil a proprietary attitude toward the black female body, become particularly volatile when they reflect back onto the black community and black kinship systems themselves. Chesnutt's John Walden embodies these conflicts most dramatically. His contradictory wishes to solidify his white identity while at the same time infusing himself and his son with the nurturing provided by his light-skinned sister Rena, who signifies his black roots, point to the

precariousness of translating the dilemma of the mammy, mistress, and nurse into the realm of gendered power relations within the African American community. What happens when the cross-racial kinship system of slavery, which symbolically relates white slaveholders, their white daughters and sons to their unacknowledged mixed-race siblings, moves out of the securely circumscribed sphere of social segregation and into the immediate black family circle in which educated brothers like John Walden make use of their sisters as nurses or mistresses of the house? As Chesnut's novel indicates, passing men like John Walden may use their sisters, willingly or unwillingly, in strikingly similar ways to the former appropriations of African American women by white men and women alike.

Chesnut's *The House Behind the Cedars* is not the only example that problematizes the African American man's complicit role in continuing to exploit black women for their own social ascendance. While John Walden appropriates Rena for his own white identity at the expense of her life and happiness, a text like Pauline Hopkins's *Of One Blood* (1902) fictionalizes this dilemma in strikingly similar ways, despite the latter novel's celebration of blackness and diasporic identity. Light-skinned Reuel Briggs, the protagonist of Hopkins's convoluted, melodramatic novel, can only become the African prince, husband of Queen Candace, and thus future symbol of a Pan-African self that celebrates its blackness, through the sacrificial death of his former wife, the beautiful mixed-race Dianthe. Although Reuel is unaware of his incestuous kinship relation to Dianthe, who turns out to be his sister, Hopkins novel shares with Chesnut's the fatal appropriation of African American women by their brothers in order to boost

their own social standing, no matter if these kinship-based exploitations ultimately serve in the name of solidifying whiteness or blackness.

By charting the representational history of the African American woman throughout the nineteenth century, especially the transition from pre-Civil War usage of black womanhood to that of the later decades, we are better able to understand how or why black womanhood retained such an imaginative stronghold among realist and post-sentimentalist writers of the latter half of the century. The value of authenticity, truth, and realism embodied in the African American woman that comes to the fore in my selected texts helps explain the complex re-inventions of the mammy and tragic mulatta into new forms of appropriation that celebrate while at the same time continue to exploit black womanhood in the service of white women and black and white men alike. The internal and external debates surrounding the public image of the African American woman incited by the black female writer-activists of the 1890s show most clearly sensitivity to these compounded issues facing the educated African American woman of the future. The tensions between light-skinned and dark-skinned African American women that inform their fictions tackles most comprehensively the legacies of sentimentalism and realism in terms of racial representation and redirect these discussions back into the hands and agency of black women themselves. As Frances E.W. Harper and Victoria Earle Matthews note, the 'ideal real' can only be accessed by acknowledging the sentimental past and its dark-skinned foremothers. Without a combination of the sentimental force of emotion that transcends generational or cross-racial boundaries, the future American women can only fall short of a dignified, historically cognizant, and realistic representation of herself.

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