

A NOVEL WAY TO LEARN: BLACK EDUCATIONAL FICTION
FROM RECONSTRUCTION TO THE HARLEM RENAISSANCE

BY

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DISSERTATION

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Abstract

A Novel Way to Learn examines the development of black fiction in tandem with black educational advancement from Reconstruction to the Harlem Renaissance. By reading education in the novels of Frances Ellen Watkins Harper, Sutton Griggs, W.E.B. Du Bois, and Jessie Redmon Fauset, I reveal an underexplored genealogy of black educational thought from initial calls for educational access to more independent, ideological, and pragmatic modes embodied in the texts of black fiction writers. Ultimately, I argue that black educational fiction constitutes a key strand of African American writing before the Harlem Renaissance.

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Introduction

De greatest t'ing in de wul is edification. Ef our race ken git dat we ken git ebery t'ing else. Dat is de key. Git de key an' yer ken go in de house to go where you please. As fur his beatin' de brat, yer musn't kick agin dat. He'll beat de brat to make him larn, and won't dat be a blessed t'ing? See dis scar on side my head? Old marse Sampson knocked me down wid a single-tree tryin' to make me stop larning, and God is so fixed it dat white folks is knocking es down ef we don't larn. Ef yer take Belton out of school yer'll be fighting 'genst de providence of God.

--Sutton Griggs, *Imperium in Imperio* (23)

At the beginning of his 1899 novel *Imperium in Imperio*, Sutton Griggs uses the words of a country preacher to express the sentiment of the “old Negro,” an imaginary voice of the formerly enslaved black American. From this turn-of-the-century perspective, the preacher remains unprepared for post-emancipation era politics. The parson’s speech to a mother concerned about her son’s education is rendered in dialect, which emphasizes the preacher as an ostensibly provincial figure and contrasts to the protagonists of Griggs’s novel who speak in standard English. The preacher further suggests the violence of the white schoolteacher would be a “blessed” beating, though the rest of the novel, and indeed all the fictions in this study, argue against such a meek, passive perspective. Still, the parson also reaffirms the importance of education as the means to achieving “ebery t’ing else”: the very thing that was punishable by physical violence under slavery is now available, and Griggs evokes the memory of enslavement to underscore the importance of learning. Griggs and other postbellum black writers of educational fiction build their narratives on and against this perspective.

The title of my project, *A Novel Way to Learn*, draws together black fiction and education, each of which faces a novel circumstance when the end of Civil War abolished

slavery in the United States. While black writers had written novels prior to emancipation and the genre of slave narrative lingered after it, a specific type of black literature emerged during Reconstruction: the black educational fiction. Similarly, the Civil War ended the various laws that forbade teaching African Americans to read and write, although these prohibitions were broken by some enslaved blacks as well as some white Southerners.

A Novel Way to Learn traces the development of black educational fiction from Reconstruction to the Harlem Renaissance. This underexplored strand of African American writing in the United States reveals an alternative genealogy of black educational thought from initial calls for educational access to more independent, ideological, and pragmatic modes embodied in the texts of black fiction writers.

Black Educational Fiction

My project argues that Frances Ellen Watkins Harper, Sutton E. Griggs, W.E.B. Du Bois, and Jessie Redmon Fauset capture key moments of black educational thought in the United States in their fiction from Reconstruction to the Harlem Renaissance. To trace the trajectory of black educational fiction from the Reconstruction-era discourses to the 1930s, I engage two eras of writing: the historical period during which these fictional texts were produced, and the last quarter-century of renewed interest and critical attention to late nineteenth-century black writing.

The Reconstruction and turn-of-the-century literature by Harper and Griggs are marked by a more pronounced interest in access to institutional education and its nature and outcomes in the service of black empowerment. For instance, Harper wrote *Minnie's Sacrifice* (1869) in the immediate aftermath of the Civil War, and the novel focuses on black education as a matter of individual access to institutional learning. For Harper, educated African Americans could

unproblematically connect to the black community, providing guidance and leadership to the masses. In *Minnie's Sacrifice*, the major obstacle to black education is white resistance in both the North and the South. In the same way, Sutton Griggs's perspective in *Imperium in Imperio* (1899) assumes some individual access to education for black Americans and draws a distinction between black and white institutional alternatives. Griggs's novel reveals that the difference between these two alternatives is largely cultural—not curricular—and the curricular archive of the time supports this claim. *Imperium* argues that relative equality and access to education without corresponding social and citizenship rights will lead to a violent separation of the educated black citizens and the communities they lead from the nation that cannot contain them in a position of second-class citizens.

The final two authors in this study build upon the concerns articulated by Harper and Griggs by depicting black education as an independent, increasingly ideological endeavor separate from institutional engagement. W.E.B. Du Bois's earliest attempts at fiction span from the manuscript fragment "A Fellow of Harvard" (1892-93) to the short story "Of the Coming of John" (1903) to his first published novel *The Quest of the Silver Fleece* (1911). The track of narrative development in these texts show Du Bois plotting paths for intelligent black individuals—the Talented Tenth—to become educated leaders for the black masses. The false starts of unsuccessful black education depicted in his early, short texts lead to a pragmatic solution for the Talented Tenth in a rural Southern context in *Quest*. Envisioning a self-sustaining black community, *Quest* argues for black-controlled racial advancement in the early twentieth century when the pressure for industrial and manual training dominated discussion and policies of black education. Fauset's novels, written during the 1920s and 1930s, reflect the

rejection of educational institutions present in other Harlem Renaissance novels.¹ Her earlier works, *There Is Confusion* (1924) and *Plum Bun* (1928), reveal and resist the racist practices of white-controlled colleges and universities, while her final novel, *Comedy: American Style* (1933) offers a more ideological, pragmatic use of education to reorganize a self-sufficient black middle class.

These texts were produced during a period that already had witnessed at least two decades of black fictional and autobiographical writing arguments about education. Despite the laws banning black literacy and education in the Southern slave-owning states, black literary production existed and, in some cases, thrived in the antebellum era. Through the 1850s, novelists like William Wells Brown, Martin Delany, Harriet Wilson, and Frank J. Webb published novels and autobiographical narratives.² These antebellum black novelists' work largely depicted the life of free blacks, revealing white hypocrisy and racist practices in the North while highlighting the respectability and morals of black characters.

These early novels augmented the limited agency of black subjects in slave narratives, written by formerly enslaved blacks but edited and published under the control of white abolitionists. Narratives like Frederick Douglass's *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave* (1845) and Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861) demonstrated black authorship within the limits of the genre that served white abolitionists'

¹ Examples of such novels include Nella Larsen's *Quicksand* (1928) where the protagonist, Helga Crane, abandons her teaching career at Fisk University, an institution she finds stultifying, and Wallace Thurman's *The Blacker the Berry: A Novel of Negro Life* (1929) whose protagonist Emma Lou Morgan drops out of UCLA in favor of moving to Harlem when college life fails to bring her a sense of belonging.

² William Wells Brown was a former slave who wrote a slave narrative and works in many other genres, including plays, a memoir, and a novel, *Clotel; or, The President's Daughter* (1853). Martin Delany's *Blake; or, The Huts of America* (1859-62) was published as a serial novel that offers a more rebellious narrative than the many of the other black novels of the decade. Harriet E. Wilson's autobiographical *Our Nig, or Sketches from the Life of a Free Black* (1859) and Frank J. Webb's *The Garies and Their Friends* (1857) detail the oppressive Northern race relations before the Civil War.

purposes above those of black individuals whose lives were used in the narratives. The forms of education that made slave narratives possible, and that were recounted in the narratives themselves, were always clandestinely acquired and fragmented due to the lack of legal means of obtaining literacy and education under slavery.

This cultural period has been called “Postbellum, Pre-Harlem” by Barbara McCaskill and Caroline Gebhard in their 2006 edited collection of the same name. They borrow the term from author Charles Chesnutt to describe the period between 1877 and 1919 in African American cultural production (McGaskill and Gebhard 1). Often known as “The Dark Ages of Recent History” and “The Decades of Disappointment” due to “the increased violence and de facto racial segregation that has come to define them,” Postbellum, Pre-Harlem indicates a larger turn in black literary studies towards resurrecting the literature of that era from this assumed oblivion (1). In fact, as McGaskill and Gebhard argue, “African American cultural development, viewed as a whole, may prove to be marked more by continuity with than by rejection of the past” (8).

My work aligns here with McGaskill and Gebhard’s approach to the black literary tradition. The post-Civil War “generation of writers and leaders not only pioneered black national and international studies; they were also very much a part of their own time” (5). The collection aims to combat the common perception of the pre-Harlem era, spawned by the Negro renaissance’s refusal to acknowledge similarity with the its literary past: “The negative evaluation of this epoch begins with the architects of the Harlem Renaissance,” while “historians and critics have long followed [Alain] Locke [...] in formulating negative judgments of the post-bellum—pre-Harlem epoch as a whole” (3). The modern and cosmopolitan perspective centralized in Harlem during the renaissance in black arts and letter from 1919 to 1929 often ignores the earlier black literature from the 1850s to the turn of the century as provincial and

limited, but as this study argues, the postbellum fictions of education bring the regional in conversation with the national, and they engage with a radically black theme of education for African Americans. Such a focus on black identity connects these texts to the Harlem Renaissance in ways that have not yet been fully recognized.

The dominant idea of “the ‘renaissance’ itself suggests a particular paradigm of cultural development—a sudden and miraculous flowering, a dramatic break with the past” (McGaskill and Gebhard 7) that has overdetermined many twentieth-century views of the pre-Harlem period. More recently, literary historians have opened up these possibilities for an alternative interpretation, one of a continuum rather than “a dramatic break.” In “The 1850s: The First Renaissance of Black Letters,” Maurice S. Lee extends his analysis to antebellum black writing, including not only the popular slave narratives by Frederick Douglass, Harriet Jacobs, and Sojourner Truth but also the now better-known novels by Brown, Webb, Wilson, and Delany. For Lee, “the 1850s renaissance of black letters is marked by both unprecedented creativity and continuities with established traditions” (103). This second view of the idea of literary renaissance guides *A Novel Way to Learn* in charting the educational fictions of the postbellum decades and beyond.

Written in the 1980s and 90s, the initial major works about the black literature of the late-nineteenth century focused on recovery, the act of reading and making accessible to other readers texts that were previously unknown or ignored in the twentieth century but that were important in their own time. Early critics like Henry Louis Gates, Jr., Hazel V. Carby, and Claudia Tate have uncovered a tradition of black writing that has potential to expand our understanding of the development of American literature. The initial critical readings of the postbellum fictions serve to expose these texts to a larger critical reading audience and make them available for a modern

readership. They also recognize the specific historical circumstance of late-nineteenth century black writing: black writers understood that their novels and short stories brought forward images of black Americans in ways that had not been possible before in white-authored novels or within the confines of the slave narrative genre.³

Among the earliest critics to draw attention to the understudied black literature of this era was Dickson D. Bruce, Jr., whose *Black American Writing from the Nadir* (1989) argues for a significant tradition in African American literature emerging from Reconstruction. Subtitled *The Evolution of a Literary Tradition, 1877-1915*, Bruce's work analyzes what he sees as a distinctive and separate period of black literary production. He correctly notes that black authors of this era aimed both to counter prejudiced mainstream perceptions of their race and to demonstrate their capabilities in order to disprove racist notions of black ability (2). These middle-class and college-educated authors had what Bruce calls "significant formative exposure to Victorian culture and ideals" from strong liberal arts curricula (7). The cultural contexts for these writers drew from the same kinds of works and backgrounds as those of the white middle-class Americans. Seeing such modes as "common" and "polite" (12), Bruce nevertheless argues the subversive potential of black authors and texts that occupy such a position: not only could these literary forms potentially also reach a white audience, but they also "allowed [black writers] to approach American history with a touch of irony" (13, 30). While for Bruce the black written tradition changes significantly in the wake of the First World War, my project argues for more continuity and overlap between the postbellum fictions and the trajectory of black novels beyond the early twentieth century. Black educational fictions connect a black literary tradition

³ The foundational texts about the black novels of this era include Hazel V. Carby's *Reconstructing Black Womanhood: The Emergence of the Afro-American Woman Novelist* (1987) and Henry Louis Gates, Jr.'s "The Trope of the New Negro and the Reconstruction of the Image of the Black" (1988).

from Reconstruction to modernism. Further, the fictions of education show a particular race-centered focus that counters Bruce's correlations of black texts with white ideals: while the standards of respectability and middle-class manners were shared between the middle classes across racial lines, the theme and topic of black education bears a particularly raced and, as I argue, radical focus on black identity. By emphasizing black education, these authors do not mimic white forms but rather move beyond irony by insisting on black leadership and social advancement.

Studies like Gates's (1988) and Carby's (1987) illustrate that dominant racial motifs were also deeply gendered. Black women, in the era of slavery and beyond, were seen in strict opposition to white women whose white femininity, in turn, was constructed based on these notions of black womanhood: these ideologies "coalesce in the figures of the slave and the mistress" (Carby 20). While the characteristics of the "cult of true womanhood"—domesticity, piety, submission, and chastity—were applied to the white women in the South and the North, black women were seen as subordinate and overtly sexual. Black women writers wrote against these assumptions and claimed their respectability and gentility, something already afforded to (and imposed upon) white women in the popular imagination. Postbellum African American men faced the burden of the white stereotype of Sambo, signaling at times subservience, lack of intellect, and laziness, that Gates defines as "a sign of lack, of degeneration, of a truly negated absence" (130). Gates's article, "The Trope of the New Negro and the Reconstruction of the Image of the Black" (1988), demonstrates how, in the mainstream mind, blackness had become associated with these antebellum stereotypes that later black writing and other cultural production sought to counter.

My dissertation connects postbellum black fiction and black education to expand the critical discourse about these texts beyond the early readings that emphasize domesticity as a metaphor. Among the most influential threads in criticism of black women's writing in the late nineteenth century has been marriage as a site of a broader social argument about black ability. According to Claudia Tate's study, *Domestic Allegories of Political Desire* (1996), black women's purchase of married domesticity and middle-class respectability, as laid out by Carby, in fact served as an argument for black women's potential to carry political power. I argue that in addition to such metaphorical representations, late-nineteenth-century black fiction converses more overtly about social issues, specifically education. My project aligns with the kind of broader critical work that Xiomara Santamarina has begun. Xiomara Santamarina convincingly expands the critical understanding of nineteenth-century black writing in *Belabored Professions* (2005), where she argues that women's narratives about labor posit alternatives to the influence of white hierarchies of racialized and gendered work. I see Santamarina's argument about labor as particularly valuable because it reveals that black women writers of the nineteenth century did not abandon the category of labor and solely seek domesticity and gentility as markers of black ability. Instead, as Santamarina shows, they remained concerned with depictions of black labor as well, in essence reconstructing representations of black life in much broader ways than examined in the earliest critical texts focused mainly on recovery work.

While some recent work in on late-nineteenth-century black writing has considered education as a theme, *A Novel Way to Learn* extends this analysis by examining key moments along the connected trajectories of black writing and education from Reconstruction to the Harlem Renaissance. In doing so, I focus on black educational fiction across this time period and within the U.S. national frame, something I argue is missing from the critical conversation. On

one hand, specific moments in the postbellum development of black writing have been connected to the theme of education: Anne-Elizabeth Murdy's *Teach the Nation: Pedagogies of Racial Uplift in U.S. Women's Writing of the 1890s* (2002) explores how 1890s' black women's writing elaborates pedagogical stakes in the context of public schools and the community by reading narratives of women as teachers. My study examines education as a consistent trajectory informing black fictions since the Civil War while Murdy's syncretic study particularizes the 1890s. On the other hand, the more genealogical work by Peter Schmidt in his *Sitting in Darkness: New South Fiction, Education, and the Rise of Jim Crow Colonialism, 1865-1920* (2008) covers roughly the same time period as my project, but follows the strand of transnationalism to link the novels he reads to U.S. imperialism abroad.⁴ My dissertation offers a focused, sustained look at the connected work of black fiction and black educational thought in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century.⁵

Although my dissertation is part of a broad literary-critical recognition of the previously understudied tradition of black writing in the late nineteenth century, a period that I along with the critics I have mentioned argue is more than merely the precursor to the more ostensibly rich tradition of the Harlem Renaissance, it's also part of an historical reclamation of African

⁴ In the past decades, the general trend for transatlantic research, hemispheric studies, and international connections has pushed much research to seek such connections across established national borders. While such connections are useful and meaningful, Santamarina reminds us that "African-American studies can still yield various periodizations and genealogies within a national frame" ("Are We There Yet?" 310). Given the relatively recent recovery of and fairly uniform critical perspectives on nineteenth-century black literature, the work of understanding the relationship between these fictions and their national and historical framework remains relevant. Further, such work can offer beneficial new means of understanding the study of African American literary history, and "it is wrong to suppose that only black internationalism can transform the field's terms and references" (Santamarina, "Are We There Yet?" 307).

⁵ My dissertation argues for a key connection between black fiction and ideas about formal education between the Civil War and the Harlem Renaissance. Elizabeth McHenry's *Forgotten Readers: Recovering the Lost History of African American Literary Societies* (2002) offers a thorough reading of external sites of learning by analyzing literary practices of black Americans from the 1830s to the Harlem Renaissance.

American education. Next, I survey that tradition, examining American higher education in general and the limited options within that system for black citizens in particular. Connection to that tradition, my project traces the path of black educational fictions from Reconstruction to Harlem Renaissance. Harper's Reconstruction-era focus on individual ability and access, Griggs's militant turn away from second-class citizenship at the turn of the century, Du Bois's extended approach to black-controlled learning from the 1890s to 1911, and Fauset's ambivalence about, and departure from, institutional learning in the 1920s and 30s mark key moments in that genealogy.

Black Education

The history of black education in the U.S. is probably best known through the debate between W.E.B. Du Bois and Booker T. Washington. The polarized notion of the opposing ideas of the nature of black education, one supporting a liberal arts model and the other manual, industrial training, glosses over the more complex history of black educational thought in the U.S. My project builds on the work of literary-historical recovery by also contributing to our understanding of black educational history that many people only know through these well-known positions.

In the first decades of the twentieth century, the model of industrial education became a dominant force in black learning, and the attention of black educators like W.E.B. Du Bois turned increasingly to curricular concerns such as those of Booker T. Washington's Tuskegee Institute. Funding from Northern philanthropies like The Peabody Fund and The Slater Fund bolstered the training of black students for industry and manual labor.⁶ Washington himself had

⁶ The Peabody Fund was founded in 1867 to support Southern education in general, and largely benefitted white students (Urban and Wagoner 143-44). Established in 1882, the Slater Fund aimed specifically to

been trained at the Hampton Institute that served as a model of industrial training for black students. Both General Samuel “Armstrong [who ran the Hampton Institute] and Washington believed strongly in correlating academic and industrial training. In reality this meant academic instruction no higher than the three Rs and what was presupposed by the manual labor routines” (Anderson 74). Du Bois, however, rejected this model by positing that those who could lead the race, the Talented Tenth, should be able to pursue higher education, and that, furthermore, the purpose of education was “training not isolated men but a living group of men [...] And the final product of our training must be neither a psychologist nor a brickmason, but a man” (*The Souls of Black Folk*, 61).

Underlying the Du Bois-Washington debate is a decades-long conversation about the nature of black formal education, shaped by the historical circumstances of Reconstruction and its aftermath. The emergence of black fiction and literature after the Civil War coincided with the educational effort on behalf of black Americans, and the whole century had been, and remained, a time of active growth and expansion for mainstream American education. In the new schools, the black students’ desire to learn was met with at times ill-organized and hurried effort, along with resistance to the kind of learning they wished to acquire. During Reconstruction, the federal government played a large organizational role in the process of black schooling through the Freedmen’s Bureau, while benevolent associations like missionary groups and independent Northern philanthropies soon stepped in to take part in organizing and steering black education. These mainstream efforts were met with the work of black educators and activists who sought to participate in founding institutions like Wilberforce, founded in 1856 in western Ohio, and in shaping curricula.

help black Southerners. The two were closely linked in their philanthropic work and focused on teacher training and industrial education (Urban and Wagoner 145).

Implementing postbellum formal education for black Americans was not a simple process. As educational historian James D. Anderson notes, in the postbellum era, “The short-term purpose of black schooling was to provide the masses of ex-slaves with basic literacy skills plus the rudiments of citizenship training for participation in a democratic society. The long-range purpose was the intellectual and moral development of a responsible leadership class that would organize the masses and lead them to freedom and equality” (31). In the process of moving the majority of black Americans from enslavement that strictly forbade and restricted literacy and learning to educational advancement, the need for schools increased during Reconstruction when mainstream racial practices in both the North and the South required separate facilities for black and white students. While even the earliest works from 1869 in this study address higher education, they also augment the concept with alternate forms like self-education, communal learning, and a variety of different arenas of learning that would not formally count as colleges or universities. The fictions I study supplement formal schooling in alternative spaces like family homes, a settlement house, a secret society housed underneath a college campus, and a swamp deemed uncultivable by white planters.

In an era when black education was necessarily a fragmented, variable enterprise, the fictions of Harper, Griggs, Du Bois, and Fauset constitute educational fictions rather than college novels. Although the postbellum effort of “uplift also suggests that African Americans have, with almost religious fervor, regarded education as a key to liberation” (Gaines 1), these texts reveal an acute awareness of the problems of black education and an approach far more complex than religious fervor. Within the general field of education, higher education presents the most contested area of black learning because it largely determined, at least in theory, the extent to which an individual could advance in American society.

The entirety of the nineteenth century was an era of growth for colleges and other institutions of higher instruction in the United States. While a number of women's colleges, like Mount Holyoke Female Seminary and Elmira Female College, were founded before the Civil War and institutions of higher education for African Americans, like Fisk University, began to open their doors in the 1860s, both types of schools struggled until the 1880s, and even beyond (Geiger 29). The changes throughout the century resulted in a lack of standardization in both the terminology used for educational institutions as well as their curricula and programs of study. The Morrill Acts of 1862 and 1890 established federal funds for land-grant colleges and brought about some standardization in the curricula of schools that benefited from the grants, while the German university model that influenced the white schools, Johns Hopkins first among them, in the 1890s relied on distinctions between the modern university model and other institutions that aimed to provide higher education. In addition to the increasing demand for education for white females and African Americans, the rise of industry, growth of cities, increasing secularization, and surplus of money following the war contributed to the changes in education. As higher education expanded both westward and to groups previously excluded from its reach, the focus shifted from questions of access and admission to curricular choices.

The curricular issue was particularly prominent in debates over black education. From the start,

Both schooling for democratic citizenship and schooling for second-class citizenship have been basic traditions in American education. These opposing traditions were not, as some would explain, the difference between the mainstream of American education and some aberrations or isolated alternatives. These two contradictory traditions of American education emerged during the first half of the nineteenth century and clashed with each other until well into the twentieth century. Both legacies flow into our own present. (Anderson 1)

This history complicates the idea of education for black citizens. The authors share a belief in education, but they find the way education, especially in its most advanced forms, was presented to African Americans in this era to be deeply flawed. In effect, then, these writers not only produced pro-education fictions but also wove into these narratives both critiques of their contemporaneous models of education as well as imagined plots of success for their protagonists within the flawed system.

In terms of opportunities for learning, emancipation brought about a profound change for those formerly enslaved because, as educational historian William H. Watkins explains, “education was anathema to the interests of keepers of chattel slaves” (12). Many southern states instituted black codes to control and stop African Americans’ educational attempts, especially after the Turner Rebellion in 1831 (Urban and Wagoner 128). Wayne J. Urban and Jennings L. Wagoner point out in their educational history that the kind of learning available, in limited ways, to the enslaved blacks was practical, religious, and covert in nature (133). After manumission, the opportunities were still limited by southern resistance to black schooling altogether as well as northern perceptions of proper forms of black education. Even the seemingly well-meaning and most progressive missionaries and Yankee schoolmarmes of “New Puritanism” often disagreed with the black community on education (Urban and Wagoner, 137, 140).

Still, when “formal slavery was destroyed, black people enthusiastically embraced education as a weapon to ensure their emancipation,” and “the masses of freed people regarded education as a basic right” (Kelley xii). As historians of the Reconstruction era and education have noted, “freedpeople, not northern whites, initiated the educational movement in the South while the Civil War was being fought” (Williams 5). Since self-education as well as attempts and

achievements in literacy and learning had taken place during slavery, the spirit behind those practices thrived in freedom and carried over to the early black colleges like Wilberforce University.

Unsurprisingly, the first black colleges were founded in the north starting with Philadelphia's Institute for Colored Youth in 1837. Southern resistance to black education did not dissipate easily, and while some African Americans had been able to attend college in the antebellum era, only 26 blacks graduated before Emancipation (Lucas 164-5). The first black college students graduated in 1826, and by the end of the century, "state-supported black colleges had been founded in all of the southern and border states" (Lucas 122, 170). During Reconstruction, the federal Freedmen's Bureau worked most effectively in the area of education, and together with philanthropies and missionary organizations helped establish several black institutions (Urban and Wagoner 139).

For black students, the prospect of entering white southern schools was non-existent in the decades following Reconstruction. Northern schools, while more accessible, were not automatically open to admitting black students. The resistance to black education in any form persisted in the south until around the turn of the 1880s when some southern whites began to acknowledge that they would not be able to resist the movement towards black education (Anderson 27). Rather than a change in underlying attitudes, this move signaled a new approach to limiting black learning when a "particular class of southern whites began thinking more about controlling and restricting the expansion of public schooling in the black South and the possibility of adapting it to the region's traditional social structure and racial mores" (Anderson 31). Such moves, woven into the fictional narratives in this study, sought to minimize, if not entirely counteract, the advancements and changes resulting from the Civil War, and they

severely limited the choices and opportunities of black students. It is important to note that these limitations were not only a result of southern attitudes but also of northern perspectives as well, carried out effectively through the power of northern philanthropic donations. Despite being seemingly progressive and supportive of black education, “northern reformers were not perturbed by the southern racism per se. They also viewed black Americans as an inferior and childlike people” (Anderson 92), and such perceptions influence how financial support to black education was routed.

That educational aid to the south had begun with “northern white benevolent societies, denominational missionary bodies, and private black charitable organizations,” and it was continued in the final decades of the nineteenth century by “corporate philanthropic foundations and wealthy individuals” (Lucas 166). In addition, the Morrill Land Grant Acts prompted states to “designate existing black schools as recipients of land-grant funds” (Lucas 170). Each of these sources provided funding to black schools while also influencing the nature of the education in the recipient schools.

In the wake of the Civil War, former slaves “pursued their educational objectives by developing various social strata, but the one they stressed the most was leadership training” (Anderson 28). As Lucas explains, though, none of the black colleges, with the exception of Howard and Fisk, “offered anything remotely approaching the collegiate-level liberal-arts training” in the years following Reconstruction (169). Soon thereafter, in the 1870s and 1880s, these black schools “adopted the New England classical liberal curriculum,” which meant that the “black elementary, normal, and collegiate schools did not differ appreciably from those taught in northern white schools” (Anderson 28). These earlier liberal arts models were challenged by the prominence of the industrial training model when the Tuskegee Institute,

founded in 1881, garnered attention and funding from white northerners, especially following Washington's famous Atlanta Address in 1895 that endorsed social separation between the races and limiting black learning to manual and trade skills.

Still, Du Bois was not vehemently against all forms of industrial education. In fact, "Black protest against the Hampton idea was directed at that particular form of industrial education; it was not a blanket rejection of vocational and technical training" (Anderson 65). Thus when Du Bois offers a model of black education in *Quest*, he does so by incorporating rather than rejecting manual labor and training into his brand of communal, self-sufficient black education. Nor was Du Bois alone in his criticism of the Tuskegee model and resistance to the dominance of the industrial model: Anderson suggests that the embrace of industrial education had more to do with a search for funds rather than an ideological purchase of the manual labor model (66), and according to Lucas, "most black colleges funded with land-grant monies were devoted primarily to general academic purposes and to teacher preparation" (171). The authors in this study, Griggs and Du Bois in particular, encounter this problematic need for balancing the necessity of funding, the educational goals of African Americans, and the white ideologies of black education.

Project trajectory

Chapter One, "Harper, Blake, and Arguments for Educational Ability and Access during Reconstruction," analyzes Frances Ellen Watkins Harper's novel of racial uplift, *Minnie's Sacrifice* (1869), against Lillie Devereux Blake's women's rights novel *Fettered for Life, Or, Lord and Master: A Story of To-Day* (1874). Written in the wake of the Civil War, these novels encourage educational advancement and women's leadership at a moment when black American

and white women, respectively, saw potential for limited access to formal education from which they were previously excluded. These texts both mirror and contradict one another, reflecting what Hazel Carby has termed “the history of the uneasy relations between organized black and white women” (4). Analyzing them together in this chapter, I show not only how Harper’s novel signals a move from antebellum forms into black educational fiction but also how that mode departs from white women’s writing like Blake’s.

In her novel, Blake presents a project of white women’s education that is a distinctly segregated one within the middle-class community in the urban north. Reacting to the postbellum opening of limited social and educational opportunity to black citizens with this localized perspective, the novel defines the recipients of white women’s educational help within the middle-class, urban Anglo community, expanding it to include Irish immigrant women. *Fettered for Life* excludes the South and African Americans, and Blake looks to white male leadership to accept white women into its sphere of privilege. Rather than continue the uneasy alliance between women’s rights work and abolitionism, Blake’s vision separates the two causes and divorces itself from the issues of racial equality. The battleground in the novel shifts from the national stage of the abolitionism-inflected women’s right discourse to the specific realm of white women’s aspirations in business and art, arguing for inclusion into these realms formerly cut off from them.

As a proto-feminist novel, Blake’s women’s rights text foregrounds financial and marital relations as the central obstacle for white women’s advancements and equality with white men. On the one hand, despite her aspirations as an artist, Laura’s career track includes teaching, which shows her ability but also reveals her resistance to that occupation. On the other hand, Laura’s abilities and her aspirations extend beyond the opportunities open to her. Laura pushes

towards an empowered future for middle-class, white women like herself. Laura's path contrasts with two extreme options for women in the form of her school friend Flora Livingston, a socialite belle whose education remains unfinished and whose marriage traps her into effective servitude, and her journalist friend Frank Heywood who saves Laura from the corrupt and lecherous judge's machinations and who turns out to be a southern female cross-dressing for the sake of her career and livelihood in the northern city. Juxtaposed against Laura's tireless efforts, these two modes of acquiescence and clandestine subversion, both at a high personal cost, stand out as ineffective and ultimately self-defeating. Through her persistent work, Laura reaches personal empowerment and continues to work towards recognition of women's full civic participation.

Blake sets this triumph of the educated white woman in clear contrast to the static and unchangeable American South. Not only is the region itself seen as desolate and stuck in the past, but the southern characters fail to participate in active social roles like Laura's. Two southern female characters perish while Frank, the journalist posing as male, has surrendered her personal freedom entirely for work, forever cut off from the potential of family life. The most striking component of Blake's southern scene, however, is the African American stereotypical mammy character. The black female of the South is completely excluded from the sphere of white women's experience and access.

Where Blake portrays decay and desolation as well as sectional separation in the South, Frances Ellen Watkins Harper situates her story that aims for black independence and social advancement. The second half of the chapter focuses on Harper's periodical Reconstruction novel, *Minnie's Sacrifice*, in which the national stage serves as a broader backdrop for the racial uplift that transcends both racial and gender lines. Her protagonists Minnie and her eventual love

interest Louis override the kinds of assumptions about the lack of black agency that guided Blake's depiction of the postwar south. In her uplift narrative, Harper posits a more national vision that breaks down divisions based on race, gender, and region. This trend, I argue, carries throughout the black educational fiction from the Reconstruction on.

Minnie's Sacrifice initiates black educational fiction as a mode of realist fiction that connects the black community to formal education. Here, Harper relies on the access and ability of the individual to move the black community towards education. Because they inadvertently pass for white, Harper's protagonists prove black ability: both Minnie and Louis attend and thrive in northern educational institutions until they learn that they are black and choose to give up any façade of whiteness and return to the South. Once there, they help extend their learning by taking on leadership roles back in their Southern community. Through this practical activism among the newly freed black southerners, they aim to raise an "army of civilizers," or an "army of the pen" (68); this terminology underscores the significance of education in the process of postbellum racial uplift. Harper's protagonists become the kinds of mentors and leaders that are missing from their own lives, setting a precedent for black educational fiction for the decades to come.

Chapter Two, "*Imperium in Imperio* and the Curricula for Racial Advancement," examines Sutton E. Griggs's evaluation of more systematic and institutional forms of black education that assumes a degree of access for black students. Reflecting both the change in the educational history of black Americans as well as the historical circumstance of the nadir of race relations at the turn of the century, Griggs's 1899 novel *Imperium in Imperio* navigates a minefield of educational and social episodes to create a narrative of black uplift. Given the tensions inherent in and present between the conditions of black institutions and southern white

attitudes and practices, *Imperium* shows an increasingly militant black identity emerging from the conflicting impulses of black education and U.S. mainstream ideology.

In his quest to forge a narrative of education and advancement at the turn of the century, Griggs turns to a national framework over the provincial one of the south within which the narrative launches. Unlike *Minnie's Sacrifice* where the interaction of the south and north allowed the protagonist to return south to work for racial progress, *Imperium* envisions a substantial break from stultifying racial nadir of the seemingly more accommodating north and the more openly hostile south, expanding the national perspective to the west. The new, third space of Texas represents for Griggs a potential way to subvert the gridlock of the nadir and its limitations on black uplift and self-determination. The West reflects the outcome of second-class citizenship, a position offered to blacks by the mainstream culture combined with access to education. It provides no outlet, however, since the African Americans, educated and committed to United States, cannot exist either in the North or the South because those regions are too rigid and unchanging to contain the kind of change Griggs calls for. This new space proves, in the end, militant, threatening, and, to an extent, self-destructive, when Griggs reveals the impossible math of turn-of-the-century American practices regarding race. Black ability, education, and selfhood cannot be satisfied with nor contained by the limited freedom and status afforded African Americans at the time.

To argue for Griggs's challenge, I read curricular archives from Harvard and Fisk from the 1870s and 1880s to tease out Griggs's educational argument. These white and black institutions mirror the arcs of the protagonists, Bernard's access to white middle-class ideals and institutions and Belton's connection to the black community and its values, respectively. I show that despite the significant difference in the histories and resources of the two universities, the

curricular commitments in literature and history, the subjects defined by Griggs as crucial, citizen-making ones, are similar to one another, as the novel suggests. *Imperium* reveals that access to education alone cannot create leadership opportunities and avenues for advancement without large social changes. Rejecting Harper's earlier model of individual educational access to white institutions, Griggs posits how the education Belton receives at Fisk, guised as Stowe University in the novel, affords him a more balanced and intelligent approach to becoming a race leader than Bernard's Ivy League education that lends him more access to the white world but also renders him angry and, ultimately, insane. The post-Reconstruction rhetoric of American citizenship and nationhood that echoes in their lessons from early schooling to university stir both men's minds, but Belton's experience within the black community and witnessing a black professor at Stowe help contextualize that nationalist impulse within the conflicting reality of discrimination and limited opportunity at the end of the nineteenth century amid worsening race relations. In short, the black college offers Belton better race consciousness, but the novel argues that, ultimately, a model of second-class citizenship for black Americans cannot be sustained.

In a significant move from the Reconstruction novels like *Minnie's Sacrifice*, *Imperium in Imperio* does not take for granted the connection between the educated black subject and the black community. This connection, so evident in the commitment of Minnie and Louis to the work of uplift combined with the evident success of their work among the black people in the south, grows more complicated for Griggs: Bernard's access to white education leaves him detached from black reality, despite his ideal position to act as a race leader, while Belton's alternative route of black education connects his life and mission to a deeper race consciousness. The clash between these two versions of education demonstrates the increasing critique of the uses of black education. Frances E.W. Harper's call on black graduates to put their education to

use for the black community accelerates by the century's end into Griggs's claim that education achieved through access to white institutions and mainstream contexts bestows the black individual with only limited, dysfunctional ability as a race leader. While Griggs, and indeed any author in this study, never takes access to education, institutional or otherwise, for granted, a clear critique of access to mainstream white education, in favor of black education, emerges in *Imperium in Imperio*.

Griggs's novel ends with a failed attempt at an independent black nation, revealing both the vast potential and need for black Americans to organize for self-determination as well as their ultimate commitment to the United States as its citizens. While this paradox destroys the protagonists in the novel, only barely defusing the threat of black rebellion, the text clearly advocates learned and engaged black citizenship in the service of an independent black community. Bernard and Belton advance from children ready to learn to educated, capable men prepared to lead, and their story offers both a model for the black community and a critique of mainstream society's systemic de-facto practices of discrimination.

Chapter Three, "Finding the Way: W.E.B. Du Bois's Educational Fiction," foregrounds W.E.B. Du Bois's successful novelistic arc of black education. Harper's and Griggs's novels insist on education as the only means of advancement under Reconstruction and racial nadir where the storylines of the educated protagonists are nevertheless violently cut off. Here I trace a genealogy of Du Bois's three fictions from 1892 to 1911 that manifests his literary development towards a narrative arc for an educated black protagonist. Like the other texts in this study, Du Bois's unpublished manuscript "A Fellow of Harvard" (1892-3), short story "Of the Coming of John" (1903), and published full-length novel *The Quest of the Silver Fleece* (1911) introduce protagonists whose maturation represents the path to an educated black identity. The first two

texts provide false starts in both form and content: “A Fellow of Harvard” remains unpublished and unfinished, with author’s notes projecting either death or madness as the end result for the story’s hero; “Of the Coming of John,” published as the sole fictional piece among the celebrated essays in Du Bois’s masterpiece *Souls of Black Folk*, offers a short overview of the educated and thus isolated John’s life that ends in the hands of a lynch mob. It is only in *Quest* that Du Bois concludes with a successful narrative of black education.

What sets *Quest* apart from his earlier attempts, as well as from the prior nineteenth-century black fictions, is its negotiation of formal and pragmatic education outside of the white-controlled institutions of learning. I argue that *The Quest of the Silver Fleece* is the culmination not only of Du Bois’s attempts at an educational novel but also of the larger mode of fictions of education as form of postbellum black writing. The time of the novel’s writing, the heyday of Booker T. Washington’s industrial educational model of black education (from his famous 1895 speech supporting social separation of the races to his death in 1915), compels Du Bois to incorporate both a greater sense of community than his earlier failed narratives as well as a reconciliation between his ideas about black liberal arts education and the prevailing ideology of industrial education of African Americans.

In both “Fellow of Harvard” and “Of the Coming of John,” Du Bois’s male protagonists are gifted individuals given a chance at an education by a larger group—family or community—in vague hopes that they will somehow help bring about uplift for the race. In both cases, the chance at an education provides no solutions for the community since the singular protagonists, increasingly isolated by their education, fail to reconcile their advanced learning and abilities with the realities of black life in the late-nineteenth-century United States. The eventual destruction of the protagonists suggests that, unlike in Harper’s 1869 novel, education can result

in negative internal consequences for the black scholar, echoing the Harvard-educated Bernard's fate in Griggs's 1899 *Imperium in Imperio*.

The other crucial site of seeming conflict for fictions of black education rests on the split between industrial education supported by powerful white-supported institutions like Hampton and Booker T. Washington's Tuskegee Institute and the liberal arts education—the training for individual citizenship, not just for compliant labor—that Du Bois strongly advocated. The white resistance to book-learning among black Americans informs the context of each of these fictions, and in *Quest*, at a moment when Washingtonian industrial training dominated the educational scene, Du Bois charts the practical terms of how these educational modes might co-exist. Not opposed to industrial training as such but rather the notion that it should be the only form of education accessible to black students, Du Bois presents in his first novel a model for pragmatic education that combines both the skilled and intellectual labor of black Southerners to achieve a self-sufficient black community. In his earlier fictions, the respective lone protagonists fail, but in *Quest* Du Bois's dual protagonists, the impish uneducated Zora from the swamp and the talented and hard-working Bles, evoke a multiplicity of black experiences that ultimately, in tandem, gestures towards a sustainable, self-sufficient black education and community.

While Griggs used the nearly twinned figures of Belton and Bernard to highlight the impact of alternative black education and access to white education in *Imperium*, Zora and Bles communicate a broader range of experiences in their lived realities. Zora's untrained and folksy vivaciousness conveys both the dangerous position of black females without guard from powerful white males' sexualized gaze and actions as well as the wisdom and value of the perspective of the field laborers who live their lives in the swamp and rural spaces with minimal access to education, power, and advancement. Bles, on the other hand, arrives in Zora's town in

order to pursue learning from a local black school, bringing with him an appreciation of both book-learning and an appreciation for labor. His received assumptions about respectability and propriety, female virtue in particular, are revised through his friendship and eventual romance with Zora while his influence pushes her to take advantage of formal education.

Throughout the novel, both protagonists acquire an understanding of the historical circumstances underlying their social and cultural conditions—how power is negotiated and, in large part, usurped and cheated out of the hands of black workers by the white planter class. This understanding guides them to ways of working within the flawed system to develop means for communal black self-determination. Revising gender roles, religious community, labor, and learning, the novel never abandons these categories but is able to imagine an independent educational solutions in ways that *Minnie's Sacrifice* and *Imperium in Imperio* did not. Combining financial independence through labor with black-controlled versions of formal education, books, and a sense of individuality, *Quest* accomplishes a viable model for self-sufficient black life and learning.

Finally, Chapter Four, “Ambivalence and Pragmatic Education in the Novels of Jessie Fauset,” examines Fauset’s approach to black educational fiction during the black modernism of the 1920s and 30s. The general attitude of the New Negro movement towards the established forms of black education was ambivalent at best, and the work of many of the black authors of the 1920s exposed an increasing anti-Tuskegee thrust.⁷ Fauset’s earlier novels of the 1920s, *There Is Confusion* (1924) and *Plum Bum: A Novel Without a Moral* (1928), show this increasing frustration with institutional education, and I conclude with her final novel, *Comedy: American Style*, written at a time when the Harlem Renaissance has waned in the wake of the stock market

⁷ Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man* (1952) starts from a similar premise, attesting to the ambivalence about institutional black education in the twentieth century.

crash of 1929 and the resulting drop in patronage and financial support for black arts in the United States. In *Comedy*, Fauset moves beyond ambivalence and frustration to a pragmatic mode where the financially independent black female controls her own learning.

Fauset presents a reordering of a middle-class family by rejecting the stagnancy of stable, traditional black education. The launch of *Journal of Negro Education* in 1932, one year prior to the publication of *Comedy*, underscored that black education had become the norm rather than the exception. An academic periodical dedicated to the study of black education as a field spoke to the level of stability in the black institutions of higher learning, and the black educational fictions from the late nineteenth and the early twentieth century were out of place in a society that could, to an extent, take for granted some access to education for black Americans.

Fauset's novels carry markers of the previous fictions of education, including the desire for access to white education from Harper, the potentially isolating effects of that white education from Griggs, and the need for pragmatic, black-controlled modes of learning from Du Bois. Ultimately, *Comedy* advocates a blend of practical and formal education that ultimately supports black self-determination and self-sufficiency as the base of the new middle-class identity, replacing any attempts at advancement through inclusion into whiteness.

Fauset's critique of the black middle class and black education stems largely from the conflation of each with whiteness. The novel presents three matrilineal generations of black women in the Cary family who forge their middle-class identities very differently, always in connection with education. The family's turn-of-the-century grandmother reflects the values of race uplift and education by running a boarding house and taking extension classes at Harvard University, while her light-skinned daughter Olivia finds out in school that she can pass for white and becomes increasingly drawn to the social power that such passing seems to afford. She

guides her children along the same path, seeing her daughter Teresa's modern higher education as a chance to pass into the white race and thus advance socially. Since Olivia perceives schooling as a means of entering the white world, her ideology completely counters the postbellum belief in education as race uplift. Olivia's daughter Teresa has no interest in passing, but she feels the pressure to do so from her mother. Teresa's story reveals Fauset's ambivalence about the established middle class and black education. While Olivia sees the potential of a white college as a marriage market, Teresa is simply biding her time until she might "go comfortably to Howard or Fisk" (71). Though Teresa's plan to attend a historically black college never materializes, her preference for Howard and Fisk affirms her racial identification. In the end, Teresa yields to her mother's wishes, and her tacit passing and eventual marriage to a poor, white scholar in France leave her miserable in the very sphere of whiteness her mother so venerates.

Fauset balances this move away from the values of uplift and leadership yoked to education by Harper, Griggs, and Du Bois through the character of Phebe, who joins the family when she marries Teresa's brother. Decidedly rejecting the established black middle class, Phebe works as a seamstress and eventually owns her own business. By taking English and French classes at Temple, she complements her financial independence with learning on her own terms. Her actions echo those of Olivia's mother, the business owner committed to her work as well as education; the path of race leadership and uplift is restored in Phebe, but Fauset posits that neither inherited middle-class status nor education alone can provide a viable path to a sustainable black identity in the 1930s. The pragmatic blend of entrepreneurship and learning transcends the juxtaposition between labor and liberal arts education, and the model resists turning to whiteness as a source of social or financial power.

**Chapter One:
Harper, Blake, and Arguments for Educational Ability & Access during Reconstruction**

The Reconstruction-era novels I analyze in this first chapter, Lillie Devereux Blake's *Fettered for Life, or Lord and Master: A Story of To-day* (1874) and Frances E.W. Harper's *Minnie's Sacrifice* (1869), reflect a growing emphasis on higher education and its qualified possibilities for American women in the wake of the Civil War. These novels illuminate how women's fiction across racial lines made claims for educational ability and access for groups previously excluded from formal education. Pegged as writers of women's rights fiction and racial uplift respectively, Blake and Harper complement each other: reading *Minnie's Sacrifice* against Blake's account of educated white woman's reality brings into stark relief the myopic mainstream ideologies of black education. In the last decades of the nineteenth century, Harper became a leading black female voice through her novels, poetry, speeches, and religious writing, while Blake moved from novel writing to political advocacy for women's suffrage on the local level in New York State. On their way to becoming leaders in their respective circles, both authors seize the postwar moment of possibility to leverage new educational opportunities into hope for social progress.

Though Harper has been read as the leading example of the veritable boom in black women's writing in the 1890s, her earlier work has not—even since its recovery—warranted similar attention, and *Minnie's Sacrifice*, like Blake's much less read *Fettered for Life*, has not been considered against the educational context. Yet both novels focus on education in order to carve out distinct, if limited, opportunities for their respective claims about women's rights and civil rights. Blake argues for white, middle-class female agency in the Northern urban environment, reaching across class and ethnic lines to the working-class and poor Irish women

but cutting off Southern and black women. Harper counters this exclusion of the South, and, more important, the marginalization of the African American community by centering her narrative of national hope and unification on the educated black woman who brings together the North and the South. Conflicting as well as mirroring each other, the texts reveal the shared stakes for women's advancement in postbellum fiction while Harper's first novel establishes the mode of black educational fiction.

Thus, the relationship between these two novels is vexed. Despite the oft-noted connections between slave narratives and white women's fiction, particularly the abolitionist kind, the relationship between the two modes of writing reflects, in Hazel Carby's words, "the uneasy relations between organized black and white women" (4). It would be a mistake to liken abolitionist women's writing too easily with anti-racist or "uplift" fictions, as even the most anti-slavery white-authored texts contained problematic claims and contexts from the perspective of racial equality. The end of the war along with the passage of the Thirteenth, Fourteenth, and Fifteenth Amendments⁸ made abolitionism technically moot, but in spirit—especially for the black abolitionists like Harper—its struggles were far from over. Since the antislavery cause had been "the backbone of antebellum feminism" (Painter 169), women's rights advocates like Blake most likely also saw their movements undergo significant changes following Emancipation.

In *Fettered for Life*, Blake seeks to refocus women's rights conversations into the Reconstruction-era urban North, an emphasis she bolsters by extending her definition of white womanhood to working-class and Irish immigrant women. Like Harper, she focuses on single-sex, classically-oriented education for the main character for the purposes of preparation for public life. Both novels' protagonists use their educational experiences as the basis for their later

⁸ The Fifteenth Amendment, giving black men the vote, was proposed in 1869, the year *Minnie's Sacrifice* was published serially. The Amendment was not enacted until a year later.

civic life, one that involves more than the push for suffrage. In fact, *Fettered for Life* depicts the political life of New York City as blatantly corrupt and the voting process itself as riotous and vulgar, reflecting a system in need of wholesale reform. Highlighting the need for both access to the ballot and broader reform, Blake suggests that educated women can begin to effect change before gaining the vote, without losing sight of full civic participation as their ultimate goal.

Minnie's Sacrifice, too, envisions Minnie's education as the foundation for her racial uplift work in the Reconstruction-era South, while insisting that black women and their work should also be recognized for their role in uplifting the race. The novel launches black educational fiction by highlighting the educated black individual's connection to the community, the national scope of black educational issues, and the purpose of higher learning as means toward race leadership.

Race, gender, and education form a crucial set of connections between the two “political” genres Harper and Blake were writing in: racial uplift and women's rights. Each narrative includes female characters whose lives are plotted out based largely on their educational opportunities. By no means the same, these two texts function by metonymy, suggesting a connection through the central role of education in the efforts of reform and uplift during Reconstruction. The education of black characters, passing as white, becomes symbolic of the privileged opportunity of white Americans as well as the limits of black education. The education of women, in liberal institutions of their own, still leaves the graduates to face hostile families and employers clinging to prescribed social roles. Furthermore, the figures of passing—whether unwittingly flaunting the racial divide or deliberately dressing across gender lines—connect the educational aspirations of black and white women during Reconstruction. Specifically, both imagine educated women as leaders outside of the academy, helping bring about a shift in social conditions and views in order to improve both living conditions and

opportunities for both basic schooling and higher education. Black educational fiction, then, inspires and models narratives of success in a postbellum America that range from, at best, dismissively indifferent like Blake's depiction to openly hostile toward any advancement of black citizens. Proving individual ability and arguing for educational access for black men and women, Harper offers higher learning as a means of expanding the individual access towards the advancement of their community through race leadership.

Women's College and Women's Community in *Fettered for Life*

While not well known today, a hundred years ago Lillie Devereux Blake graced many catalogs of notable Americans, most often lauded for her role in the work for women's rights. Although her novel, *Fettered for Life*, was praised in its time as "a thrilling story...a powerful book"⁹ and deemed to be "among the most readable and notable books of the year,"¹⁰ her long literary career that began in the 1850s and lasted until the 1890s seldom emerges as anything more than an afterthought in those encyclopedic entries with a list of her novel titles. Curiously, some of these accounts omit her novel *Fettered for Life, or Lord and Master: Story of To-Day* (1874), citing instead Blake's society novels *Southwold* (1859) and *Rockford* (1863), which predate her involvement in women's rights organizations, before jumping to her more polemical writings in *Woman's Place To-Day* (1883).

The omission of the novel from these accounts despite its popularity might be explained by its generically ambivalent status. Like Harper's *Minnie's Sacrifice*, Lillie Devereux Blake's *Fettered for Life, or Lord and Master: Story of To-Day* (1874) stands as a transitional novel of

⁹ "Review of *Fettered for Life*," *Home Journal* 6 May 1874: 2. Qtd in Grace Farrell, "Lillie Devereux Blake," *Legacy* 14.2 (1997), 149.

¹⁰ "Review of *Fettered for Life*," *New York World* 14 April 1874: 1-2. Qtd in Grace Farrell, "Lillie Devereux Blake," *Legacy* 14.2 (1997), 149.

sorts, marking the move from the antebellum sentimental and abolitionist traditions towards postbellum women's rights fictions, even if the novel remains ambivalent what that new type of women's writing looks like. Farrell notes that *Fettered for Life* "looks backward towards the sentimental novel, with its emphasis on plot, and forward to the naturalistic portrayal of the industrialized world's class struggle" ("Afterword" 409). Further, like Harper's novel that reminds its readers of the continuing effort to move towards racial equality after Emancipation, Blake's novel continues to breathe life into the suffrage and women's rights movements¹¹. Both Harper's and Blake's narratives map the social and financial opportunities of educated young women in their communities in Reconstruction-era America. Where Harper highlights the racial restrictions placed on African Americans as the greatest threat to black uplift and women's progress, Blake finds marriage and culturally enforced financial strictures the main obstacle for women. Echoing each other's calls for the proper use of education and imagining different approaches for actively transforming the nation into a more accepting, healed community, these novels argue for pragmatic, democratic changes to make education matter.

Set in New York City in the early 1870s, *Fettered for Life* centers on the life of Laura Stanley, its college-educated and proto-feminist heroine who leaves her home in rural New York to pursue financial and urban independence. Unlike many antebellum sentimental bestsellers that

¹¹ Blake became involved with the cause of women's rights in the 1860s, and through the period of her active participation, the splits and splinters within the movement resulted in founding and reuniting of several national and regional organizations, most notably the Boston-based The American Women's Suffrage Association (AWSA) headed by Lucy Stone and The National Women's Suffrage Association (NWSA), the organization of Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton in New York. Blake was involved with the latter, until Anthony derailed her bid for the leadership of the organization following Anthony's retirement. For more of the complex dynamics of the movement, see Elizabeth B. Clark, "Matrimonial Bonds: Slavery and Divorce in Nineteenth-Century America", *Law and History Review* 8 (1990): 25-54, . For specifics on Lillie Devereux Blake's role and her activism in New York State, see Grace Farrell, *Lillie Devereux Blake: Retracing a Life Erased* (Amherst and Boston: Massachusetts UP, 2002) and "Beneath the Suffrage Narrative", *Canadian Review of American Studies* 36.1 (2006): 45-65, and Katherine Devereux Blake and Margaret Louise Wallace, *Champion of Women* (New York: Fleming H. Revell, 1943).

recount their protagonists' *Bildung* from childhood to marriageable womanhood, Blake's novel concentrates on Laura's life after college graduation. She experiences resistance and dismissal from her employers and faces the everyday struggle to make a living. She also witnesses the abuse and oppression directed at women by social customs, law, and even their own husbands. As a novel concerned with female suffrage, *Fettered for Life* contrasts women's character and ability with the dishonesty in the male system, associating a holder of an elected office—Judge Swinton—in the story with corruption and lust which prompt him to even kidnap Laura, albeit unsuccessfully. One of the key allies in Laura's life is Frank Heywood, a young reporter from the South who finds Laura on her first night in the city and directs her to Mrs. Darcy, a prominent female doctor. The widowed Mrs. Darcy becomes Laura's mentor in employment, relationships, and social justice. She helps situate Laura's experiences into a broader social context, and thus supports Laura's independence and the proper application of her education. She encourages her to apply for positions that women have not been permitted to hold before, and she supports Laura's artistic efforts by securing her a place at the Academy of Design. The narrative also brings Laura into contact with working-class and poor women: Bridget Malone, the Irish servant; Rhoda, a good-hearted woman who works in a saloon; Maggie, an ailing Southern girl taken advantage of in the city; Mrs. Bludgett, the wife of one of the corrupt judge's cronies; and Mrs. Moulder, Laura's landlord's well-educated but oppressed wife. Laura's closest friend and one-time school mate, Flora Livingston, on the other hand, is the wealthiest of the novel's women but also increasingly unhappy in her privileged life. Laura extends her help and support to all of these women, relying on Mrs. Darcy's advice to make sense of their lives, but only Bridget survives the novel. Although only Mrs. Bludgett is directly killed by her husband, the death of each woman traces back to marital oppression, forced marriage, exploitation, or other kinds of

mistreatment by men. One of Laura's central tasks, in addition to negotiating her own career and ambitions, is to make sure she is not trapped in a bad marriage. She ultimately marries Guy Bradford, a businessman, after many sentimental misunderstandings along the way, but the delays in their courtship also serve to make Laura privy to the realities of women's lives.

Since the recovery and publication of a new edition of *Fettered for Life* in 1996, the novel has garnered surprisingly little attention from critics. Much of the scant scholarship rests in the comprehensive work of Grace Farrell, who edited and wrote an afterword to the 1996 edition as well as authored a biography on Blake in 2002. In her analysis of the novel, Farrell posits that "In Laura Stanley, Blake presents a woman who is attempting to construct a different story for her life, one in which she can inscribe a self which is independent and artistically empowered" (*Fettered* 382). Though Blake has Laura articulate a very refined and feminine claim to selfhood by asserting that she "shall prefer the quiet paths of art and study, to the angry strife of politics" (68), the novel and its protagonist cannot help becoming entangled in political claims. That is, to speak out for suffrage and other legal rights, and to pursue a marriage of equality and affection over that of convenience and social position, are in themselves political acts in the novel's time and social atmosphere.

Though initially without a community in the city, Laura soon finds a mentor in Mrs. Darcy, the widowed doctor who prefers to go by her married rather than occupational title. Having witnessed Laura's potential during a visit to the fictional women's college, Essex, the doctor takes Laura under her wing since she can foresee and brace, if not protect, her protégée against the male plots to control women. In this way Mrs. Darcy functions *in loco parentis* as an extension of the institutional education Laura has received.

Still, Blake's protagonist must walk a fine line: she seeks to revise the category of full, active citizenship into which she simultaneously tries to gain entry. Laura's denouncement of politics notwithstanding, the novel paints her work as a teacher, as an artist, and as a potential wife as politically charged. A promising painter, Laura becomes an art teacher both in private homes as well as in Mr. Glitter's fashionable school, "a temple of learning to many of the daughters of New York's wealthiest citizens" (74). Accordingly, Mr. Glitter exhibits great care in selecting his teachers, but also exposes his sexism in telling Mrs. Darcy he prefers male teachers since he automatically assumes them to be the best. But beyond Laura's sex, what makes hiring her particularly problematic is her education: "'I regret,' [Mr. Glitter] said at last, 'that the young lady is a graduate of Essex. I have always felt that the teachings there are hardly such as to develop true refinement, [...] true womanliness, [...] and to fit young ladies for their real sphere in life'" (75). Thus Mr. Glitter voices the idea that women's education, per se, is not harmful, but it should only promote the traditional domestic values. The "real sphere", then, is the domestic one, and the repeated use of the word "true" brings to mind to the Victorian ideology of true womanhood. While Laura firmly rejects the domestic and submissive qualities of true womanhood, she still relies of purity and at least some degree of piety to ground her identity in respectability. Working within and against the social expectations for women, Blake's heroine is not radically subversive by modern standards, but her education poses a potential threat to the 1870s' status quo.

Thus, if Laura's sex marks her as potentially inferior instructor in her employer's mind, her education at a progressive, liberal women's college makes her dangerous. Even Mr. Glitter admits that the Essex education is "very thorough" (75), removing any doubt that the school's inferior standards might play a part in his decision, and he offers Laura a position, with a pay

lower than that of the previous male instructor deemed incompetent at his job. While this devaluation of women's labor seems culturally naturalized in Mr. Glitter's behavior as he considers "it quite a concession on my part to take her at all, considering her sex" (76), Mrs. Darcy links it to a broader social phenomenon regarding women's work and education; as she tells Laura, "Teaching is, after all, the one great resource open to our sex [...] and you, dear child, must suffer from the overcrowding of the one occupation, that is held to be within a "woman's sphere"" (76). Such structures, in Mrs. Darcy's view (and Blake's), are rooted in legal and social customs that naturalize the assumed inferiority of women.

Although accepting the teaching position at Glitter's—out of financial necessity—ostensible pegs Laura as a participant in the circular social logic that perpetuates these sexist assumptions, the novel strives to expose spaces of hope for equality and means toward achieving it within these structures. Just as Mrs. Darcy's guidance both encourages Laura to work toward equal rights and opportunities and also shows her the limitations of the (for the moment) unconquerable gender hierarchies, Laura herself becomes more than an instructor for the girls she teaches. She assumes the kind of mentorship position that Mrs. Darcy serves for her, modeling a female community to support equal educational opportunity for girls. Her reputation as an Essex graduate makes her students turn to her when Mr. Glitter forbids one of them from delivering the valedictory address as the end of the school year. Laura promises to accompany the girls to confront Mr. Glitter, though she soon becomes the leader followed "by a picket of little girls" (249). Mr. Glitter immediately turns them down, citing the "unwomanly" and "improper" nature of both a female speaking in public and other females wanting to hear such an address (250), and Laura's role in the request ends up costing her the teaching position. Despite this outcome, Laura's example has served the girls like Mrs. Darcy's example has served Laura:

the immediate effects of her words and actions are not known, nor really relevant, since the knowledge and experience of the girls has been enriched by the encounter with the strong female teacher willing to stand up for their cause. Her protest may have been unsuccessful against Mr. Glitter's power and patriarchal policies, but it also embeds in her young pupils a sense of female solidarity. Laura's actions argue that women's educational achievement should be made public, not domesticated, and that to pursue that objective, one must take a stand against unfair traditions on all levels.

Same applies in Laura's own life: although she can list French, German, piano, "good business hand," drawing, bookkeeping, and teaching as her abilities (36), the post-college life in the city proves hardly receptive to the idea of a young woman wishing to make her own way in the world. Despite the efforts on her behalf by Mrs. Darcy, she is denied bookkeeping work in a company that employs only men, and the non-teaching work she is able to procure sends her around town to sell books, only to be patronized (not in a good way), lectured, and accosted by her potential male clients (170-185).

Thus teaching, the "one great resource open" to women, must be Laura's initial occupation, but she finds it unpleasant and ultimately taxing, despite the fact that she cares for her students and they look up to her as the scene discussed earlier shows. It may come across as odd that a novel that I claim to be about education and pro-education would propose such a negative view of teaching: after all, Laura's teaching life is often marked by "monotony" (194, 225) and described as "drudgery" (247). Blake's point here, in fact, is to emphasize that teaching, though "open" to women, is not Laura's calling. As a Mrs. Darcy tells her protégée,

Once women were not educated, were not admitted to any professions, were not considered capable of attending to any business; now their education has much improved,

though it is not yet what it should be [...] the time is surely drawing near, when the last barrier shall be removed and the civil and political equality of women shall be acknowledged. Every one of us can do something to help on that time; you can yourself do much. (64)

The particular calling for Laura, then, rather than the available avenue of teaching, is to be “a really great woman-painter” (64), and Mrs. Darcy procures her admission to the Academy of Design to pursue that career path. While teaching serves in Blake’s novel as a temporary necessity for Laura, and educated women like herself and Mrs. Darcy are meant to solidify female representation as leaders in fields such as medicine and art, the impact of teaching is undeniable. The earlier example shows Laura’s effect on the girls in Glitter’s school and Mrs. Darcy’s mentorship figures crucially to Laura’s success. Further, since Blake aims to rattle the cage, to push the limits of acceptable female behavior within the novel’s educated, middle-class frame, teaching as the protagonist’s final calling would pack no punch. All this does not mean, though, that teaching is not valuable, but in the world where institutions, even the ones for female students like Glitter’s academy, are controlled by men and dismissive toward women, Blake’s narrative must map its mission both inside and outside of formal education.

Essex, Laura’s fictional New England alma mater, serves as an progressive institution affirming Blake’s push towards a future marked with increased women’s rights and equal opportunity for the sexes. Despite her rich but paternalistic father’s objections, Laura has been able to attend Essex with the financial support of a wealthy aunt, but while women’s supportive encouragement and guidance towards one another plays key roles in the narrative, Blake makes it clear to the reader that the source of Laura’s, as well as other female characters’, proto-feminism is not acquired through education only. Rather, lived experience brings out the feminist

tendencies of each character, as evinced by Laura's country cousin Caroline and her everyday version of the more refined women's rights talk in which Laura engages. A "rosy-faced, sensible girl, with a rough wit of her own," Caroline encroaches upon activities traditionally reserved for males: as "an accomplished horse-woman," she is "well-known for driving the best animals in that part of the country" (319). After a year in the city, Laura is startled by Caroline's impatience and fierceness, but finds a rural mirror for her desire for progress in suffrage and gender relations.

In fact, Blake uses Caroline to lend voice to one of her pet projects, women's school suffrage. Caroline urges Laura to consider "how wrong it is to exclude the mother from the school-board! They who feel the deepest interest in the education of the children must stand back, and let the men, who are apt to pass it by carelessly, decide everything!" (320-321). The question of school suffrage draws together the questions of women's ability, education, and suffrage. A micro-level victory on the path to full voting rights, and one that Blake was able to claim in New York City in large part due to her activism, school suffrage imbues institutions with women's agency that combines the institutional with practical knowledge and experience, mirroring the novel's message of formal education combined with activism, mentorship, and small victories that anticipate and work towards greater advances toward equal rights.

As a foil to Laura's educated striving, the novel presents the wealthy and beautiful Flora Livingston. One-time attendee at Essex, Flora never completed her degree due to her father's concern over "the reports about the place, [...] that the training was too masculine, that girls wanted to vote, and so on" (41). This has resulted in Flora becoming something akin to the stock character of a "belle" in transition. As Nina Baym describes the anti-heroine of the antebellum women's novel, "the so-called 'belle' lived for excitement and admiration of the ballroom in the

mistaken belief that such self-gratification was equivalent to power and influence”¹². Through her incomplete education at Essex and her desire “to have something to do,” Flora is left with a desire to write, but her leisure-class social role cannot accommodate that desire since her “friends don’t associate with literary people; they think any woman who earns her living is out of caste” (41). As a result, she comes across as a dilettante, her room strewn with the evidence of her bad habits in the form of “a half-completed novel, some tangled embroidery, an open novel” (40). The incomplete formal education along with her lack of financial independence and female mentorship leaves Flora under her parents’ control. The gilded cage of Flora’s life ultimately reduces her to a nervous bird unable to concentrate and demand her rights.

Like Flora, Laura encounters resistance from her father before leaves home after college, but Flora does not escape her parents’ control. When Laura wishes out loud she could help Flora avoid an unpleasant marriage her parents have all but arranged for her, Mrs. Darcy notes that “There is not much hope of that, I fear. A girl brought up as she has been, is rendered almost incapable of independence. A fashionable training so hampers a woman’s body and mind, that one can no more expect freedom of action, in any of its victims, than once can expect the Chinese ladies with their distorted feet to walk like the bright warrior Hippolyte” (161). In this orientalist analogy to the visual markers of Chinese women’s submission, Mrs. Darcy suggests that Flora, like her education and efforts, remain incomplete, even with Laura’s assistance. Although Laura is the one whose ideological stance is read as unhealthy by the likes of Mr. Glitter, Blake argues that the oppressive “fashionable education” causes irrevocable damage that is legible in Flora Livingston.

¹² Nina Baym, *Woman’s Fiction: A Guide to Novels by and about Women in America, 1820-70* (Urbana and Chicago, U of Illinois P, 1993 [1978]) 28.

Here, as in Mr. Glitter's response to Laura's education, *Fettered for Life* reflects the tension and expresses the potential of women's colleges in the nineteenth century. According to Carrol Smith-Rosenberg, the female students "seized upon this novel institution for reasons of their own and so transformed the women's college into a potentially revolutionary social force" (247). In Blake's narrative, the same is true for Laura and Mrs. Darcy, the main proponents of women's education. The progressive ideas of the women's college and its graduates are met with social resistance from both men and women in the text; after all, "[t]o place a woman outside of a domestic setting, to train a woman to think and feel 'as a man,' to encourage her to succeed at a career, indeed to place career before marriage, violated virtually every late-Victorian norm" (252). The novel's plot recognizes and aims to overthrow the notion that educated middle-class woman "remained a liminal figure long after college" (257), and the resistance Flora encounters from her family show the radicalism of such a task. If, as Smith-Rosenberg claims, the educated Victorian woman "had to create alternative institutions and careers for herself, since the normative world offered her no haven other than the role of a spinster aunt or the poorly paid and unmarried schoolteacher" (257), Blake aims to revise this script for educated women.

Flora's contested education at Essex also cuts to the heart of late Victorian concerns about sex and education since, for women, the college experience was supposed to only serve as "a pause in a woman's normal progression from girlhood to marriage" and "a contained ritual" (Smith-Rosenberg 252). As the characters of Laura and Mrs. Darcy show, a clear tension existed between society's expectations of female educational institutions and the goals of at least some of the women educated in them.

Through Flora, the most obvious victim of patriarchal social constructions of femininity, Blake targets both these societal strictures and the assumptions about biological difference used

to uphold them. For example, in his 1875 *Sex in Education, or a Fair Chance for Girls*, Edward H. Clarke posits that while women can, theoretically, achieve the same academic and intellectual goals as a man, pursuing one's education at the same intensity as male students will result in physiological damage as the intellectual, muscular, and reproductive functions of the female body compete for limited energy. In his push for different educational structures for male and female children, Clarke constructs a thinly veiled attempt to circumscribe women with the limits of physical reproduction in the guise of a kind of "separate but equal" educational ideas based on sex.

While Clarke's book appeared after Blake's novel, it is based on his earlier speeches, and it is unlikely that Blake would not have become aware of similar claims in the circles in which she moved. Ideas such as Clarke's, and women's responses to them, are likely to have been discussed among women activists of the 1870s. Through Flora Livingston, then, Blake counters Clarke's model and similar idea about the biological necessity of traditionally prescribed limits of feminine behavior. For Flora, it is the thought of putting her education to use as "a literary lady" that makes life "worth living" (328). An education cut short makes Flora more, not less, likely to become ill, and when her parents practically force her to marry a charismatic, controlling Mr. Le Roy, she becomes even more nervous and prone to illness. The one avenue of independence and self-expression she has left is her writing, a practice that Laura encourages along with studying, especially once she has married (265).

Yet for every effort of support she receives from Laura, Flora counters resistance first from her parents, then from her husband. Flora is trapped with her gently patronizing father and submissive mother, and Laura's attempts to encourage and mentor Flora are offset by her husband's controlling temper. He admonishes her for not being able to maintain an account-book

of her purchases—something she has never learned to do—and when one of the poems she sent to a journal has been published, he tells her she will never be allowed to publish another piece and burns her notebook (100; 341). The kind of work Flora wants to pursue directly opposes and excludes the work her husband wants her to perform, and the two are closely linked: Flora's passion for writing does not culminate in publication until her husband angrily cuts her off financially and she needs to earn money on her own.

These obstacles that lead to Flora's death emphasize how the ideologies of "proper" womanhood connect to and stem from financial and even physical control. Miserable after her husband forbids all writing, Flora attempts to drown herself, and although she survives a while longer, her message to her mother is clear: "Mamma, don't let any of the other girls marry men they don't love [...] Don't urge them to marry any man, however rich he may be, from any motive but affection" (350). Flora tells her mother that the marriage has killed her, but Blake maps a series of failures—her upbringing, her interrupted college education, the "fashionable" social customs, her subsequent inability to find self-assertion—that have contributed to her demise and that Laura and Mrs. Darcy actively oppose.

The third young female of the novel, informally educated but successful, is not known as female by Laura or any but the most astute of readers until the end of the novel: Frank Heywood, the young reporter that helps and befriends Laura on her first night in the city turns out to be a Southern migrant woman in drag, orphaned and made destitute by the Civil War. Frank's success in journalism offers an alternative route to success for women, but it also highlights the impossibility of this path for most females. In his gendered passing, Frank must disavow marriage and close friendships with his colleagues, trusting his secret to Mrs. Darcy and Laura alone. To forego having a family of one's own, though not unthinkable, comprises a great

sacrifice in the novels' world, and despite his success, Frank's eyes betray his melancholy moods. The victory gained through Frank's passing can ultimately be seen as pyrrhic, proving a point about women's ability but not contributing to the cause of women's right directly. There is, however, a sense of victory in Frank's ability to invade the halls of power and influence public opinion. As a woman, she makes for an enlightened man when it comes to equality of the sexes, and while he continues to pass, he remains an increasingly influential "man" persuaded by the women's rights discourse. Further, there is a sense of glee in transgressing the gender line. Finding out that Frank is indeed a woman disguised as a man, Laura "clapped her hands in delight," declaring the whole ruse "glorious"; Frank admits that it "is rather a large practical joke isn't it?" (364). Such light-heartedness regarding passing is entirely absent in Harper's take on racial passing, which functions as a means to a shared advancement: the figures that pass as white eventually return, bringing the fruits of their white education to benefit the Southern black community. In Blake's text, however, the gender-passer is a marginal character, someone who proves women potential in a clever but ultimately self-defeating way.

The novel ends with Guy Bradford's recognition and articulation of Laura's equality and the unfairness of the gendered double standards in social norms, after which Mrs. Darcy grants that he "may go to her" (379). Appropriately, he proposes to Laura in Mrs. Darcy's library, a safe yet progressive space in the home of the novel's alternative, educational mother figure. Ultimately, as much as *Fettered for Life* imagines women's education as personally empowering, socially transformative, and at times transgressive force, the novel does not reject the notion of heteronormative marriage and family. Like others in these early generations of New Women, Blake's strong female characters reject "the patriarchal family and their mothers' domestic lives," but saw potential for the "female-guided" bourgeois family (Smith-Rosenberg 257).

Fettered for Life achieves its happy ending by relying on education as well as women's community and mentorship. The lack of specific, reliable structures to achieve lives such as Laura's—or to achieve them with fewer struggles—emphasizes the tenuousness of white women's civic prospects in the early 1870s. Even as Blake rightly argues for fair chances for women like Laura, Flora, and Frank, the novel's successes rely on an enabling disengagement with the questions of race and region. As the exoticized Others of Reconstruction, South and its black residents appear in Blake's novel only to reinforce their distance from the sphere of possibility found in the North. The narrative portrays South and its people as static and devastated, in a state of nature that emphasizes the progress in Northern cities. Similarly, the benevolence between women, which reaches across class lines to the working poor and across ethnic lines to the Irish immigrants, leaves out the Southern black women.

When Frank Heywood and Rhoda, Laura's impoverished and uneducated friend, accompany the ill Maggie back South to her mother, Blake's text addresses the Reconstruction South. However, instead of linking the Southern efforts of reform and progress with the Northern ones for a national vision, Blake uses the region as a scene of fantastical, Old South wasteland that bring into Northern progress into high relief. The pastoral beauty of the South, in its "mad mountain-streams that were dashing down the hillsides, gullying deep the yellow soil, their bright waves flashing in the sunshine" (221), only serves to highlight the perception of dilapidated buildings and abject human existence in the region. The narrative's detachment from the South is evident when even the black children Maggie and Rhoda see become part of that landscape, as Maggie admires "a tumble-down house, with the gourds hanging on a pole in front of it, and the little darkies rolling in the sand" (222). Arriving at the train station in Maggie's sleepy hometown, Blake's tableau encapsulates the novel's categorization of the South:

Beside the station-house, the stood drawn up a tumble-down old carryall with a sleepy-looking black driver, and into this conveyance the two girls presently got; Maggie still feverishly excited as she looked with childish eagerness at every object they passed; the russet-colored scrub oak to whose branches last year's leaves still clung, the grass and flowers by the wayside, and most of all, the distant blue hills. A brooding stillness seemed to reign over the scene, and there was a spicy freshness in the silent air. As they drove slowly on they could hear the wild carol of some unseen bird's song; the perpetual chirp of the frogs in the low-lying swamps, the hum of the summer insects that were already abroad. (223)

The sleepy, brooding, and still South serves as an exotic backdrop for Maggie's return and eventual death. The Southern scene culminates at the small cabin of Maggie's ailing mother, Mrs. Bertram, and her "mammy," Aunt Phoebe. The only named black character in the book, Phoebe is a "very old colored woman [,] tall and gaunt; a dark calico, faded to dinginess with many washings hung around her bony figure, and a turban of bright cloth was wound around her head" (224). As delighted to see Maggie as she has been to stay with Mrs. Bertram after Emancipation, Phoebe embodies the stereotype of the faithful, maternal mammy whose emotional ties and dependence to her former mistress alleviate any white guilt about slavery; in fact, Phoebe has remained with her former slave mistress Mrs. Bertram even though her son lives in Richmond. After Mrs. Bertram's death, Phoebe "stood like a tall sentinel watching by Maggie's bed" (270), and when Rhoda begins her trip back North after Maggie, too, has died, Blake's narrator indicates Phoebe's utter dependence on white women, even Rhoda whom she has known only a brief time: "The poor black mamma seemed to feel that Rhoda was the last link between her and those that were gone" (271).

To counter such depictions of Southern black women, Harper created Aunt Chloe, a recurring speaker in six of her poems from the 1872 collection *Sketches of Southern Life*. As “an uneducated but decidedly informed and intelligent woman” (*A Brighter Coming Day* 33), Chloe topples the stereotype of the “poor black mamma” of Blake’s narrative. Specifically, Harper’s poetry affords more emotion and agency to the formerly enslaved black woman: whereas Phoebe stays with Mrs. Bertram despite having family of her own and seems to cling to even the memory of the former white master class, Chloe articulates both the pain of being separated from her biological children and the joy of finding them after the war. Losing her children hurt her “as if a bullet/Had shot me through and through” (“Aunt Chloe” 196); upon finding her son again in “The Reunion”, Chloe notes that “gladness filled my cup!” and, indeed, she considers herself “richer now than Mistus/Because I have got my son/And Mister Thomas he is dead,/ And she’s got nary one” (*A Brighter Coming Day* 207-208). The other poems prove Chloe to be sympathetic to the personal losses of white Southerners and dedicated to South as a region, but Harper takes pains to show the independence and meaningfulness of black lives before and after Emancipation.

Nothing in Chloe’s ex-slave status and advancing age stops Harper from making her an exceptional model for such black self-assurance and enterprise. In “Learning to Read,” Chloe counters both the white resistance to black literary as well as general questions about her ability to learn. “Aunt Chloe’s Politics” lays out her position of uplift and civil rights, condemning misuse of the newly gained ballot for black males—“this buying up each other/Is something worse than mean” (205). Speaking for education and racial advancement, Harper reroutes social commentary and power through the voice of an older black woman, often stereotyped for humorous effect, and endows that conventionally silenced voice with both authenticity and

legitimacy. Yet Harper still chose as her protagonist in *Minnie's Sacrifice* a young mulatta woman, inadvertently passing as white and given the chance at an institutional education that occupies a crucial role in both Blake and Harper's novels.

***Minnie's Sacrifice* and Harper's National Vision**

By positing a black woman, in life and in death, as the central figure for the future of American society, Harper amplifies Blake's vision for reform. She augments both the scope and depth of Blake's novel, tying together the fate of North and South as well as black and white Americans. Deconstructing the idea of distinct boundaries between the North and the South, Harper draws on African American history and experience to speak to the conditions in the entire nation. In her speech addressing the Pennsylvania Society for Promoting the Abolition of Slavery in 1875, on the occasion of the association's centennial anniversary, Harper points out that while the immediate goal of abolition had been accomplished a decade earlier, much work remained to be done, particularly in the South:

It may not seem to be a gracious thing to mingle a complaint in a season of general rejoicing. It may appear like the ancient Egyptians seating a corpse at their festal board to avenge the Americans for their shortcoming when so much has been accomplished. And yet with all the victories and triumphs of which freedom and justice have won in this country, I do not believe there is another civilized nation under Heaven where there are half so many people who have been brutally and shamefully murdered, with or without impunity, as in this republic within the last ten years. (*A Brighter Coming Day* 220)

In the tradition of the African American jeremiad, used earlier by abolitionist speakers such as Henry Highland Garnet and David Walker, this Reconstruction-era speech follows *Minnie's*

Sacrifice by little over five years and highlights that novel's attention to a national problem that Blake's narrative glosses over in its static tableau of the postbellum South. The figurative corpse of the speech evokes the ending of *Minnie's Sacrifice* where the novel's female protagonist lay dead in the hands of Southern clansmen. Though ultimately thwarted in her mission, Minnie uses her Northern education in her commitment to racial uplift in the South. She wages "a moral warfare, a battle against ignorance, poverty, and low social condition," items Harper's later speech cites as incentive against "the North relaxing its efforts to diffuse education in the South" ("The Great Problem to Be Solved" 219).

Despite the significant differences in the strategies of the two novels, there are points of connection between them through the complaint about the legal status of women. Minnie expresses—albeit gently—her insistence for the improvement of the black women's social conditions and leadership opportunities along with those of black men. In a speech at the National Woman's Rights Convention in 1866, two years before the publication of *Minnie's Sacrifice*, Harper relates her own legal troubles after her husband's death and echoes Blake's legal criticism by proclaiming that "justice is not fulfilled so long as woman is unequal before the law" ("We Are All Bound Up Together" 217). To contextualize this point of solidarity, she also reminds her audience about the sharp contrast between the lived experience and arguments of the white women's rights activists and their black counterparts also working for racial uplift: "You white women speak here of rights. I speak of wrongs" (218). Citing lynching and the economic terrorism against Southern blacks as the most blatant manifestation of injustice, Harper reminds her audience that "Society cannot afford to neglect the enlightenment of any class of its members" (217)—regardless of class, race, gender, or region. Echoing and adding to the

arguments of earlier black female orators like Maria Stewart and Sojourner Truth, Harper shows her consciousness for the overlapping categories of race and gender.

Harper's novel first appeared in serial form on the pages of *Christian Recorder*. As a genre, serial fiction might have provided a broader reach for Harper than a published novel because serialized novels and stories tended to more readily read out loud and shared among the journal's readership. Connected to organized religion, *Christian Recorder's* publisher, AME Book Concern, would not have viewed its mission as distinct from secular or political issues. The long history of debate over questions of race relations and racial equality in America was closely bound to the various forms of Christianity, whether those forms used their interpretations of Christian tenets to defend or renounce slavery. For Harper readers, as well as Blake's, "religion and politics, secular and sacred, were not carefully distinguished" because the "Afro-Protestant press rarely if even confined itself to what we might understand as 'religious' subjects" (Foster, "Introduction" xxv).

As Frances Foster Smith notes in her introduction to the novel, *Minnie's Sacrifice* is "a deliberate retelling of the Old Testament Moses story" and an "appropriation of Judeo-Christian mythology into African American literature" (xxx), but the inclusion of Christian elements does not make it a solely religious text nor is it separate from other American novels written by black and white authors. Telling a black narrative of freedom and citizenship through a biblical precedent was empowering, and not uncommon, and it even challenges Foster's term "appropriation" insofar as that Judeo-Christian mythology had been symbiotic with the lives of enslaved Africans in America since their arrival. Elements of Judeo-Christian mythology, then, in my reading of *Minnie's Sacrifice* signifies not a "Christianized" or white-centered religious influence over the black narrative but rather a set of shared—among all Americans—cultural and

social references that have circulated broadly, and for many different and opposing purposes, in the nation's cultural imagination since its inception. Although Harper's novel aims to reach black readers, even white audiences would have easily connected the story of Moses to abolitionist rhetoric and the famous "Moses," Harriet Tubman. As Melba Joyce Boyd points out in her biography of Frances E.W. Harper, "Harper's admiration of Tubman as a female Moses figure reinforces the role of women in the struggle for freedom" (Boyd 85).

The twin themes of *Minnie's Sacrifice*—the Moses story and education—are present in the text from the very beginning. The book opens with a juxtaposition of the powerlessness of Southern slaves and the potential power of education. The daughter of a white slaveowner LeCroix, Camilla saves an orphaned black infant that will grow into Louis, the story's male protagonist and Minnie's husband, from a lowly slave cabin, and convinces her father to allow her to raise the light-skinned child as white. The story of white benevolence in the face of brutal southern slavery recalls a sentimental abolitionist novel, but Harper takes pains to show her reader that Camilla's actions are not based solely on Christian good will or the right sentiments. Although Camilla has been reading the biblical story of Moses "till [she] cried" and envisions herself as doing something like "that good princess" (5), she nevertheless refuses to declare herself an abolitionist:

"No, Pa, I am not an Abolitionist. I heard some of them talk when I was in New York, and I think they are horrid creatures; but, Pa, this child is so white, nobody would ever know that he had one drop of Negro blood in his veins." (6)

It is not, then, Camilla's good heart or understanding of the workings of slavery despite her privileged access to biblical, formal, and practical knowledge that draws her to help Louis;

rather, the whiteness of his skin mesmerizes her and she is appalled at the prospect of someone so white being enslaved.

To make her plea, Camilla finds her father, Mr. Le Croix, “seated in his library, reading Homer” (6). The slave owner’s reading habits bring to mind those of Thomas Jefferson, and like the founding father, Le Croix finds no imperative to change his views regarding black slaves in Homer’s writing. While Harper does not specify which of Homer’s works Camilla’s father is studying, it is fairly safe to assume that, given their criticism of Jefferson’s mapping of racial hierarchies in his *Notes on the State of Virginia*, many black readers of the nineteenth century would have been reminded of Jefferson’s infamous “Query XIV: Law,” where he divorces American slavery from its Roman predecessor. Quoting Homer’s claim that enslaving a man “takes half his worth away,” Jefferson relies on proto-eugenic, racist thinking to justify postponing emancipation due to the exceptional nature of American slavery:

Among the Romans emancipation required but one effort. The slave, when made free, might mix with, without staining the blood of his master. But with us a second is necessary, unknown to history. When freed, [the African American slave] is to be removed beyond the reach of admixture. (Jefferson 143)

The association here links Le Croix with Jefferson’s polemic that underscores both the racist thinking in the nation’s history as well as the hypocrisy of the founding father in eschewing miscegenation in his writing while pursuing a well-known sexual relationship with one of his slaves.

Further, in portraying Le Croix as a Southern slave owner and placing a book of Homer in his hands, Harper emphasizes the limits of antebellum white education in the South. Both Camilla’s naïve reading of the Bible as well as her seemingly educated father’s complacency

with the inhuman practices of slavery undercut their position as respectable citizens. In fact, Camilla points out that her father “take[s] no part in politics. You shut yourself up in your library, year after year, and pour over your musty books, and hardly any one knows whether you are dead or alive” (7). Le Croix’s complete lack of political participation and the uselessness of his knowledge—alone with his “musty books”—set up a stark contrast to both Louis and Minnie’s educated, participatory citizenship later in the novel.

The white father and daughter stand in Harper’s novel as cautionary markers of unstructured, misused education and misguided literary life. Mr. Le Croix’s passion for literature and art borders on perversion as the decadent “velvet carpets” and “magnificence” of his library and estate seem to have suffocated his wife, turning him and his daughter even more inward after the death of Mrs. Le Croix. Instead of providing engagement with society, Camilla’s education was “superintended” by her father” and left her “with very little knowledge of the world, except what she learned from books” (10). While book learning provides an appearance of a broader intellectual life outside of the plantation, it also enables a level of denial on the part of Camilla and her father. In lieu of practical knowledge and formal education, Camilla relies on her feelings and “no law but her own will” (10). The inward lifestyle on her father’s plantation has provided Camilla with neither the mental structures that proponents of classical education ascribe as its benefits, nor the kind of female community described in Blake’s novel to help develop a contextual, pragmatic understanding of what she knows.

Camilla’s inward-turned education mimics that of Frank Heywood, the Southern woman passing as a male in Blake’s novel. As Frank describes his childhood:

I was born in the South, as you know. I was the only child and my mother died giving me birth. My father, who loved her passionately, never remarried but devoted himself to my

education. I lived with him on a lonely plantation and, less restrained by conventionalities than most girls, was his companion in his rides, his walks, and even in the athletic sports of which he unusually fond so I grew up remarkably strong and vigorous. (365).

The enclosed Southern education and lack of female community stand as the cause of Frank's difference, which in Blake's story might allude to inversion in the nineteenth-century sense of same-sex desire for the cross-dressing Frank. Even though Camilla eventually overcomes, at least in part, the prejudices among which she was raised, the isolated Southern upbringing and education serve in both novels as the key source of Southern divergence from the norm, one which Blake celebrates yet marginalizes and Harper aims to defuse.

Thus in order to learn and mature, Camilla needs to encounter abolitionist arguments in an anti-slavery meeting, because, despite her close relationships with the slaves on her father's plantation, Camilla has failed to gain the practical knowledge of slavery's effects on those enslaved. It takes the abolitionist rhetoric as well as guilt over her own family's complicity in the horrors of slavery to make her question the practices of Southern life. In making Camilla the tentative conduit for abolitionist ideas, Harper allows the structures of slavery to be critiqued by one of its own. Camilla's awakening to a "good seed [...] which was yet to yield its harvest of blessed deeds" points to a stagnant and closed Southern habitus that cannot change itself without Northern intervention. Moreover, access to books and privilege do not provide the kind of an education that produces functional, contributing citizens. Harper uses the character of Camilla to set up a key contrast between her and the novel's black protagonists, Minnie and Louis.

Like Louis, Minnie is moved from her black family by her white slaveowner father, and eventually a Quaker couple in Pennsylvania takes her in. Both protagonists receive a Northern white schooling that works to highlight the gap between black and white opportunities in

American education. Along with her compassion, her education and experiences lead Minnie to sympathize with the civic obstacles encountered by African Americans: she reflects on the story of an “interesting and intelligent [colored] woman” she had met, a story that centers on racial inequality through education (46). Minnie had heard of a story of black parents’ hard work to educate their daughter in a society that resists black advancement, culminating in a rejection of this qualified and well-connected young woman for an assistantship based on the racial prejudice of the Commissioner of Public Schools (47). The evident connection between the young woman in the story and Minnie—passing as white due to her well-meaning Quaker foster family—highlights the arbitrariness of educational opportunity. Furthermore, this story sparks Minnie’s unease about race in America. Though Jim Crow laws and separate seating areas in churches, theaters, and trains are all mentioned in the novel as examples of unequal treatment of African Americans, education upholds and perpetuates such a “wicked and cruel” system (48).

Yet her foster parents allow Minnie to “return again to school with the secret untold” (48). Seemingly based on the time being unsuitable to tell the already-distraught heroine about her racial affiliation, the decision also reflects the necessity of the racial passing that enables Minnie’s white education. Harper never explicitly comments on Minnie’s imminent expulsion from the school if her blackness became known, but in light of the black woman’s story, the high likelihood that she would encounter immediate obstacles in such a case becomes clear. Consequently, when Minnie’s birthmother Ellen finds her on the streets of Philadelphia, the process of expelling Minnie from her school begins. Upon learning of her blackness, Minnie’s peers express a spectrum of attitudes about race: though some “don’t see that [...] it makes any difference in her,” others believe that “[t]here are plenty of colored schools; let her go to them” (55). Ultimately, with “the sentiment of the school divided” much like that of the nation, the

institution acts “according to the prejudices of the society” and expels its black student. Although Minnie is expelled and receives no further formal education, the novel posits both Minnie and Louis as capable and meritorious students among their white peers—a comparison that would have been impossible had their race been known or had they attended one of the “plenty of colored schools.” The scene of Minnie’s schoolmates shows the impossibility of her being evaluated without prejudice if she was anything but white, exposing both white presumptions and black ability.

Like Minnie, Louis excels in his Northern education. Though the chapter that might reveal the most about Louis’s educational experience is missing, that experience ties in closely with the question of race (65). His college friend, who brings Louis to visit Minnie’s Northern home and facilitates their meeting, is a stout abolitionist, and slavery seems foremost in the minds of the young college students at their white Northern institution in the years just prior to the Civil War. Perhaps strangely, Louis, passing for white against his knowledge, remains loyal to his Southern roots and supports the status quo:

He is strongly Southern in his feelings, but having been educated in the North, whilst he is an enthusiast in defense of his section, as he calls the South, he is neither coarse and brutal in actions, nor fanatical in his devotion to slavery. He thinks the Negroes are doing well enough in slavery, if the Abolitionists would only let matters rest, and he feels a sense of honor in defending the South. She is his mother, he says, and that man is an ingrate who will not stand by his mother and defend her when she is in peril. (36)

With his biological mother Agnes, a slave on the Le Croix plantation, dead, Louis has been raised by the white planter class and shares their views. Nevertheless, his Northern education makes him more rational and more open to new ideas than his adoptive—and biological—father

is. Unaware of his former slave status and black lineage, Louis has adopted the Southern ideology that even his half-sister Camilla's proto-abolitionist views have not been able to shake. Despite his general goodness and Northern education, Louis's childhood environment of the enclosed plantation has lead him astray in his feeling and loyalties. Harper thus posits both Louis and Minnie as specimens of capable black citizenship, but carefully avoids endowing them with an intrinsic sense of race pride and abolitionism. Nor is there any inherent "rightness" in Northern or liberal education alone, or even book learning, for Minnie and Louis share similar educational backgrounds.

The Northern liberal education that both Louis and Minnie receive makes possible their personal advancement as well as enables a broader mode of uplift for their race. Though Louis "had plenty of money, a liberal education, and could have chosen a life of ease" (65) by the novel's end, he chooses to fulfill his duty and join the Union army. While Louis fights out of necessity, the narrative truly endorses Minnie's "army of civilizers; the army of the pen". After the war, the newly married couple returns to the South to educate people, both within a formal school setting and outside of it. Though easily able to stay North, and even pass as white, Minnie refuses such options because "there are lessons in life that we never learn in the bowers of ease. They must be learned in the fire" (72). Harper again emphasizes the value of the practical knowledge outside of books, academia, and elite circumstances in the process of racial uplift, even though it takes such educational opportunity and access to manage such "upbuilding of the future race" (73). That Harper's protagonists have come to a position to give themselves successfully to race is a result of several fortuitous incidents—hence the sentimental or romantic generic label her work often receives.

Yet *Minnie's Sacrifice* amply records the lack of opportunity for black youth, both in several stories of social obstacles and denials, as well as Minnie and Louis's access to quality education only by inadvertently passing as white. Thus Harper assigns the difficulty of postbellum uplift not to the particular circumstances of Southern blacks or their capabilities, but rather to the lack of appropriate opportunities for formal education among the freed African Americans. The text reads a bit more like a novel of protest or reform than a romantic and sentimental one when we realize that the necessary education and opportunities for the story's black protagonists can only be achieved through chance or outright miracles.

Indeed, education is a pervasive metaphor for all kinds of racial uplift work, including a mention—albeit a brief one—to black womanhood and domesticity, a topic Harper would explore in much more detail in the 1890s version of *Minnie's Sacrifice: Iola Leroy, or Shadows Uplifted* (1892). Though not formally a teacher like Louis, Minnie works among “the newly freed people”: “She had found her work, and they had found their friend” (74). While Minnie teaches her “scholars” the “womanly arts that give beauty, strength and grace to the fireside,” Louis focuses his school towards enabling industry, thrift, land ownership and prudent exercise of the ballot (89, 74). Still, Minnie also brings “book learning” to the homes she visits, and Harper assigns the task of such learning to the formal schoolhouses as well as the homes.

The appeal to domesticity in Harper's novel is worth noting: the independent domesticity and familial living taken for granted in Blake's narrative would have been relatively new in its unhindered form for the freedmen and women with whom Minnie works. Many black women writers of the late nineteenth century used domesticity and the respectability it afforded to craft reputable female characters in order to counter white-authored stereotypes, and Harper does so here and in her later works, most notable in *Iola Leroy*. The reference to domesticity works on a

more subversive level as well in this 1869 text: the middle-class family values it espouses were long denied the Southern blacks, and Minnie's teaching—though it reads as less radical today—brings the former slaves potential to begin accessing middle-class life. Despite its emphasis on domesticity in this section, Harper's claim relies heavily on organized higher instruction as a means of producing leaders like Louis and Minnie who bridge the regional and class differences to convey the benefit of their learning and experience to serving their Southern community.

In a final discussion of national affairs between Minnie and Louis, Harper advances a view that anticipates her famous speech a decade and a half later at the World Congress of Representative Women during the Columbian Exposition in Chicago in 1893; in her speech Harper told her audience they were “on the threshold of woman's era” (Carby 3). To “reconstruct black womanhood,” in Hazel Carby's words, Minnie asks her husband whether the newly dawning era of “the negro” is “not the negro woman's hour also?” (78). Minnie's argument for black women's suffrage builds on the need of black women to have agency and ability to speak for themselves in the political process, and moreover, the idea that the kinds of knowledge brought to the government by educated men might be found lacking: “To-day our government needs woman's conscience as well as man's judgment” (78). The kind of humanity Harper envisions through Minnie's words and work does not oppose formal liberal education—it, in fact, depends on it—but demands a complementary “conscience” that black women's experience can bring to what Harper implicitly indicates to be a limited set of knowledges used by those in power.

With the penultimate chapter of the novel missing, the details of Minnie's death at the hands of Klansmen remain unknown to modern readers, but Minnie's fate stands as prime

evidence of the necessity of education and uplift work throughout the United States during the Reconstruction. Minnie voices Harper's assessment:

“Slavery, as an institution, has been destroyed. Slavery, as an idea, still lives, but I believe that we shall outgrow this spirit of caste and proscription which still tarnished our civilization, both North and South.” (73)

Minnie's words reflect the obstacles and problems of Reconstruction in the time of the novel's serial publication in 1869. Enslaved in the era of legal slavery until she's transported north, under the de facto mob rule of Reconstruction Minnie is killed. The plot of *Minnie's Sacrifice* works as a warning and as a inspiration, a call to arms for that “army of civilizers,” and whose opponent is no longer an institution but an idea that animates racist practices. Thus, the novel itself as a conveyer of knowledge outside of the formal sphere of education carries an important lesson to its readers about the importance and limits of liberal education as well as its uses in postbellum America. Harper is asking educated African Americans not to “feel that your education is finished, when the diploma of your institution is in your hands,” but rather view education as a “stepping stone to a future, which you are determined shall grandly contrast with the past” (91). *Minnie's Sacrifice*, then, educates those already educated; though its serialization in *Christian Recorder* promised an audience of both Northern and Southern readers, it was educated Northerners—African Americans in similar circumstances as Minnie and Louis towards the end of the novel—that the narrative attempts to reach and educate.

In addition to liberal education and book learning, Minnie's agenda for the South includes making freed men “builders of machines and factories; the organizers of peaceful industry and honorable labor” (68). In the pre-Tuskegee era, the industrial and liberal education combined much more freely in the visions of uplift than after Booker T. Washington's

accommodationist speech in Atlanta in 1895 and the increasing mainstream push for solely industrialized and trade education for African Americans leading up to it. In fact, during the Reconstruction the modes of black uplift served a different goal: the “marriage between two mixed race characters, one raised in the North, the other in the South, is a call for unity amid Reconstruction era competition and dissension” (Cole 738). As a bridge between unschooled and formally educated blacks in both the North and the South, the novel geographically unifies the entire nation. The argument of education, then, for Harper during Reconstruction and in writing *Minnie’s Sacrifice* relies on demanding and imagining ways for African American education as well as working to inspire the very best use of that education through practical racial knowledge. By the final decade of the century, this argument has transformed into a different one—a polarized debate over whether black education should center primarily on industry and trade, or liberal arts education. Her most popular novel *Iola Leroy, or Shadows Uplifted* (1892) develops the themes of *Minnie’s Sacrifice* to meet the needs of the more polarized educational climate of the end of the nineteenth century.

In both of Harper’s novels, the figure of the light-skinned mixed race American marks the site of educational desires, opportunities, and limitations. Harper, along with other nineteenth-century black women novelists like Pauline Hopkins and Julia C. Collins, uses her mulatto characters to revise the trope of the “tragic mulatto.” The in-between, tragic mulatto character was a fictional manifestation of supposedly irreconcilable impulses stemming from the intermingling of black and white “blood” as well as the often-lethal misfortunes of their very existence as a result of miscegenation and taboo. Whether depicted as a warning against racial mixing, as an emblem of assumed improvement of an African bloodline through mixing with that of Europeans, or as a challenge to the mainstream polarized understanding of racial

categories, the mulatto remained a controversial figure, but despite its the embedded sexualization, objectification, and assumption of tragic nature, the mixed race character still presented a usable opportunity to writers like Harper. As Hazel Carby's landmark study *Reconstructing Womanhood* posits, Harper's fiction reconstructs the mulatta figure from its mainstream image of tragedy and passive victimization: novels like *Minnie's Sacrifice* and *Iola Leroy* portray each titular character "as a vehicle for an exploration of the relationship between the races" (89).

At the end of the novel, Minnie—like Harper's other female protagonists—chooses to cast her lot with the African American people and commit herself to racial uplift. As Leslie W. Lewis argues, *Minnie's Sacrifice*

presents white-skinned biracial characters as affirmations of race (that is, 'colored') consciousness; only because Harper constructs her characters as able to pass for white can they choose not to do so, and thus the novelist depicts a rejection of whiteness and an affirmation of blackness as a racial identity. (758-9)

As important as Minnie's rejected whiteness becomes to the affirmation of black identity at the end of the novel, it is also necessary to the development of a crucial plot point, as well as a political one, about black education.

Admitted to a white institution in Philadelphia and succeeding in her studies there, Minnie allows Harper to disprove allegations of black intellectual inferiority. In order to make Harper's point about black education, Minnie and those around her must believe that she is white in order to evaluate her scholastic performance without prejudice. As evidenced by her classmates' reaction once her black ancestry is discovered, her ability to continue her education at that institution depends not on her scholarly ability, but rather the comfort levels of her fellow

students who exhibit various degrees of racialized thinking. The school's administrators are unable to remove themselves from the prejudices of the day even as they acknowledge how unfortunate such social rules are. Though Minnie does not return to school, her work among the Southern black families and children offers her community a better chance at racial uplift. Furthermore, Harper posits this interaction between the educated individuals and the less-educated black masses as the site of growth in the black community: "the teaching that involves Louis, and most particularly Minnie, is reciprocal; and Minnie explicitly names the debt of knowledge that she owes the freed people purported to be her students" (Lewis 759). Lacking the single mentor figure like Mrs. Darcy in Blake's novel, Harper's story creates one in Minnie whose practical experience complements her formal education.

The novel concludes soon after Minnie's death at the hands of Klan members, and Harper steps in as the authorial voice to suggest to her readers that while "Louis and Minnie are only ideal beings, touched here and there with a coloring of real life [...] may I not modestly ask that the lesson of Minnie shall have its place among the educational ideas for the advancement of our race?" (90). She continues, more specifically: "The greatest want of our people, if I understand our wants aright, is not simply wealth, nor genius, nor mere intelligence, but live men, and earnest, lovely women, whose lives shall represent not a 'stagnant mass, but a living force'" (90-91). Given that her example of such black humanity dies at the end of the novel, Harper makes her case convincingly, ultimately arguing against "narrow and selfish isolation": as the novel shows, even education without a dialectical engagement with a broader community can lead to a "barbarous and anti-social state" (92). Having shown such isolation and barbarism in Southern history and enduring customs, Harper warns against repeating its mistakes. Through *Minnie's Sacrifice*, she argues for an American education for African Americans: formally equal to that of

white Americans, the higher instruction of her “ideal beings” becomes pragmatic and applicable to black life through communal interaction and participation.

**Chapter Two:
“In Preparation for High Positions and Large Responsibilities”:
Imperium in Imperio and the Curricula for Racial Advancement**

Unlike Frances Harper’s *Minnie’s Sacrifice*, which imagined the educated black individual as both communal and informal elementary-level educators, Sutton Griggs’s (1872-1933) end-of-the-century novel *Imperium in Imperio* (1899) reveals a broader institutionalized path for black advancement. In this chapter, I track how *Imperium* rethinks the mode of postbellum educational uplift. Harper calls on the already educated black citizens to extend their time and effort to the many others, especially in the South, who had no access to institutions of learning, and through Minnie’s sacrificial example, the main impetus lays on educated African Americans to reach out to the homes and communities of their southern milieus. While Griggs pays homage to the work of education and exchange of information on that level, he focuses specifically on institutionalized education for black children and young adults in the post-Reconstruction South. Within this framework, the novel reveals the mounting frustration of the lagging civil rights in the post-Reconstruction era, reflected in the white-controlled systems of education and limited prospects for educated blacks.

I argue that for Griggs, by the late nineteenth century, the nadir of race relations has pushed black leaders toward increasingly militant approaches, not despite their education but because of it. *Imperium*, set in the post-Reconstruction decades, depicts access to higher education as much more common than for the previous generation. Addressing higher learning both in a mainstream Northern institution and a black college in the South, Griggs argues that the obstacles in black education consist no longer matters of meeting direct resistance to any learning but rather embedded in the ideological structures of separate institutions, tracking students for a limited range of post-graduation work, and white-dominated practices even within

the black institutions. In short, as black education on all levels has become more common, Southern resistance to all black education has learned to collude with Northern philanthropy to control the kind of education available to black students.

In this novel—his first—Griggs captures the combination of hope provided by the greater access to education and the exasperation over the subsequent limited employment opportunities and second-class status in the mainstream society. A Baptist minister educated in Texas and Virginia, Griggs founded Orion Publishing Company in Nashville in 1901 to support the black community as well as his own writing career, and he went on to publish four more novels and several pamphlets and tracts in the twentieth century.¹³ His later work was much more integrationist than *Imperium*, which is most often characterized as militant. This shift in his thinking resulted largely from his disappointing effort to become a race leader like his early hero W.E.B. Du Bois.¹⁴ Griggs's concern over the possibilities of black independence reveals the urgency of his call to counter just such discouragement through independent black community and its educated leaders in *Imperium in Imperio*.

Set in the South, the novel follows black dual protagonists, a light-skinned and wealthy Bernard Belgrave and dark-skinned and poor Belton Piedmont, through their formal education to adulthood during the last quarter of the nineteenth century. As best friends, the boys excel in school when they are pitted against one another by a white teacher who favors Bernard, and they part ways as Bernard heads to Harvard for his college education while Belton attends Stowe, a

¹³ Griggs's novels after *Imperium in Imperio* include *Overshadowed* (1901), *Unfettered* (1902), *The Hindered Hand* (1905), and *Pointing the Way* (1908).

¹⁴ Griggs details his disappointment in his career and what he sees as a failure on the part of the black community to recognize the value of his written work in his brief 1914 autobiography, *The Story of My Struggles*, published by his own publishing company in Nashville.

fictional black college that stands in for the real-life Fisk University.¹⁵ Upon completing his education, Bernard becomes a lawyer; he is traumatized by the suicide of the woman he loves, brought on by her unwillingness to marry someone of mixed blood. Belton becomes a teacher, falls in love, and starts a family in Richmond, Virginia. His progressive attitude causes problems for him as a teacher and later as a journalist, and when his wife gives birth to a visibly light-skinned child, he feels betrayed and leaves town to teach in Louisiana. Bernard comes to his friend's defense after Belton kills, in self-defense, one of the men who have attempted to lynch him. Bernard's achievements convince Belton to introduce him to a secret political organization, the titular Imperium: funded by a clandestine web of the millions of black citizens it represents, the organization is headquartered under the main building of a college in Texas. Bernard is elected the President of the Imperium, and his militant approach to addressing racial inequality and violence wins over Belton's more gradualist approach. Unable to reconcile his patriotism to the United States with his loyalty to the Imperium, Belton leaves the organization knowing that such an action is punishable by death. His death is made more tragic when he returns home before his execution to find his now grown son with darker skin and a significant resemblance to Belton himself. Bernard is driven mad by Belton's death and the sum of his experiences that have radicalized him, but the threat of the Imperium's plans for a violent secession of Texas as a black nation is defused when a member comes forward to expose the plan, providing the concluding words for the novel.

Moving beyond the early criticism that pegged Griggs as a precursor for militant black nationalism, I show how the novel draws and comments on the scene of higher education in the post-Reconstruction era. While more recent readings of *Imperium* have sought to broaden our

¹⁵ Both Fisk and the fictional Stowe University are located in Nashville, and "established in the South by Northern philanthropy, for the higher education of the Negro" (*Imperium*, 49).

understanding of the novel, often considered ambivalent and difficult to interpret, they have not sufficiently addressed its connection to education.¹⁶ I remedy this oversight by reading Griggs's narrative together with curricular archives of Harvard and Fisk whose annual catalogs from the 1870s and 80s reveal how the black college functioned as a setting for formal and informal education for black leaders in ways that schools like Harvard could not. I contend that this connection to higher education forms the novel's central component: Griggs launches a complaint about the limitations of the white-controlled educational opportunities while also presenting a model of engaged, activist learning rooted, and needed, in the black community.

In this chapter, I first analyze the curricular archives of Harvard and Fisk to map the scene of higher education against which Griggs's novel is set. Next, I situate *Imperium* within the matrix of its critical reception and locate Griggs's position as a nineteenth-century New Negro, separate from both the slavery-era black life as well as the modern New Negro mentality of the early twentieth century. Turning to the novel, I show how Griggs envisions empowerment for an independent black community through educated leaders and separation from the oppressive mainstream.

Harvard and Fisk

Founded in 1636 in Cambridge, Massachusetts, Harvard thrived on the classic English college course driven by Puritan philosophy for nearly two centuries. The school became secularized in 1805 when it came under the control of Unitarians, and within the period covered in Griggs's novel, Harvard President Charles Eliot (1869-1909) moved his college towards student centeredness by advocating for an elective system.

¹⁶ These include Finnie D. Coleman's *Sutton E. Griggs and the Struggle Against White Supremacy* (2007), Maria Karafilis's "Oratory, Embodiment, and U.S. Citizenship in Sutton E. Griggs's *Imperium in Imperio*" (2006), and Caroline Levander's "Sutton Griggs and the Borderlands of Empire" (2010).

Griggs's depiction of his light-skinned African American protagonist as a student at Harvard in the wake of Reconstruction holds both realistic and rarefied implications. The first black students were admitted to the Medical School and Harvard College—one in each—in 1865, and the first black student graduated from Harvard in 1870 (Kennedy xx). Still, while African American students were not unheard of at America's oldest college, their numbers in the post-bellum and post-Reconstruction years only amounted to a "trickle" (xx) By pitting Bernard as a successful black Harvard man, Griggs aimed to show that Bernard was among the most talented and intelligent of the African American students, and indeed ready for grand achievements in life.

In many ways, Griggs's limited description of Bernard at Harvard seems to echo the scholastic achievement of one of Griggs's contemporaries, W.E.B. Du Bois, who was an educator and leading Black intellectual during the first half of the twenty-first century. Du Bois later recounted that "[teachers at Harvard] were on the whole glad to receive a serious student," and he went on to give the commencement speech at his Harvard graduation (Kennedy xx), but despite such success, Du Bois and his fellow early African Americans at Harvard were part a racially coded campus. Having studied at Fisk University prior to his acceptance at Harvard, Du Bois explains, fostered in him "acceptance of racial segregation" that allowed him to enjoy his time at the school (Du Bois, "A Negro Student" 74). Further, he notes having been "exceptional among Negroes at Harvard in my ideas of voluntary race segregation" (75). Du Bois, unlike many of his fellow black students, believed in independent black culture in America, but also might have chosen to isolate himself socially from the white-dominated culture at Harvard to avoid conflicts on campus. While Griggs does not mention incidents of racial intolerance at Harvard, they are recorded in the histories of the school.

Still, Griggs imagines Bernard's social experience at Harvard as more successful: "Many white young men of wealth and high social standing, attracted by his brilliancy, drew near him and became his fast friends. In his graduating year, he was so popular as to be elected president of his class, and so scholarly as to be made valedictorian" (85). Hollow in terms of connections to his friend Belton and to any black community, Bernard is encapsulated at Harvard in ways that move him further away from the race whose abilities he so aptly manifests.

Perhaps this is why Griggs offers a very limited view of Bernard's time at Harvard, but the novel certainly aims to articulate a more suitable education and outcomes for African Americans. While neither Harvard nor the historically black college meet the standard that *Imperium* posits, Stowe University, nevertheless, offers the more productive educational experience. In fact, to be able to enter Harvard means to hail from an unusual circumstance, one that cannot connect to the active communal networks into which educated black leaders should tap in Griggs's model.

The two protagonists, Belton and Bernard, learn and develop side-by-side through the years despite their different backgrounds. While Belton's mother reflects a re-imagined Southern slave-mother type, Bernard mother, Fairfax Belgrave, is a more traditional mixed-race character found in many of the post-bellum black novels, including *Minnie's Sacrifice*. Further, Belton's mother is poor and despised by a white schoolteacher, whereas the well-to-do Fairfax Belgrave as well as her son receive kind and privileged attention from him. As a tragic and mysterious mulatta figure, Fairfax does not provide communal connections for Bernard, but she compensates for this by making their home a cultural sanctuary:

Mrs. Belgrave was a woman with very superior education. The range of her reading was truly remarkable. She possessed the finest library ever seen in the northern section of

Virginia, and all the best of the latest books were constantly arriving at her home. Magazines and newspapers arrived by every mail. Thus she was thoroughly abreast with the times. As Bernard grew up, he learned to value associating with his mother above every other pleasure. She superintended his literary training and cultivated in him a yearning for literature of the highest and purest type. Politics, science, art, religion, sociology, and, in fact, the whole realm of human knowledge was invaded and explored.

(84)

Bernard is thus prepared with the finest of resources, something that Griggs acknowledges as valuable, and the limitations of Bernard's education surface years after his childhood and institutional educational experiences.

In fact, the qualities that Bernard's mother cultivates in her son do serve him well at Harvard and his individual career thereafter: he becomes the valedictorian of his class, receiving wide public acclaim for his graduation speech as does Belton, his counterpart at Stowe University (85). Bernard's success as a Harvard man opens doors for him, both in society and in his family. It is only after his graduation speech that he is brought into the home of a distinguished, white U.S. senator who is revealed to be his father. Helpless in the face of social pressure and racial prejudice, his parents have lived apart, despite having been married in Canada, his father appeals to Bernard to "break down this prejudice" (90). Secretly legitimate and secretly an offspring of a white political dynasty, Bernard finds himself more like his Harvard fellows as he could imagine. His father's expectation of Bernard breaking down the social barriers of race depends on the kind of paths to power that a Harvard man, a white senator's son, would pursue: the senator directs his son to become a lawyer, "labor hard and climb high. Scale the high wall of prejudice" (93).

It is this individualistic vision that, somehow, would allow Bernard's father to "own [him] ere I pass out of life" and for his mother to "have the veil of slander torn from her pure form ere she closes her eyes on this earth forever" (93). Urging his son to adopt his individualistic mode of advancement, Bernard's father accepts his own limitations as a white, powerful man and asks his mixed-race, educated son to effect change, acknowledging the powerlessness of white leaders to counter racial prejudice. His isolation from the black community, which has made possible his career at and after Harvard, ultimately fails.

Since prior to "the Civil War, every southern state except Tennessee prohibited the formal instruction of slaves or free blacks" (Roebuck and Murty 21), the city of Nashville was a likely site for Fisk University, the black college founded in 1866 by American Missionary Association and Western Freedmen's Aid Commission. Though not unique, as AMA founded 7 colleges and 13 normal schools between 1861 and 1870 (23), Fisk was among the more progressive of the Southern educational institutions for African Americans. It also served as the real-life equivalent for Griggs's fictional Stowe University in *Imperium in Imperio*.

Charter for the school was secured in January of 1867, and classes began in September 1868. The College Course, which offered the important liberal arts curriculum strongly associated with the kind of education long denied black Americans, was established in June 1871, and the first class for that course was admitted in the fall (*Catalogue* 1871). Fisk, and by extension Stowe, is then an institution specifically committed to liberal education. Nevertheless, the limitations on the brand new university were determined by the restrictions on black education under slavery, and Fisk was like other black "institutions which were designated as colleges and universities but which naturally were compelled for some years to spend their major energies in work at the elementary level" (Holmes 11).

By 1877, the school had already made moves to develop the college department rather than its normal department that prepared teachers for Southern black schools. This shows that the impulse was to think beyond the basic educational needs, something more than what Harper was imagining in *Minnie's Sacrifice*, and looked toward constructing a well-educated black citizenry within the United States.

Post-Reconstruction Curricula

After operating for over two centuries without them, Harvard began to administer admission requirements in 1870, testing the Freshmen hopefuls in Latin, Greek, Mathematics, Geography, either French or German, Physical Science, and English Composition (1876, 41). The inclusion of French or German, in addition to the traditional Latin and Greek, reflects the trend of more modern electives under the leadership of Charles Eliot. The entrance exam itself transformed marginally during the Reconstruction years but for the most part, remained focused on traditional texts and subjects. Since Griggs's novel values literature, language, and history as the main components of active citizenship, it helps to consider and compare Harvard and Fisk as the backdrops for the fostering black leadership in the late nineteenth century.

As Elizabeth Renker has shown, American literature did not hold a central position in the American university curricula in the nineteenth century.¹⁷ Still, composition and literature were strongly connected in the Harvard entrance exam, which expected the candidates to be familiar with English classics and, increasingly, few American authors as well. The exam itself consisted of writing a critical essay, or a "short English composition" on one of narrowed topics on a theme, character, or a scene in the text (1877; 61).

¹⁷ Elizabeth Renker, *The Origins of American Literature Studies: An Institutional History* (2007).

The first American text, Washington Irving's *Sketch Book*, appears on the entrance exam in 1877 and reappeared in 1884, followed by Nathaniel Hawthorne's *Our Own Home* in 1881. The texts and authors on the list were more likely to be removed and then returned than to stay from year to year, with the exception of William Shakespeare's plays. Despite the handful of texts listed, the 1881 entrance exam questions focused solely on two Shakespeare plays, *Hamlet* and *Romeo and Juliet* (1881; 234). The 1881 catalog also announced that in "1882, every candidate will also be required to correct specimens of bad English given him at the time of the examination. For this purpose the time of the examination will be lengthened by half an hour" (64). These specimens did not relate to literature, but rather measured the candidates' abilities in grammar and sentence structure.

The addition of the American authors to the list seems to manifest recognition of their importance in the secondary-level curriculum, even if they failed to warrant attention on the actual exams. The inclusion of more current and American authors on the exam list also reflects Eliot's changes in the overall mission of Harvard University as a modern institution that offers elective courses beyond the traditional classical college course. Part of Eliot's motivation stemmed from the influence of New England transcendentalism: in 1885, Ralph Waldo Emerson's "Essay on Eloquence" appeared on the admission exam list (67). Washington Irving's *Bracebridge Hall*, the follow-up to the *Sketch Book*, made the list in 1887 and 1888 (70).

The records of admission examination texts for English composition reflect Harvard's focus on New England through both Transcendentalism and the narrative of America that the exam texts created and extended. A young man headed to Harvard was assumed to be familiar with Longfellow epic poems *Evangeline*, on the list in 1891 (80), and *Courtship of Miles Standish*, listed the following two years (81; 85). Likewise, Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The House of*

Seven Gables, in 1891 and 1892, perpetuates the idea of American hope borne from the New England and puritan past. While Irving's *Alhambra*, sometimes considered his "Spanish *Sketch Book*," drew attention abroad, Emerson's speech "The American Scholar" appeared on the list in 1894 to solidify the American tradition as a New England one (139); the same year *Alhambra* was dropped to make room for the return of Irving's *Sketch Book*. The addition of Emerson's "Essay on Eloquence" from his *Society and Solitude* reflected the emphasis that higher education, both at Harvard and Fisk as well as in *Imperium in Imperio*, placed on oratory.

Meanwhile at Fisk, admission requirements did not appear in the annual catalog as its own category until 1884 (30). Given the comprehensive work of teaching black students on all levels, up to and including college, the 1884 catalog explained that the "peculiar work that Fisk University was founded to do, demanded that provision should be made for instructing students in all the lower grades" (30). The word "peculiar" here sounds an uneasy echo of how antebellum slavery was often referred to as South's "peculiar institution," but it also serves as a reminder of the school's accomplishments from such a starting point. The text on admission requirements, then, is much less detailed than that of Harvard and does not actually list requirements for admission, but it does, for the first time, reflect a controlled structure for advancing at Fisk from the more basic programs to the advanced, college-level ones.

The course offerings at Harvard University in 1875 for the degree of Bachelor of the Arts reflected a blend of the old and the new: ancient languages (Hebrew and Sanskrit), classical languages (Greek and Latin), modern languages (English, German, French, Italian, Spanish), philosophy, history, mathematics, physics, chemistry, natural history, music, and the fine arts. Most of these subjects carried at least a few prescribed courses, which were mandatory for all students, as well as with a broader range of elective courses in each subject. The prescribed

courses reveal what aspects of English and History, the subjects Griggs's novel most values, Harvard saw as the seminal ones for all of its students.

Harvard's mandatory courses in English centered around rhetoric, themes, and forensics (oratory), advocating the power of language and speech much like Griggs's novel and, as we will see, the curricula at Fisk do as well. The textbooks like Harvard professor Adams Sherman Hill's *The Principles of Rhetoric and Their Application* (1878) focuses on grammatical correctness and structure of argumentation, while the student work in several prescribed themes and forensics per semester of English guaranteed that the students had not only prepared and presented their own work but likely also accustomed to hearing the rhetoric and arguments of their peers (1877-78, 75).

Literature, which during the 1870s at Harvard meant the writings of strictly British authors, was an elective subject that introduced the students to Shakespeare, Chaucer, Milton, Bacon, and Dryden as well as the history of the English language. Novels and American authors were slowly infiltrating these college courses, though, following their appearance in the entrance exams. In 1879, Washington Irving's name appears among other authors in the content listing for the prescribed rhetoric course, and while the work from him was likely to be an essay on the life of Goldsmith, five years later the rhetoric course is listed under "Rhetoric and English Composition," a course that now includes Hill's *Rhetoric* as well as "Lectures on the lives and writings of Sterne, Goldsmith, Irving, Miss Austen, Scott, Hawthorne, Burke, Webster, Carlyle, and Emerson" (1884-85, 73). The inclusion of American authors as well as Jane Austen, a British female author, signals a significant change in Harvard's curricular direction under President Eliot.

The legitimacy and the spill of literature into the prescribed course likely stemmed the same impulse that brought about the introduction of another course at Harvard in 1879: an elective course on “Principles of Literary Criticism, in connection with English literature of the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries” (81). This course remained in the curriculum in the 1880s and likely helped push literature into the prescribed courses previously reserved for rhetoric and forensics only; other elective courses were offered in English literature, but not American literature which was designated a subject for lower levels of study than collegiate Harvard.

At post-Reconstruction Harvard, *Imperium*'s Bernard would have been well-prepared for the American history courses based on his primary and secondary education that emphasized the heroes of the American Revolution and the nation's Constitution. The 1870s' and 1880s' prescribed courses in history focused on general outlines of European and English history but often included an American component, like the textbook *An Exposition of the Constitution of the United States* (1860) by Henry Flanders, adopted in the prescribed history course at Harvard in 1878 (80). While elective courses were offered in “Colonial History of America” (1877; 79) and “History of the United States from 1789 to 1840” (1879; 80), the adoption of Flanders's book brings American history to each Harvard student in the College Department through a prescribed course, as did the inclusion of some American authors, if not American literature as a field of study, in the prescribed English courses in the post-Reconstruction era. These moves to include, teach, foster, and define American literature and history reflect a national quest for a new definition of Americanness in the wake of the Civil War and the subsequent Reconstruction era.

Unlike Fisk and many of the early black colleges, Harvard did not admit women, but in 1874 they began to offer examinations for women hoping to get a Harvard certification for their

knowledge and learning done in a home or tutoring environment. Only a few women took advantage of the examination for the first few years, earning recognition on either preliminary or advanced level in limited version of the subjects taught at Harvard, including English, French, Mathematics, and History as well as their choice of German, Latin, or Greek (167; 1875-76). In 1881, the examinations topics for women were conflated with those required in the University's admission exams, ironically highlighting the candidates' capability for study at Harvard where, of course, they would not be admitted (223; 1880-81). Nevertheless, that year an increased number of women earned their certificates, under both the old and new method of examination.

At Fisk, male and female students were welcome from the start, but Fisk functioned differently as a school than did Harvard: its "peculiar" situation demanded not only that the school offer instruction in college preparation and lower levels but also that the school's educational focus remain appropriate for its specific mission as a black college. From the beginning, Fisk University insisted on the value of a liberal arts education, as laid out in its 1877 catalog: while the Normal work has not been neglected, that of the College has been developed, until classes, though small, are in course of instruction through a complete college curriculum by a competent College Faculty. The first college class was admitted June, 1871, and was graduated May, 1875" (1877; 31). Within a few years of first opening its doors in an abandoned military hospital, Fisk produced a class—albeit a tiny one—of college department graduates.

While both *Imperium in Imperio* as well as the founders of Fisk aspire for quality higher education, Griggs's protagonists are in a rather unique position of being fully prepared for collegiate study upon arrival as Fisk's novelistic stand-in, Stowe University. Bernard's first-class education is by his father's design, it is revealed, as the schoolteacher has been hired specifically to provide him with the best possible preparation for further schooling and for his career; Belton,

without a white benefactor, received the same learning as if by accident, through his competition with his friend Bernard and in spite of the schoolteacher's distaste for him.

Because the reality of Southern education for African American children following the Reconstruction differed vastly from such unique circumstances, Fisk's student numbers reflect a largely pre-collegiate student body. Its first freshman class at the college department consisted of four students (1871-72; 4), and while by 1879 that number had risen to 20, the college department student count fluctuated between 30 and 40 in the 1880s (1879; 15). The college preparatory department consistently enrolled about a third more students than the college department itself.

What Fisk was best known for, though, was its teacher-training program, the Normal Department. Eight teachers graduated from the University with its first graduating class, double the size of the College Department's graduates (1871-72, 8). The numbers of future teachers grew steadily, to 48 students in the Normal Department and 198 in its lower level, the Common English course which prepared instructors for the common schools, in 1888 (31). The students at Fisk student-taught at the institution's model school, where younger students numbered around 100 on most years, adding significantly to the total number of students, which reached 508 in 1888 (31). Thus, despite its University moniker, Fisk catered to learners on almost all levels, and only a small portion of their work focused solely on the College Department program.

Still, those prepared for the College Department's liberal arts education encountered a curriculum somewhat reminiscent of Harvard's. While the lack of electives made the course narrower in its focus, the subjects were similar: Freshmen at Fisk studied Latin, Greek, and mathematics, and added French and natural sciences the following year; as upperclassmen they encountered history, English, political and moral science, logic, and constitutional law (1871;

31). Although oratory or forensics were not specified in the listing of courses, the catalogs remind the student that additional “declamations, essays, and original addresses required” and “[u]pon completing the course, the student is graduated with the degree of bachelor of the Arts” (1882; 16). Speech, as much as writing, comprised an important part of higher education at Fisk as it did at Harvard.

The English and history offerings of the Fisk college department curriculum echoed those at Harvard, but did not reflect the shift towards American literature and additional courses in American history. The course on rhetoric used a rhetoric focused on sentence construction, style, and genres of writing until 1888 when it was replaced with John Franklin Genung’s *The Practical Elements of Rhetoric* (1885), a more detailed guide (31). In the study of literature, Fisk catalogs simply note courses on English literature and “literature,” but based on the reading list of “Seven British Classics” in the Normal Department (1882; 18), those courses may not have included any American literary texts.

In the history and civics courses offered at Fisk focused on general history as well as national structures. In 1879, the students read Israel Ward Andrews’s *Manual of the Constitution of the United States* (1874), which offers interpretation of the Constitution as well as basic history of its origins and development (17). In 1888, Fisk added a course in Civil Government, using Jesse Macy’s *Our Government: How It Grew, What It Does, and How It Does It* (1887; 31). Significantly, Macy’s textbook outlines the federal and local government structures as well as parliamentary procedure in smaller democratic bodies like local organizations and literary societies, which were a key component of college life at Fisk.

Literary societies flourished at American colleges, but Harvard does not list its literary societies in the curricular catalogs. As extracurricular organizations run by the students, they

need not be listed in the catalog, and perhaps the number of them at Harvard would have made it inconvenient to print their information. At Fisk, however, the literary society is included in the very first catalog, with the organization's express purpose of "improvement in declamation, composition, debate, public address, and parliamentary usage" of the students (1871-72; 26). By 1877, the society has been named "the Union Literary Society" (25), a name that suggests a commitment to patriotism. In 1881, the Beta Kappa Beta Association was organized with membership limited to students in the College Department (24); the following year, a specific organization, the Young Ladies' Lyceum, was established for female students (24). Given the teaching in constitutional law, civil government, and oratory at Fisk, these literary societies represent a semi-institutional site for governmental practice, and the fact that they appear in the curricular catalogs in substantial detail suggests that the societies were closely connected to the education and racial uplift mission of the school.

In addition to the literary activity, Fisk also encouraged the mantra of self-help among its students and included a section titled "Self-Help" in the very first curricular catalog in 1871:

For the encouragement of those earnestly desiring an education and yet destitute of money or friends to aid them, it may be said that many such are slowly surmounting the every obstacle. Some of these defray their entire expenses by labor in the city or institution. Others do this in part. Nearly all, as they become sufficiently advanced in their scholarship, aid themselves by teaching school." (28)

Self-help was a crucial component of attending Fisk since there were few scholarships and student aid to go around. While no specifics are listed, the catalogs from the 1870s mention that funding for aid is collected from "Sunday-schools, churches, societies, and private individuals, resulting in a "limited amount" of aid (1877; 29). The Fisk alumni seldom became wealthy in the

early years while Harvard boasted over a hundred scholarships for its students during the same period. A stern notice for Fisk-bound students warned that “[n]o student should come expecting aid unless this has been previously promised” (1882; 22). Large donations for the school were also scarce, “a gift of 1000 trees and shrubs” notwithstanding in 1877 (1879; 27). When Mrs. Professor Spence, in 1888, secured “the endowment of six scholarships of \$1,000 each. By the interest on such scholarship, a student can be kept constantly in school,” the catalog noted, “one hundred such scholarships can be widely used” (54).

The main option for Fisk students who sought to earn money was teaching. According to the 1871 catalog, the “demand for teachers is in excess of the supply, and usually at remunerative wages. The students at this institution have, as a rule, obtained good positions” (28). Later, “[i]n the year 1876, no complete estimate was made, but one hundred and fifty [alumni] were known to be engaged in teaching” (28-29). However, the need for which Fisk was founded, to a great degree, was waning by 1882: “The demand for teachers varies, but thus far good teachers have always found schools at fair salary” (21). At the end of the decade, the catalogs no longer mention the degree of difficulty in finding teaching work (1888: 54). As the teaching pool in black schools of the South became more saturated, educated African Americans found it difficult to find work in the white-controlled businesses and organizations outside of teaching black students. These developments in education as well as the inequalities on the job market were even more evident by the end of the century when Griggs wrote and published *Imperium in Imperio*.

The Nineteenth-Century New Negro

"Cum er long hunny an' let yer mammy fix yer 'spectabul, so yer ken go to skule. Yer mammy is 'tarmined ter gib yer all de book larning dar is ter be had eben ef she has ter lib on bred an' herrin's, an' die en de a'ms house." (4)

Sutton Griggs opens the narrative proper, after a brief authorial frame, with this affirmation on the value of education in black vernacular, and further locates it in a domestic and maternal scene:

These words came from the lips of a poor, ignorant negro woman, and yet the determined course of action which they reveal vitally affected the destiny of a nation and saved the sun of the Nineteenth Century, proud and glorious, from passing through, near its setting, the blackest and thickest and ugliest clouds of all its journey; saved it from ending the most brilliant of brilliant careers by setting, with a shudder of horror, in a sea of human blood.

Those who doubt that such power could emanate from such weakness; or, to change the figure, that such a tiny star could have dimensions greater than those of earth, may have every vestige of doubt removed by a perusal of this simple narrative. (4-5)

The “mammy” is Hannah Piedmont, a Southern single mother to five children, including Belton, one of the novel’s dual protagonists. At the novel’s opening, Hannah prepares Belton to begin to his educational path at a school for black children in a building practically condemned. By positing the black “mammy” at the heart of black education achievement, Griggs echoes Anna Julia Cooper’s recognition of the value of black women’s work during and after slavery; for both, the “untrumpeted heroine” marks a key figure in social and cultural advancement of blacks

in America (Cooper 713). As the self-sacrificing slave mother type, Hannah exemplifies the Old Negro model in the novel.

In her willingness go hungry so that her children might be educated, Hannah makes the choice of physical and material self-sacrifice, but she also needs to contend with the idea of the psychological cost of education, both on her as well as on her children. In an effort to smooth the way for her son, Hannah “had intended to make a special plea for her boy” (15), but the racist schoolteacher, Mr. Leonard, has immediately singled out Belton for particularly cruel treatment after the schoolteacher was humiliated by a fall from the schoolhouse steps in an effort to avoid getting too near Hannah and her son. The teacher’s labeling of Belton “[a]nother black nigger brat” leaves Hannah expecting the worst, and she resolves to turn to her church parson for advice (9). Echoing her belief in the power of education, the parson declares that “[d]e greatest t’ing in de wul is edification. Ef our race ken git dat we ken git ebery t’ing else” (23). The preacher points out that under slavery, blacks were beaten for learning, so if such violent episodes accompany Belton’s schooling, at least it will be in the service of his education rather than to keep him down. Though simplistic, the parson’s words indicate the importance of education in the postbellum South as well as its complicated application.

As Peter Schmidt recognizes, the novel's opening presents a "rather humble scene of instruction" in which Griggs works to revise and rewrite the "mammy" stereotype for black women by showing that Hannah directs her energies into her own, black child rather than a white child she'd be looking after for money (76). Further, Hannah’s awareness of the importance of education as well as its costs to black Americans paints her as a smart and capable person and a necessary conduit for the future leaders of the race. By opening his novel of about a national black political organization with these images, Griggs reveals his respect for and understanding

of the role the “old” played in the “new”: the mammy and the preacher remain crucial components of Griggs’s formulation of the New Negro because, unlike the majority of the Harlem Renaissance writers, he rejects a severe transition from the former to the latter. The move from old to new in *Imperium* manifest in the *Bildung* of Belton Piedmont, a process rooted in the words of his parent, the self-sacrificing “slave-mother” that values education. Through the characters of Hannah and Belton, Griggs betrays signs of traditional as well as progressive thought, often challenging any sense of a clear binary opposition between the two. In this chapter, I focus specifically on the historically situated context of the novel around the time of its publication in 1899, not Griggs’s career-long development of racial philosophy.¹⁸

Though he has probably garnered more critical attention in the past decade than in the century following the publication of *Imperium*, the reception of Griggs’s work has always been vexed because of the formal characteristics of his fiction as well as his subject matter while the political pressures and literary valuations of the critical moment often imprint upon Griggs’s text the pressures of the specific critical moment. From the Harlem Renaissance to militant black culture of the Black Power and Black Arts movements to the on-going recovery of texts from the racial nadir, criticism of Griggs’s fiction in general, and *Imperium* in particular, reveals a trend of embedding Griggs as a prototype into an ur-narrative of whatever black literary mode is valued in the critical debate at that moment.

The need for such defensive posturing in reading Griggs stems from both the purported difficulty of pinning down his ideological stakes as well as the issue of supposed stylistic flaws in his writing. The most significant concern for critics has been Griggs’s characterization of his

¹⁸ Given his complexity as a thinker and prolificacy as a writer across various genres, the trajectory of Griggs life has been amply mapped in recent studies. Arguing a specific maturation of Griggs’s racial ideology, Finnie D. Coleman’s *Sutton E. Griggs and the Struggle against White Supremacy* (Knoxville: U of Tennessee P, 2007) charts the path of Griggs’s literary production from the early novels to his later non-fiction writing on racial cooperation.

two protagonists in *Imperio*, while the generic ambiguity and the structure of the novels follow suit in splitting opinions about the purposes of the novel.

The dual protagonists of *Imperium in Imperio*, Belton Piedmont and Bernard Belgrave, have been read as one-dimensional, though one critic suspects that “if his characters have a pasteboard quality, perhaps there is a reason” (Moses 206). Belton and Bernard, in their relative simplicity compared to modern protagonists with complexly ambivalent interiority, present critics with a dilemma of readings Griggs’s characters in a critical context that tends to devalue this kind of writing—sometimes sentimental, sometimes sensational, often humorous, always shifting.

Until recently, the answer has been to read these characters not as characters but allegorical representations of something seemingly better, or the entire narrative as exhibiting glimmers of something greater to come. One critic, William J. Moses portrays Griggs as a proto-Garveyist, while also recognizing the dual protagonists as representative of a black dual consciousness, most famously articulated in W.E.B. Du Bois’s formulation of “twoness” within the souls of black individuals caught between the “two warring ideals” of Americanness and blackness within one body (204, 207). The militancy and conflicted dedication of the characters have further inspired critics to think of novel as a “powerful precedent” to later writers from the Harlem Renaissance era (Schmidt 82); moreover, *Imperium* has been imagined as a precursor to the later black militant Muslim separationism (Whitlow 27). For yet another critic, “Griggs’s seminal work foreshadows the contemporary black revolutionary novel” (Peavy 219).

More often than not, a critical reading of Griggs’s *Imperium in Imperio* is predicated upon an assumption about the text’s anticipatory or prescient status, likely towards the Harlem Renaissance as the well-established period of valued literary production. What invites this

comparison is Griggs's use of the term "New Negro" in the course of the novel: "The cringing, fawning, sniffing, cowardly Negro which slavery left, has disappeared, and a New Negro, self-respecting, fearless, and determined in the assertion of his right was at hand" (62). Yet the New Negro in *Imperium* lacks such a clear distinction from the earlier imaginaries of the African American identity as seen in the novel's opening of Hannah Piedmont as a re-imagined mammy figure who nevertheless harks back to the self-sacrificing slave mother.

The problems with common readings of the novel are ones of definition, not of connection. That is, linking Griggs to the New Negro Renaissance of black letters during the 1920s in Harlem makes sense, but reading his novel as solely anticipatory of this movement ignores what the novel tells us about 1890s' black literature. Attempts to read *Imperium* as a precursor are limiting, even and especially when the critic is motivated to salvage and contextualize what is recognizable in the novel through the literary characteristics of modern black literature alone because to see the text as prototypical of the 1920s' New Negro mentality is to foreclose the differing meanings of that precise term in its own time. After all,

The "New Negro," of course, was only a metaphor, a trope. The paradox of this claim was inherent in the trope itself, combining as it did a concern with time, antecedents, and heritage, on the one hand, with that for a cleared space, the public face of the race, on the other. The figure, moreover, combined implicitly both an eighteenth-century vision of utopia with a nineteenth-century idea of progress to form a black fin-de-siècle dream of an unbroken, unhabituated, neological self—signified by the upper case in "Negro" and the belated adjective "New." A paradox of this sort of self-willed beginning was that its "success" depended fundamentally on self-negation, a turning away from the "Old

Negro” and the labyrinthine memory of black enslavement and toward the register of a “New Negro,” an irresistible, spontaneously generated black and sufficient self.

(Gates and Jarrett, “Introduction” 4)

In considering Griggs’s novella against the New Negro trope, Knadler makes a key distinction by recognizing similar multiple definitions and competing, contested meanings of the trope, yet emphasizing “that they functioned nonetheless to define a political subjectivity as well as cultural and social identity for African Americans” (Knadler 674). My reading posits that Griggs occupies this imagined space for a new identity by combining the traditionally defined Old Negro and the New, forging a model of black identity for the 1890s that depends on rather than rejects the continuity that identity from the Reconstruction and antebellum culture. In essence, Griggs attempts to model a turn-of-the-century New Negro without “self-negation,” even if the specific characteristics and modes of behavior for such identity remain delicate in his novel.

Some of the more recent work on Griggs has begun to develop more productive forms of recovery and reading: for instance, Adenike Marie Davidson’s work *Black Nationalism* in 2008 acknowledges Griggs’s “use of a double protagonist, not as a means of examining the double consciousness of the African American psyche, but as a presentation of the binary path facing the community relying on uplift—inclusion and exclusion” (54). Her historically specific reading understands Belton and Bernard as representation of the social options, with their possibilities and limitations, available to the black reader and citizen during the nadir of race relations in America. Hugh Gloster, one the only earlier critics to recognize the broader importance of Griggs’s writing, reads him as a precursor to the NAACP as Griggs’s novels are “race-motivated”, and *Imperium in Imperio* presents a “fantastic account of a national Negro political organization” (337). In Gloster’s reading, “*Imperium in Imperio* exhibits the racial outlook that

produced the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People and other organizations striving for the full participation of the Negro in American democracy” (338). The connection from *Imperium* to NAACP makes more historical sense as the time lapse between the novel’s publication and the founding of the organization is merely a decades rather than quarter of a century and up.

What these readings also salvage from the novel is its nuanced expression of a historically specific sensitivity to black progress. As Gabriel A. Briggs notes, in using Hannah Piedmont as an example of the imagined Old Negro, this older type is also treated with respect and given credit in the evolution of the New Negro (156). In fact, not only is Hannah credited with as a necessary connector for the development of the New Negro in the form of her son, Belton, but she is endowed with the potentially radical presence in the Reconstruction South: citing William Andrews’s “existential thesis” that recognizes the act of staying in the South as a form of resistance, Briggs argues that the novel’s setting presents a significant choice over escaping oppression to the Northern cities, and through the figure of Hannah, “the Old Negro resists through enabling action” (157).

In seeking to look beyond the novel’s depiction of black nationalism, Maria Karafilis focuses on the crucial role of oratory. She writes, “[d]espite its initial representations of the power of oratory and the mind to secure African Americans the right due them, *Imperium* reveals a deep, post-Reconstruction anxiety about the efficacy of such means” (136). Some such anxiety may be present in *Imperium in Imperio*, but “the failure of oratory to transcend the black body” (126) is not its message. I argue that Griggs formulates, despite any anxiety and precisely because of the need to resuscitate black intellectual life, a model of self-help through engaged education. Oratory, in the form of the speeches throughout the novel as well as courses

emphasizing oratory and forensics at both Harvard and Fisk, serves as a classical method of showing one's learnedness. The question of the potential of oratory can be useful in highlighting the inequalities in the reception of the protagonists' speeches, but for the purposes of the novel's representation of black education and self-help, public speaking remains a tool for racial uplift, not a means to acquire inclusion and leave behind the black body.

The resurgence of attention to the novel, particularly since the turn of the twenty-first century, coincides with sustained critical interest in hemispheric studies and criticism focusing on early U.S. imperialism. This concentration on broadening the sphere of American literary study to acknowledge transnational links drew from the 1980s' focus on Black Atlantic which argues for a more complex Pan-African experience in the various sites of diaspora; in the 1990s, the same impulse to break previously assumed national borders in order to recognize more elaborate literary and ideological currents was most prominently theorized by Amy Kaplan and Donald E. Pease in their 1993 edited collection *Cultures of United States Imperialism*. Yet Griggs's characters are aware of but do not act for or against U.S. imperialist missions because they are not the primary concern of the black nation-within-the-nation in the novel. The particular concern of the text—lack of civil rights for black Americans—is echoed in U.S. imperialist missions, but the actual political, ideological, and educational battleground for that concern lies in the South and the West of the novel's key locations of Virginia, Tennessee, and Texas.

Caroline Levander's recent article offers an a convincing and necessary corrective to the detached readings produced through Americas studies and U.S. imperialism approaches: focusing on Texas as borderland, Levander explains the specific potential for the territory in Griggs's novel as both a part of the United States as well as apart from the traditional

North/South split. She explains that such a possible third space, then, has a long history as an imperial borderland, persistently in flux, that provides a potentially transformative ideological and physical imaginary for black Americans in the 1890s rather than simply bolstering the argument against the imperialistic impulse that works to oppress and disenfranchise non-white populations at home and abroad. By attending to the specific, historical context of Texas borderland, Levander shows the importance of recognizing the region as “a borderlands South” (64) as a space of growing African American presence.

The alumni records of Fisk University reflect the importance of the borderlands South: when the University began including information about its former students from the college department in the annual catalogs in 1881, two out of the six alumni listed for the previous year’s class were teaching in Texas when no Fisk graduates were listed for that state among the previous graduate. Two years later, another college department graduate is a principal in Texas while the newly included normal department alumni include several graduates living in Texas: a physician from the class of 1875, teachers from the early 1880s graduates, and out of the five Fisk alumni listed for 1884, one is a teacher and another a principal in Texas (10).

Though not large, the increasing numbers of employed alumni heading west suggest that Texas offered promising employment to recent graduates after Reconstruction. Since the placement of Fisk alumni had traditionally focused on Southern schools, the move also indicates that the teaching work, along with other employment, was likely becoming less plentiful in the South. As the novel shows, the late-nineteenth-century South offered very limited options for educated black Americans, and this is one of the key aspects of the frustration that Griggs tackles *Imperium in Imperio*.

“What Will He Do With It?”: The Paradox of Black Education

Following the opening scene of Hannah Piedmont’s insistence on education for her son, Belton, they “marched forth to school, where he laid the foundation of the education that served him so well in after life”; further, “A man of tact, intelligence, and superior education moving in the midst of a mass of ignorant people, oftentimes has a sway more absolute than that of monarchs” (7). Setting up a path of basic schooling, college education, and post-graduate uses of education, Griggs portrays Belton as the “uncrowned king” of the school-room (7). The passage may come across as awkward, perhaps even mocking, to the contemporary reader, but Griggs’s narrative partakes in both seriousness and humor in ways that disallow a reading of his exaltation of education as purely ironic. The elements of humor, shown through Belton’s patchwork clothing and the slapstick quality of his childlike engagement with the hostile teacher, are juxtaposed by the realities of the school-room set in an old, condemned building too decrepit for white occupants (8). Further, as the black children play school in the teacher’s absence, they mimic the behavior of the teacher, from parodying his language—“Cum year, yer black, cross-eyed little wench, yen I’ll teach yer to go to sleep in here”—to pretending to beat each other with a cowhide (10-11). Though accompanied with laughter from the children who participate in and witness this play, the scene Griggs paints of the treatment of black students under white-run, underfunded school is disturbing, as we saw earlier with Belton’s mother’s concern regarding the physical and psychological toll of his schooling.

The educational setting Griggs depicts stems from a combination of direct and indirect effects of racism. Finding a teacher for the black school has been problematic since no educated black men were available, white men did not want such employment, and the work was considered unsuitable for white women (25). In his evaluation, Griggs leaves out black women

entirely; the role of “mammy” here is a crucial, supportive one that connects to but does not participate in formal education of black children. Nevertheless, Belton directly solved part of this dilemma by becoming a teacher, and his presence advocates for the concerns of black women as well as men.

The role of “mammy” in the field of education is an informal one. Hannah’s consultation with the preacher regarding education connects her concerns for his schooling to the religious community, while reciting out of a “blue-back spelling book” in Sunday school supports both religious community and educational ability (17). Though it resides outside of formal education, women’s work provides a crucial connection to the community, despite critical claims "*Imperium* contains hardly a single scene representing education as a communal process--though one might concede that such a possibility is vaguely suggested by the mother's speech in the opening chapter or the occasional references to black adult discussion groups like those chronicled in Elizabeth McHenry's study, *Forgotten Readers*" (Schmidt 80). The consistent presence of communal aspects of education can make it, at times, appear invisible, but in this scene of early education as well as later instances of higher education, Griggs constructs a pattern of educated citizenship based on, and functioning through, the community.

The racialized context of Bernard’s and Belton’s pre-college careers and their teacher’s pattern of favoritism culminate in an oratorical context to be held at their graduation ceremony. Over the years, Griggs explains, by pitting the boys against each other, Mr. Leonard has taught Bernard directly and Belton indirectly (28). Belton’s ambition and ability to learn despite conscious effort to hinder his education and prove him inferior to Bernard echo the kinds of self-motivated learning described in many slave narratives, most notable Frederick Douglass’s narrative where he remembers learning equally from the benevolence of whites as their

resistance to his learning, and becoming increasingly motivated in his studies because “the argument which [the slave-owner] so warmly urged, against my learning to read, only served to inspire me with a desire and determination to learn” (37).

The two protagonists set out to compete as “oratorical gladiators,” putting to use their learning of United States history and rhetoric at school (32). Mr. Leonard, once again, takes Bernard under his wings while shunning Belton, who nevertheless finds a white collaborator in a local congressman who is impressed by his talent and grants him access to his library as well as his mentorship (31). Belton’s active intelligence in the congressman’s library revises the scene of the Southern library space as a stultifying, decaying space in *Minnie’s Sacrifice*. The dynamism of Belton’s drive to learn with the help of whites as well as despite their resistance breathes revolutionary life into the white man’s library, turning it from a static space into a subversive one. Such a space, of course, was already available for Bernard at his home, but despite his lack of financial resources, Belton succeeds in gaining access to an equally impressive archive.

Both young men enthrall their mostly white audiences, but do not address racial discrimination, or even race issues directly; still, the superior dark-skinned Belton is denied victory due to the racism of the judges who would rather award the light-skinned Bernard (35). The speeches, especially Belton’s oratory on the achievements of Anglo-Saxons, reveal a political argument about race: “Griggs seems to parody [Booker T.] Washington's speech and white America's reaction to it,” showing that rhetoric trumps the reality among the white audience members (Winter 98-99). As the text of the novel only records the audience’s reaction to Belton’s speech and not its content, it is difficult to know the attitude Griggs intends for his speech to have. Given the generally trusting and genuine approach Belton shows towards

mainstream white culture, it is likely that his speech is not a performance without any sincere ideological investment in what he advocates in his speech. By the same token, Belton has also set up an elaborate prank to avenge the years of mistreatment from Mr. Leonard, since “[s]ometimes, even a worm will turn when trodden up” (37). That Belton’s small but significant early act of rebellion coincides with his speech on Anglo-Saxon civilization and his first cooperative partnership with a white benefactor suggests that the mode of interracial cooperation and race activism can coexist.

Imperium in Imperio insists on college education for both of the protagonists: Bernard, light-skinned and with seemingly unlimited financial resources, attends Harvard while Belton attends Southern black university in Nashville, Tennessee. In his move from the small Virginia town to a Southern city, Belton is participating in the quintessential New Negro action of urbanization, and importantly not in the usual Northern context (Briggs 162). Here Griggs imagines intellectual and academic ability as an equalizer between Bernard and Belton, but only to a degree. Despite Belton’s lack of money to attend the school, Griggs’s New Negro protagonist has other kinds of capital from which to draw. His graduation speech that mesmerized white audiences in person has circulated widely in the press, gaining him local and national attention as well another white benefactor.

While Belton will not be able to gain entry to Harvard due to lack of funding, his skin color, and social connections, his education at fictional-yet-representative Stowe University in the South is financed by Mr. King, a newspaper editor from Virginia. Educated in the North, King is “ultraliberal” (41) and recognizes in the speech “an unyielding love of liberty” (43). King’s benevolence helps Belton but also aims to teach him that not all white people are “worst class,” a lesson aimed as much to extend help across the racial line as to conciliate the potential

for militancy in Belton and other black men infected with the contagious love of freedom (47). By recognizing the potential for black militant action if equality and freedom are not extended to African Americans, Mr. King is both a part of the white networks of benevolence that funded much of black education in the South after the Civil War as well as an outsider within that system insofar as his Northern education allows him to see the venture of black education as more than charity.

It is these networks of white benevolence that create and support most of the institutions of black higher education in the South at the time. Most of these postbellum colleges were, as Griggs points out, “established in the South by Northern philanthropy, for the higher education of the Negro. Though called a university, [they were] scarcely more than a normal school with a college department attached” (48). Pointing out that whites control the college, Griggs can launch a critique of its limitations without pointing to any lack on the part of its students. While teachers, educated in the normal school, are desperately needed in black schools, the novel insists that there is potential for more in higher education of African Americans by suggesting that the college department should not be an afterthought to the institution’s mission.

The limits of such higher education in the South, per Griggs, stem from “the Old South [that] instinctively saw the danger to its social fabric as then constituted, and therefore despised and fought the agencies that were training and inspiring the future leader of the Negro race” (51). However, just as the New Negroes reflect their time, the region is, in Griggs’s view, “being formed in the womb of time” because of these black schools as “the receding murmurs of the scowling South that was, are lost in the gladsome shouts of the South, which, please God, is yet to be” (52). Griggs sincerely believes in the transformative power of higher education of blacks,

and casts in the specific form of Belton's schooling at Stowe. Not purely academic, his college career reflects his coming-of-age process for engaged black citizenship.

Griggs's take on education is a complex one. As Jane Campbell notes, "Griggs rejects the myth that education necessarily serves as a tool by which blacks can achieve material success in white society and replaces this notion with an emphasis on education as a process that should develop critical and creative thinking so that blacks can alter oppressive conditions" (49-50). These conditions are precisely why education is important, even and especially if it fails to create equality for the educated blacks. Additionally, the missionary societies that founded and maintained many of the black schools such as Fisk and the fictional Stowe occupied a vexed role:

They were part of the cultural and religious evolution of the South, they accepted an evolutionary view of societal change, they espoused the paternal social and racial relations of the South, they accepted the emergent corporate-industrial economic arrangements as modernization, and they were willing and eager participants in educating minorities. Although accepting of America's economic order, the missionary leader were fervent believers in education as a tool for racial advancement. (Watkins 15)

Thus the tools for black advancement were only partially possible in the institutions themselves, but as Griggs shows, the existing higher education, despite its limitations, offers access to the process for training black leaders. Unlike Bernard's experience at Harvard, Belton's time at Stowe prepares him for leadership through his engaged education.

Belton faces the gap between the black community and institutional policy at Stowe, which is where Griggs suggests that such issues can be solved as well. Upon entering the institution, Belton somewhat naively admires its mission, the teacher, and "a venerable white

preacher from the North” who speaks for the student about white benevolence and the role of black students in the nation’s social order: Belton is overwhelmed by the speech and his surroundings, of being part of what the preacher calls “an immense army of young men and women being trained in the very best manner in every section of the South, to go forth to grapple with the great problems before them” (50). This scene repeats during the New Negro renaissance of the 1920s in Nella Larsen’s novel *Quicksand*: the protagonist Helga Crane, teaching in the South at a fictional Naxos university, finds a visiting white preacher’s speech patronizing and stultifying, and the incident serves as the catalyst for Helga’s permanent departure from a school that she feels has turned into a machine that kills individuality and severely limits the futures of black youth. That Belton feels none of the same frustration in part due to his lack of experience and in part due to his time period. Griggs seems to project a real, though by no means certain, hope for a significant social change in the South even during the difficult era of the nadir, but he also does not expect it to come about from the white-controlled education without black agency and communal effort.

In the only incident narrated at length during Belton’s college career, Griggs weaves a model of a dialectical process that creates and sustains him as a nineteenth-century New Negro. When Belton sees the sole African American faculty member at Stowe—“a colored man on equal terms with the white college professors”—he “could not contain himself any longer, but clapped his hand and gave a loud, joyful, ‘ha! ha!’”(54). The shock of equality that draws such a bodily response from Belton’s “patriotic heart” is soon checked when he visits another school, as he finds out that unlike at Stowe, the food service for professors is desegregated (54; 58). To address the issue, Belton establishes a secret organization at the school, using “Equality or Death” as their clandestine password, with the “ambition and purpose to coerce the white teacher

into allowing the colored teacher to eat with them” (58, 59).

Forming the secret student organization not only manifests Belton’s abilities and potential as a race leader but it also holds two-fold importance in the novel’s message about the power of communal action. At first, the students at Stowe seem afraid to gather independently, as if “a fear of combinations seems to have been injected into the Negro’s very blood” (59). The right to assembly, a major civil right denied to blacks under slavery, seems inaccessible due to historical conditioning, but Griggs shows that such legacies can be unlearned as he chooses to model student potential rather than reject the existing, white-controlled higher education because of its flaws.

As all of the students deliver a complaint document, “dressed in their best clothes” with “a quiet satisfied look on their faces that the teachers did not understand” (59, 60), the power of communal action becomes evident. The president of the university reads the document and is visibly taken aback by the combination of rebellion and decorum—a model for Belton’s quiet resistance and activism—as each student holds up a small tablet with “Equality or Death” chalked on it, like a lesson (61). This very satisfying scene of rebellion that reverses the roles of the teachers and student proves successful and teachers’ dining areas are desegregated. It is in this scene that Griggs defines Belton as a New Negro, one whose education after the Reconstruction is part rebellion: “Rebellions, for one cause or another, broke out in almost every one of these schools presided over by white faculties, and as a rule, the Negro students triumphed” (62). Showing that black student did not approach their education as passive recipients, Griggs paints them as active participants in shaping both their own education as well as the white-controlled institutions.

Upon graduation, however, the late-nineteenth century educated African Americans faced an unreasonable job market, and the same is true for Belton. Here Griggs arrives at the key dilemma for the uses of black education: Belton “possessed a first class college education, but that was all [...] It is true there were positions around by the thousands which he could fill, but his color debarred him” (129). The limited employment options and racial prejudice make him leave his home, eventually pushing him westward to Texas.

Towards the Imperium

The scene of Southern higher education proves a next to impossible one as Belton assumes a position of a college president in Cadeville, Louisiana. Having gained the job through recommendation of the president of his alma mater Stowe University, he barely makes it to Cadeville to assume his duties as the racial pressures of the era unfold upon him. He is thrown off the train for breaking an unwritten Jim Crow law prohibiting blacks from riding in first-class cars in Louisiana. Belton’s ignorance of the rule and his demand to know why his presence in the car is cause for protest results in him getting thrown off the train, and the landmark case of *Plessy v. Ferguson* echoes in the novel as he walks to the next station.

Belton’s arrival at the college town reflect “two historical atrocities: Southern lynching and unethical medical research on black patients” as Stephen Knadler points out (689). Though not directly aimed at keeping Belton from assuming his duties at the college, the immediate reaction of the white locals to his arrival is one of curiosity and suppression, evinced in the town’s doctor Zackland’s wish to secure “the nigger's body for dissecting purposes” (154). Far from recognizing his intelligent citizenship, Zackland treats Belton as a body, a curio to be taken apart, but Belton miraculously and to some critics, ridiculously, survives both an attempted

hanging and being shot in the head. After feigning death, Belton attacks and kills Dr. Zackland in his operating room, an act of self-defense that promptly secures him a conviction from a jury that consists largely of men responsibly for his lynching. Now a respected congressman and a lawyer, Bernard takes on his old friend's case, and wins him a right to retrial by arguing the case in front of the Supreme Court.

This series of obstacles through which Belton retains his commitment to the America is indeed dizzying, and some critics see "an almost farcical disparity between Belton's experiences and his patriotic devotion, as if Griggs wants to confront the reader with the shocking spectacle of the black citizen's slavish devotion to the flag" (Knadler 687). Yet Belton's commitment to United States proves not merely a parody of his devotion: Griggs shows that he understands the circumstances that more than justify a reaction of militant anger while he also presents the potential of for intellectual, thought-out, moderate action that nevertheless sets its sights on gaining full equality. The novel does not use Belton and Bernard as sacrificial character for a complaint, but rather seeks to convincingly portray the ideological and violent barriers confronting African Americans while seeking a way to deploy education and communal action to break down those barriers. The fact that Belton kills Zackland, in self-defense, proves that Griggs's turn-of-the-century New Negro is not driven by but ultimately capable of violence (Briggs 169).

Still, the primary mode of public action for the New Negro must attend to the social atmosphere, largely dictated by the white majority in towns like Cadeville. Belton organizes an industrial department and lectures on young black men's duty to vote in an upcoming Presidential election, combining what Hallie Quinn Brown termed the "gospel of honorable manual labor" with the Du Boisian demand for full exercise of civil rights, yet both actions draw

opposition from his Louisiana town. The seeming impossibility of *any* black higher education precedes the novel's revelation of the black shadow government, the titular Imperium in Imperio, as the decisive and organized form of black community. As Jane Campbell observes, "[a]lthough Griggs's ideal leadership rests on an educational foundation, he insists that black thinkers must not forget their folk roots or seek to assimilate" (42). Griggs seeks to use and revise the models of higher education available for African Americans by imagining the kind of educational-communal action that successfully desegregated the dining services at Stowe on a national scale in Jefferson College in Texas, the potentially revolutionary site of black nationalism and intelligent citizenship.

The opposition to Belton's campaign of civil rights and education mirrors the resistance that many Southerners expressed towards black school and colleges. One solution to ease the tension between these institutions and the white residents of their towns came in the form of industrial education, a program that Belton adopts at Cadeville. Since he continues to advocate for black suffrage in line with the laws of the nation but against the white-dominated practice of the town, the inclusion of industrial training at his school does not make acceptance of a limited social role for his students.

While many Southern black colleges and universities, led by Hampton College and Booker T. Washington's Tuskegee Institute focused heavily on industrial education, Fisk University was hesitant about adopting professional programs. The following qualification marks the emergence of industrial training at Fisk in 1885:

While distinctly Industrial Education is not made a prominent or characteristic feature in Fisk University, all the methods of instruction and all the arrangements of the home life

in the boarding department are devised with the view of forming correct ideas and habits which shall help prepare the student for the practical duties and occupations of life. (37)

Seen a mostly pragmatic addition to the school's offerings, classes commenced nursing, dress making, and plain sewing. Two courses in particular—printing and cooking—were funded by the John F. Slater Fund for the Education of Freedmen, a fund specifically created a few years earlier to support industrial education, which put pressure on Fisk to offer such training.

The education of the dual protagonists manifests not only on their scenes of instruction and school life, but also in how education continues to figure into their lives as black intellectual citizens. These lives read very differently despite the similarities in the two men's abilities: Bernard, the graduate from Harvard, becomes a politician and a lawyer whereas Belton, after graduating from black university, becomes a teacher as well as a social activist. Driven by his father's call for Bernard to work on breaking down race prejudice that made it socially impossible for his parents to live together as husband and wife in the United States, his activism takes form through his position as a good representative for the race. That is, settling in Norfolk, Virginia at his father's request, he meets with black leaders in the community, works to help black defendants in legal battles, and ultimately wins congressional office; this life's work earns him the respect of the community and makes him something of a Moses-figure among his constituency (109).

The Underground Race Capital

The novel culminates in the revelation of the mass-scale secret society, “another government, complete in every detail” (190), that is the Imperium. After presenting the racial conditions of the nadir, Griggs “shows that solutions to a society's profoundest needs cannot be dictated to the

masses from on high" (Briggs 81). Moreover, the novel tracks the path of traditional uplift mentality of inclusion to its inevitable cul-de-sacs in the fields of education, civil rights, and labor. In line with the novel's fascination with history of the U.S. revolutionary period, the site of the Imperium's clandestine headquarters is Jefferson College in Waco, Texas. On the "borderlands of empire," to use Carol Levander's insightful term for Texas as Griggs's potentially revolutionary space, and under the ostensible veneer of the college lays Griggs's "race capitol."¹⁹

The reader is introduced to the Imperium as it unfolds to Bernard, acting on an invitation from Belton to join him at Waco. Like Belton after the birth of his presumably white son, Bernard accepts the invitation at a moment of personal tragedy after Viola Martin, the black woman to whom he had proposed, had committed suicide rather than marry the mixed-race Bernard despite her love for him, since she believed that such "intermingling was impairing the vital force of our race and exterminating it" (173). Traumatized but determined, Bernard receives the mysterious invitation from Belton at the precise time that he is ready to commit his life to the race struggle in Viola's honor.

After testing Bernard's loyalty to the black race through a series of threatening and potentially violent challenges, Belton reveals the Imperium, an underground national black organization with long roots but an increasingly important mission during the period of the nadir: since the "Negro finds himself an unprotected foreigner in his own home" (182) and the Federal government fails to protect him, it falls to the Imperium to augment and perhaps replace the role of the U.S. government. Unlike the Federal government, the Imperium both demands an educated membership as well as extends the necessary education to them. Since the Civil War, the recruitment for the organization always included "a campaign of education, which in every

¹⁹ Briggs uses this term while the novel simply calls the site "The Capitol."

case preceded an attempt at securing members” (192). Since the Imperium consists of and relies on smaller organizations across the country, Belton reveals that he has been a member of the organization since his days at Stowe (197).

In Bernard, then, the organization has finally recognized someone worthy when they “needed a George Washington” (198) as Belton offers him the position of the group’s first President. While his mulatto heritage has kept him from being privy to the existence of the Imperium until now, his commitment and dedication to the race has won him the trust of the organization’s governing body, a unilateral parliament where the representatives serve, and are recalled, at the pleasure of the majority of their black constituency. The parallel life of the organization offers hope to Belton, who “shares an optimistic belief that a period of renewal is imminent in the South if the New Negro understands how to utilize the tools of protest and resistance he has developed” (Briggs 168). Though never discussed directly, the representatives of the Imperium place their implicit trust in their ability to arrive at the best course of action through educated and informed debate. Kept abreast of all the issues facing the U.S. government, the Imperium parliament addresses each of them from the standpoint of the New Negro within the semi-rhizomatic organization through the nexus of the secret capitol.

As President, Bernard begins to publish an internal *Red Record* of sorts, a secret newspaper chronicling racially based economic terrorism and mob violence in the South (201). Following the insurrection in Cuba, of great interest to Imperium since” as the Cubans drew near to their freedom, the fever of hope correspondingly rose in the veins of the Imperium,” and while the U.S. Congress deliberates going to war against Spain, Bernard believes it is time to act to assert the power of the Imperium (201; 203). Griggs’s plot comes full circle as the oratory context of the their youth repeats in the form of Bernard’s speech to the Imperium parliament,

followed by Belton's response. These speeches delineate in detail the problematic facing black leaders on the national level at the turn of the twentieth century; at the same time, the speeches mark a significant departure for Bernard and Belton because their views on race activism and the role of the Imperium move from complementary to contrary.

Bernard's speech draws heavily from the world of labor and education to express his frustration, and he presents a militant proposal for freedom without detailing the specifics of the Imperium's relationship with the United States. He notes that African Americans can only secure brute work despite their education, thanks to the paradox of white-supported black education: "He will contribute to public funds to educate the negro and then exert every possible influence to keep the negro from earning a livelihood by means of that education" (211-12). He can find no explanation for the kind of treatment that blacks encounter other than a willed mistreatment by the white society: "They have apparently chosen our race as an empire" (218). Belton demands freedom in lieu of the current "slavery [...] in slightly modified form" (211), and puts forth a call to "strike a blow for freedom" (221). In the wake of Bernard's speech, the parliament is silent, hesitant to actually take steps to make public the organization that has flown under the detection of mainstream American since it's founding. Slowly the members of parliament suggest option to the increasingly dire racial conditions in America, ranging from amalgamation to emigration to Africa to war, and all suggestions are shot down (223).

This is when Belton speaks up from a position of black nationalism that cannot divorce itself from the frame of American patriotism. In "defense of the South" (228), he argues that the history of slavery, despite its cruelties, benefited the Africans by bringing them a language and culture through which they gain access to the greatest works of civilization; in short, there is "more good for which to thank God than we find evil for which to curse man" (231-2). Further,

slavery left blacks “in undisputed possession of the whole kingdom of labor” (233). Seemingly meek and accommodationist by comparison to Bernard’s militancy, Belton’s speech echoes the idea of self-help from the Fisk curricular catalog. Belton notes that blacks have been forced into business for themselves when whites would not hire them, resulting in an independent black workforce not susceptible to the kind of divisions between capital and labor that pester white enterprise (233). Regardless of the strength he sees in the black work force, Belton plots a gradual plan: “There is a weapon mightier than either [sword or ballot]. I speak of the pen. If denied the use of the ballot let us devote our attention to that mightier weapon, the pen” (246). The lack of demands, even for the civil right of the ballot, together with Bernard’s machinations cause the Imperium to accept Bernard’s plan, a militant action that Belton’s patriotic connection to both his race and the United States cannot tolerate. He “had learned to put duty to country above everything else” (259), even if in this instance his choice to leave the organization means his death in order to preserve the secrecy of the Imperium. The man who Griggs posits as “the world’s noblest hero” (260) is dead, and the novel returns to the seemingly impossible and transparent narrative frame of Berl Trout, a member of the Imperium, whose telling of the story is defusing, at least momentarily, the threat of the Imperium.

Having revealed the patriotic spirit and abilities of the black citizens, Griggs suggests that the only possible outcome of the second-class treatment of blacks is their violent break from the United States. He envisions black education as a means to race leadership toward the potential for such militant separation, if necessary, rather than toward the kind of uplift described by Harper. The power of leaders like Bernard and Belton stems from their communities at home and at school that support their education and finance their organization, and the black citizens have the ability to not only sustain and benefit from their educated leaders but also to buoy them with

might and money beyond the systemically limited opportunities that await them after graduation. Exemplifying what Kali Tal calls “near-future fiction,” *Imperium in Imperio* seeks to subvert the rigid mainstream practices during the nadir of race relations, and Bernard and Belton—well-educated and steeped in the American ideal of freedom—cannot remain under the unacceptable oppression of America.

Chapter Three: Finding the Way: W.E.B. Du Bois's Educational Fiction

In W.E.B. Du Bois's (1868-1963) first published novel *The Quest of the Silver Fleece* (1911), the young and uneducated black female protagonist, Zora, faces the prospect of book learning by exclaiming, "Don't white folks make books?"... "Pooh, I knows more that they do now—a heap more!" (29). This strict association of formal education with whiteness transforms in a later scene where a young man named Robert visits a New England schoolteacher, Miss Smith, at her school. While she pushes her promising student to pursue higher education at Atlanta University, Robert is resistant. He has been offered "forty acres of good land" to work as a share-cropper, and he wonders "what opening is there for nigger with an education?" (101). Zora's instinct that formal education is for whites only grows into Robert's embitterment over the lack of opportunities for black Americans who have gained access to such education. In *Quest*, Du Bois seeks a balanced mode of black education that bridges Zora's and Robert's perspectives and transcends them through educated race leadership. In this chapter, I show that the novel's solution, "the Way" as Zora calls it, stems from Du Bois's decades-long commitment to creating such a black educational narrative that binds his work as a leading black intellectual of his time to his fiction writing.

As a race leader and respected educational thinker, Du Bois was and remains best known for his non-fiction writing, namely the 1903 essay collection *Souls of Black Folk*. Throughout a career that included academic and political writing and activism,²⁰ he retained a connection to writing fiction, and the earliest stage of that career reflected young Du Bois's attempts to work out a plausible narrative of race leadership using the mode of black educational fiction. While

²⁰ Du Bois's later novels include *Dark Princess: A Romance* (1928) and the Black Flame Trilogy written in the 1950s and 60s. These texts reflect the attention Pan-African experience that marked Du Bois's political and academic interests as well.

Sutton Griggs's writing career overlaps with the first half of Du Bois's, Du Bois carries his educational fiction past the frustrated militancy of *Imperium in Imperio*.

I trace that writing from Du Bois's early attempts in the 1890s and the short story in *Souls of Black Folks* in 1903 to the publication of his first novel, *The Quest of the Silver Fleece* in 1911. The unpublished manuscript of "Fellow of Harvard," written in late 1892 and early 1893, consists of two versions of the first chapter for a novel of education. In neither draft is Du Bois able to imagine a satisfactory path for the black intellectual within the white-dominated, hostile educational context of the United States. Thus, "Fellow of Harvard" amounts to a dead end, both for the would-be novelist who abandoned the project and for the promising protagonists in the drafts who end up mad and in exile, respectively. Du Bois picked up the educational fiction again in *Souls*, in a short story titled "Of the Coming of John" where the title character John's education ends brutally at the hands of the hostile Southern community. That violent conclusion echoes the militant, sacrificial turn-of-the-century protest of *Imperium*, tying Du Bois into the genealogy of black educational fiction in the post-Civil War United States. It was not until nearly a decade later, in his first published novel, that Du Bois crafts a functional model of black education in his fiction by combining formal education with the life experience of black Americans and aligning this pragmatic model with the existing structures of organization in the black community. Further, Du Bois casts educated black leaders as the creators of social and economic advancement for African Americans outside of the white institutions that so blatantly hinder those possibilities.

Reading these fictions from the desk drawer to publication, from literal and figurative dead ends to a model for success, I argue that the culmination of Du Bois's educational fiction in *Quest* marks a transformative moment in the tradition of black novels of education. By casting

access to white-controlled formal education against the limited opportunity within the mainstream society, Du Bois crafts a narrative that finds a successful path for its educated protagonists to move beyond inclusion and toward a self-sufficient black identity.

By arguing for this culmination of two decades of work on fictions of education I recognize that Du Bois's work did not end with the publication of *Quest*, but rather that the novel marks the first successful negotiation of an educational narrative for Du Bois. Keith Byerman, who reads the novel as a utopian narrative, points out that "Du Bois consistently seeks to combine conventions of a fictional narrative with the realities of black experience in a racist society" (58). The amalgamation of real life and fiction made sense for Du Bois because he believed it to be his life's work to combine science and art, sociology and literature in particular, as he wrote in his journal around the time of writing "Fellow of Harvard": "these are my plans: to make a name in science, to make a name in art and thus raise my race" (quoted in Rampersad, 51). Not only does Du Bois bind his work in both fields to the cause of black uplift, but he also connects the two modes to each other. In his essay "Criteria for Negro Art," he declared, "all Art is propaganda and ever must be, despite the wailing of the purists. I stand in utter shamelessness and say that whatever art I have for writing has been used always for propaganda for gaining the right of black folk to love and enjoy" (17). Thus, for Du Bois, the mission of black uplift and the work of black fiction were irrevocably bound, always working together in the development of his model of black uplift through education.

Dead-End Education in "Of the Coming of John"

As Du Bois's best-known work, *Souls* reads like a mission statement for his life and for his art. It focuses on race leadership, civil rights, and education, and describes the key concepts that had

already emerged in Du Bois's fiction, albeit gone unpublished. Well-known is his concept of the Talented Tenth, the intelligent and educated top ten percent of American blacks to which Du Bois projected his hope for the future leaderships of the race. The essay that introduces the term was published the same year as *The Souls of Blacks Folks*, but he built on this concept in the book (Gates and Oliver, xxiii). In *Souls* as well as the other texts in this chapter, Du Bois's protagonists all exemplify the intelligence and talent of this group of race leaders. For them, the concept of the Veil poses a unique dilemma of in-between-ness. Du Bois explains:

[T]he Negro is a sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American world, —a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness, —an America, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder. (10-11)

This oft-quoted passage conveys not only a sense of otherness but also the ideological import of the perspective that such a position of otherness carries, a double-consciousness. The idea of the racial veil that separates the white and black worlds—especially for the educated African Americans who often gain perspective of both—carries throughout the fictions in this chapter where Du Bois aims to reconcile the two realities in a way most conducive to black uplift. The only short story amid 12 essays in *Souls*, “Of the Coming of John” presents the title character John as a member of the Talented Tenth from the South who earns his educational advancement at the cost of experiencing the “two warring ideals in one dark body.”

The text employs a communal narrative voice that some have contributed to the black community as whole. Wagers, for instance, finds that the “story moves between a solicitous address to a white stranger (‘And if you will notice’), a first-person plural narrator (‘we’ and ‘us’) who is of the black community but fails to penetrate the restrictions and contradictions it

entails, and an inconsistent free indirect discourse that provides access to the spoken and silent thoughts of Du Bois's protagonist, John Jones ('he')" (95). Yet the narrator of the story is at least at first identified not with the broader community but rather with the educational institution that John attends: "Up in Johnstown, at the Institute, we were long puzzled at the case of John" (143). The narrative, in a way, opens up a window to the learned readers of *Souls* to see the lived experience of a black Southern student. John Jones is a black counterpart to the son of a judge in his hometown, a white John. The boys' lives contrast in their educational opportunities, the townspeople's expectations of them, and their post-school opportunities, and the other, white John remains a twin and a foil for John Jones throughout the narrative.

Since John Jones shows promise in his studies, the black community supports him in gaining access to higher education with the expectation that he will return to his hometown and lead his people. This hope echoes in the townspeople's repetition of the phrase "when John comes" (143), which functions as a vague repository for their undefined expectation of how John's homecoming will change their lives. The white townspeople, in turn, fear that black John's education will "ruin him" (144). At the institute, John faces a rough adjustment until he grows up and understands what is expected of him, and "somehow it seemed to us that the serious look that crept over his boyish face that afternoon never left it again" (145). Having grasped the gravity of his position, John has outgrown his youthful self-centeredness and "left his queer thought world and come back to a world of motion and of men" (145).

At this moment of combining the "thought world" of ideas with the practical "world of motion and men" John encounters the divisive racial reality: "He grew slowly to feel almost for the first time the Veil that lay between him and the white world" (146). This intellectual separation, beyond that of the segregation in his rural Southern home, marks the incompatibility

of the black intellectual from the limited social roles allotted to him in the turn-of-the-century South. Growing bitter and angry, John does not wish to return home (146). Instead, he heads to New York City where he is enthralled by the big city. Following a crowd, he finds himself at a music hall, where despite having purchased and been sold a ticket, he is directed away when the white John sees him sitting next to his female companion and is subsequently outraged (147). Even outside of the constraints of his small hometown, the white twin from the other side of the racial veil limits John Jones's life, and angry, he decides to return home.

The educated John seems recognizably different to the people in his hometown because of his cool demeanor, his seeming detachment from religion, and his inability to meet the vague expectations of the black community. His education has in fact not only elevated him but also severely distanced him from the practical lived experience of the Southern black community. This alienation—his experience of living within the Veil that separates him from both the powerful white world as well as the black community—manifests in a speech he gives regarding his goals as a race leader: elaborating on his lofty goals and hopes for the future, John glosses over the everyday realities and ignores religion altogether. His lackluster performance in front of his black audience contrasts with that of a folksy, powerful black preacher who inspires the congregation in a way that John could not (149). John understands his predicament, concluding that, given such isolating effects, education makes one unhappy (150). Here Du Bois points to but does not expand on the need to transcend the Veil, to foster solutions for pragmatic applications of black education.

Rejected and reduced in his hopes, John turns to the one professional avenue open the educated blacks: teaching. Though an honorable option, teaching seems like a reduced option here because by the turn of the century, Du Bois's educational pitch is not one of access like in

the texts by Harper and Blake, for instance, but for educated race leadership. In “Of the Coming of John,” that leadership and its potential for transformative resistance to the white-dominated status quo is coopted in the teaching role. Such subordination manifests when John must petition the white judge, the father of John’s white counterpart, for permission to teach the black school in town. Here the judge summarizes the de facto rules of black education from the Southern white perspective: he claims to support “reasonable expectations” of blacks but also reminds John that “the Negro must remain subordinate” in America (151). Stemming from his fear of the prospect of black equality and social mixing of the races, the judge issues a reminder: “I knew your father, John, he belonged to my brother, and he was a good Nigger” (151). Even though slavery is over, its legacy remains a parameter for proper social behavior of black Americans in the Southern white-controlled social landscape.

The contrast between the black John and his white counterpart shows when John Jones implicitly accepts the judge’s declaration and begins to teach as a way of contributing to the uplift of his race. The white John, on the other hand, completely lacks any sense of duty in his life (151). Home from school, the white John picks up on the gossip in town, including the assumptions of the postmaster who says of John the teacher, “He’s what I call a dangerous Nigger” (151). White John swiftly alerts his father that it was the other John who he encountered in New York, that he was “the darky that tried to force himself into a seat beside the lady I was escorting,” and the concern over this sense of social equality prompts the judge to close down John’s school (152).

The black John’s thwarted ambitions contrast again with the white John’s aimless existence and his complaints that “there isn’t even a girl worth getting up a respectable flirtation with” (152). Spotting the other John’s sister, Jennie, “the little brown kitchen-maid”

and how he “never noticed before what a trim little body she is,” calling to her: “Hello, Jennie! Why, you have n’t kissed me since I came home” (152-3). Frightened, Jennie attempts to avoid him, and the white John runs after her. Her brother, the black John, plans to leave town for the North in the wake of the school closing when he sees “his dark sister struggling in the arms of a tall and fair-haired man” (153). John grabs a fallen tree limb and strikes down his sister’s attacker who falls bloodied and motionless on the ground.

Pushed to either submit to the oppression closing in on him and his family from the white world or strike back, John is driven to a literal dead end that closes Du Bois’s narrative. In the story’s haunting conclusion, John return to his mother’s house in an almost dreamlike state, planning his move up North, and return to the woods to calmly sit and wait for the inevitable. Detached from reality, he hears something—“Hark! was it music, or the hurry and shouting of men?” (153)— as he waits for the lynch mob, ironically humming a German wedding march that translates to “joyfully led, pass along to that peace” (154). The story ends as John views the enraged judge with pity, closes his eyes, and “the world whistled in his ears” (154).

This seemingly inevitable end of the story emphasizes the limitations of black life in the South at the turn of the twentieth century. Both John and his sister Jennie remained bound by the white world’s expectations and assumptions of their proper place, based on the different subservient roles assigned to them. John is made dangerous by his education as well as his act of educating others, whether or not his teaching is as radical as the gossips imply; as a black female, Jennie registers on the white John’s radar as an easily approachable object of desire, leading to his death when the black John steps in to defend his sister’s honor. Driven to an impasse by the social rules and expectations, John’s act reveals that the crumbling social order of the South works to destroy both blacks and whites.

In line with the turn-of-the-century protest narrative similar to Sutton Griggs's *Imperium in Imperio*, "Of the Coming of John" launches a complaint regarding the increasingly unbearable tension between the old Southern rule and black education and uplift. Many of the story's elements echo those of *Imperium*: the twinning on main characters, in this case one black and one white; building of racial anger to its boiling point that erupts, or threatens to erupt, in the destruction of both blacks and whites; and the incompatibility of the educated black individuals with their traditional Southern surroundings. While "Of the Coming on John" thus reflects its moment of publication in the genealogy of black educational fictions, it also exposes the trajectory of Du Bois's fictions of education. As I argue in this chapter, the arc of his educational fictions ties in with his educational philosophy and, in fact, help shape it, a pattern that began in his unpublished manuscript a decade before.

First Fiction: "The Fellow of Harvard"

Du Bois's earliest extant piece of fiction, "Fellow of Harvard," consists of a handwritten manuscript now housed at the Special Collections and University Archives at the University of Massachusetts-Amherst.²¹ The narrative exists in two distinctly different fragments spanning 60 pages that record Du Bois's early effort at making sense of black education through fictional narrative. This effort shows that he had novelization of the topic in mind quite early—he was 24 at the time of writing—prior to *Souls* and his rise to national fame. Since his race leadership, writing, and scholarly pursuits were all irrevocably bound for Du Bois, the text of "Fellow of Harvard" charts his early attempt at crafting a narrative of a successful life for a black

²¹ The W.E.B. Du Bois Papers. University of Massachusetts, Amherst Special Collections and University Archives. Series 11, Folder 6066.

intellectual in the United States, a topic that would have been closer to Du Bois's own life than any other.

The first draft manuscript, dated December 7, 1892 when Du Bois was in Berlin studying at Friedrich Wilhelm University, consists of an abstract, or "Plot of a Novel" as he calls it, and a brief first chapter for this novel. The abstract imagines the protagonist of the novel as a black boy with "N.E. ancestry" now living in St. Paul, Minnesota. He is an eccentric who seems intensely invested in becoming a fellow at Harvard, but faces many obstacles from his high school committee and from the University itself. He works relentlessly to find ways to secure funding for himself there, but he becomes disenchanted with his goal and questions his life's purpose. From thereon out, he finds himself both failing to meet his current duties and then finding other avenues to secure funding, proving him as inconsistent as he is capable. Ultimately, this separation from his surroundings and purpose brings him alternatively success and failure until he is dismissed from Harvard because of political reasons and he becomes "hopelessly insane and dies 'a fellow of Harvard.'

The accompanying chapter introduces George Smith, who is "a bit odd" (1) but "has the reputation of being one of the most promising scholars in the public schools"(2). The black scholar seems to fit very poorly into his surroundings: his family consists of an older brother who learned a trade and became a railroad fireman; a father who is a locomotive engineer and does not understand his younger son; a younger sister is a dreamer that seems as out of time as George is out of place; and a generally beloved "homekeeper" mother (3). When the father complains to his labor union friends about George, one of them sums up the group's opinion:

Education is a good thing—a good thing of course, but somehow it don't work out right. If we could educate our sons for farmers or for brakemen—it would be all right, but that's just what they won't be—and I'm blessed if I see my way out of this thing—I spose George will go to college. (5)

This perspective posits the young scholar in direct opposition with labor, a juxtaposition that Du Bois later sought to dismantle in his novel *The Quest of the Silver Fleece*. George's father never considered such an option, and he rushes home to demand that his 16-year-old son declare what he will "do for a living" (7). Pulled from the space of his dreams and illusions—like the "queer thought world" in "Of the Coming of John"—back to pragmatism, George cannot imagine expressing himself since even "he sometimes doubted if he understood himself. Certainly he did not the detail, but the great vague outlines always danced before him, and charmed and beguiled him by their very haziness" (8). As the narrator attempts to describe George's vague yearnings, the chapter—and thus the first version of the novel—ends abruptly and highlights the lack of mission for a young black intellectual like George.

The abstract and the fragment of the first version of "The Fellow of Harvard" suggest that Du Bois was creating a rather autobiographical sketch of a young black scholar. George is Northern and Western, not Southern, which reflects Du Bois's own experience at this juncture, although he had already spent time studying at Fisk University in Nashville, Tennessee. Further, both the home community of the protagonist as well as the academic world seem rather hostile to George, either discouraging him from gaining education or proving adverse to his achievements. Since Du Bois abandoned this version of the draft, and indeed never completed either version of it, it is impossible to know how much of this failure can be attributed to the systemic structures of higher education and to what extent his own strangeness is to blame for his fate. Regardless, this opening version of "Fellow" exhibits a rocky path for intelligent black students. The narrative false start echoes in the projected madness of the protagonist. Du Bois sought to create a novel that pointed towards a way to transcend the limitations imposed upon black education, black scholars, and the entire black community. While in "Of the Coming of John" he opts to

protest and expose the impossible demands of white oppression, Du Bois's ongoing project as a novelist was to move beyond the kind of militant warning issued by Griggs's *Imperium in Imperio* (1899).

The second version of the manuscript, a much more elaborate opening chapter with a rough outline of the novel's structure, proffers a much more successful narrative arc for the young protagonist even though he eventually abandoned the narrative without completing it. The chapter titles mark a journey from "the child + dreamer" to "the youth," "Amer. student," "the cynic," "Europe," and "the Man." Through these labels the plan tracks the male protagonist from childhood to adulthood, from age 10 to 25. The younger sister is listed as an important character, growing alongside the protagonist from ages 7 to 22. In addition to the chapter titles, Du Bois lists events, people, and locations that mark each planned chapter. The first chapter, which Du Bois drafted in full and I will discuss next, includes a religious revival the protagonist attends with his mother and sister. The second chapter was to involve Fisk University, the third a country school, and the next two chapters focus on Harvard. The final two take the protagonist to Europe, plotting his final growth into manhood in Germany. Both autobiographical as well as literary connections can be drawn from this outline where the educational path of the main character echoes Du Bois's own, but the idea of black protagonists finding an outlet for their identity in Europe rather than America appeared almost simultaneously for female characters in Francis E.W. Harper's *Iola Leroy, or, Shadows Uplifted* and William Dean Howells's *An Imperative Duty* in 1892. Although Du Bois's plan for concluding the second version of "Fellow of Harvard" avoid the madness of the first version and the dead end of "Of the Coming of John," the exilic solution in this version is not a sustainable one but rather just an escape from the white-supremacist United States and its institutions.

Du Bois commended writing the second attempt at “A Fellow of Harvard” in Neustadt, Germany, only four months after he created the abstract for the first version, but much had changed in both the narrative voice and the plot of the novel by April 14, 1893. The completed second version of the first chapter in 47 handwritten pages opens with more pastoral and aesthetic diction than its prototype: “Just as the red moon rose over the span of the dark mountains, the laborer leaning on his scythe heard a strange song rolling down the valley in rhythmic cadence” (1). Following the sound of the song, the narrative leads the reader through the natural landscape of rural Virginia to a revival meeting, led by a powerful black preacher. The snippets of songs from the black congregation before and during the service anticipate the use of black songs at the beginning of each essay of *Souls*, tying the narrative more closely to the black community than in the first version where George seemed profoundly alienated from his surroundings. The telling finally focalizes on the protagonist with his mother and sister through the mother’s emotional outburst and the sister’s conversion to faith. The young male protagonist goes through the motions of kneeling by his mother’s side but does not convert or express emotion. A toned-down sense of the protagonist’s difference from the community from the first version lingers, but Du Bois’s hero has become, to put it bluntly, much less strange to his family.

Next, Du Bois introduces the white characters of his novel that elucidate the context of black life in the South. These characters epitomize Southern land-owning males in the decades after Reconstruction: the major land-owner in the area, Captain Thornton “drives a hard bargain often with his tenants and [...] his book-keeping is not always readily to be understood” (14). In the past “the Thorntons of Alexandria were a great family” and “the most radical defenders of slavery” (14, 15), but their fortunes have dwindled following emancipation and Reconstruction, and the now-moneyless Thornton relies on his only child, the 14-year-old George, for his

happiness. The protagonist's family is introduced as tenants and sharecroppers of the Thorntons: the hardworking parents Sam and Matilda Johnson, their son John who "was just awakening to a serious consideration of the world around him and was on the whole dissatisfied with it" (17), and his little sister Tildy. Unlike George Smith, the initial "Fellow" protagonist, John is easily able to pinpoint the source of his discontent: his "worlds were divided into a white one and a black one and the first mean to him all that was [...] unfortunate and hateful, the second all that was lovable and dear to him" (17). The split between the races appears completely irreconcilable to John, and he perceives the day as belonging to the white people but "night brought jolly black faces around" (19). In a community that centers largely on religion, John cannot reconcile in his mind the two worlds bound to the same faith as the white church appears to him severely detached from the practical realities of his life. He does, however, connect closely with his younger sister: "His little sister Tildy was not so much a separate being as a sort of feminine echo of her brother" (21). Regarding the black and white duality, "The more he thought the bitterer was his mood against the whole world" (22) for black oppression and white privilege.

The most powerful white character in the manuscript, Captain Thornton, exposes the educational ideology of the Southern planter when he asks John, "do you go to school yet?" and upon hearing that the 10-year-old boy does, he notes "It's about time you went to work, isn't it?" (22-23). John remains silent while the Captain explains:

You folks don't want to be throwing away your time on books—you should learn to be honest workmen and not strive to push above your station. A good plowman is worth a dozen preachers and teachers. (23)

The Captain rides away, leaving John to his silent anger at the Captain's articulation of the common Southern sentiment. Du Bois immediately presents the flipside of the educational equation when George, the Captain's son, comes along, declaring that he's headed to a

preparatory school called “Philips Exeter” and after “3 and 4 years there I’m going to Harvard” (24). Ignorant of what Harvard is, John learns from George that it’s “a big college the biggest in America, or in the world; awfully enlightened; only gentlemen go there” (24). George says, “perhaps I’ll write a book and be a fellow of Harvard,” introducing both the university and the idea of fellows to John (24).

The boys are jolted into reality from their disparate future prospects when Tildy cries out because George’s dog has killed her chicken. John promptly lashes the dog with his whip, and when George begins to yell, “You want to remember, you little black rascal,” John whips at him as well (25). Here the violent encounter between the black and the white boy is much less dire than in “Of the Coming of John” where the protagonist’s attack on his white counterpart proves deadly to both. In this second version of “Fellow,” the Captain rushes to the Johnsons’ cabin to investigate: “you dare to raise your hand against a white man and my son at that” (26), and he warns the family of a nearby “lynching bee.” The mother Matilda knows how to defuse the situation by strategically appealing to God, the only one who should judge (27). Though eventually defused, the tension in the scene links the disparate educational opportunities of black and white children to a potentially violent conflict stemming from white privilege.

The strain between the two worlds and the incompatibility of a shared religion among them threatens to anger John, but the narrative employs both a meaningful, sacrificial past and a potentially liberating future to help the hero transcend such frustration. Matilda contextualizes the role of faith in her life to John by explaining the history of slavery and her dream for John to be a leader (31). Grounded in a story of her grandfather, “a preacher and the most powerful black man in the county” and “the grandson of a great king in Africa” (32), Matilda’s story places John at the forefront of generations of struggle. The grandfather had been a respected blacksmith who

fled one night after killing an overseer who beat him violently, an unfortunate but perhaps justifiable burst of violence in the wake of an unfair violation of the black body. The grandfather had left directions in a missive to his great-grandson, stored in a box to be opened at a later date. The box turns out to contain “a crumpled stained paper then a larger carefully folded one, an old foot of a rabbit and some queer shaped bones” (33). The story of the great-grandfather brings to John a source of knowing other than that of the white world while expanding his understanding of his family’s history. Further, the great-grandfather’s role as a respected worker and a powerful leader among the slaves models black leadership for John.

Drawing from the traditions of conjure and mysticism, the letter directs John to unearth something from the yard at midnight while performing ritualistic chants (34). This buried item turns out to be “a heavy rusty anvil” that his great-grandfather had housed in his workshop but never used (44). Upon closer inspection, the anvil disguises within the basic tool of the enslaved grandfather’s trade coins embedded into its faux-metal surface, and John’s mother goes to find her savings to add to the growing pile of found money (45) Infused with purpose and the means to follow it, John declares that he’s “goin’ away yonder over the mountain and beyond Alexandria to the great city. And I’m a goin’ to be a great man—perhaps a preacher, perhaps perhaps, a Fellow of Harvard” (46, *sic*). The religious component of the discovery dovetails implicitly with Du Bois’s call for education: it is only through religion that the grandfather was able to lead his community at a time when blacks were barred from receiving an education whereas now John can pursue educated race leadership because of the generous legacy of the grandfather’s labor, hidden literally inside the tool of his trade and guised with the markers of African religious practices that would escape attention from whites.

The near-magical emergence of educational opportunity in this version of “Fellow” sets the protagonist on the path toward intellectual fulfillment, but novel’s outline suggests that such freedom is possible for the black intellectual only by leaving the country, at least temporarily. There is no indication that that John will return to his community or become a leader, suggesting that he and his sister escape from the circumstances of their upbringing and represent individual, not communal, success stories. It was not until *The Quest of the Silver Fleece* that Du Bois broadened the scope of his fictions of education to include the work of the black intellectual in service of the black community. The unsuccessful conclusions of madness, exile, and death in these early attempts show the difficulty of transcending the Veil for Du Bois and for black Americans at the turn of the twentieth century, but even in these dead ends and false starts, the texts gesture towards the solutions Du Bois would propose in *The Quest of the Silver Fleece*: more than just access to education is needed for effective race leadership, any mode of uplift must tie education to the pragmatic experience of the black community, and solutions for transforming the parameters of black education and advancement require a perspective and power beyond that which the white society affords to African Americans.

The Quest for Black Education in the South

In educational thought, *The Quest of the Silver Fleece* builds on *The Souls of Black Folk*, and two sections in particular: the essay on the Southern cotton economy and another one on black education. Key ideas from these essays meld into the novel. First, “Of the Quest of the Golden Fleece” sets up Du Bois’s complaint grounded in his sociological fieldwork among poor black communities in Georgia. As per the title, the essay compares the Southern cotton industry and the rewards it reaps to the Greek myth of Jason and the Argonauts’ quest for the golden fleece in order to regain a usurped throne (89). This highlights the value of Southern cotton in the U.S.

market as well as internationally, and by exploring the cotton market, Du Bois argues for the significance of the black labor force: “So the Negro forms to-day one of the chief figures in a great world-industry; and this, for its own sake, and in the light of historic interest, makes the field-hands of the cotton country worth studying” (90). Thus, the lives of those who worked in the cotton fields and mills provided a suitable setting for exploring powerful social and racial forces. He found these conditions to offer only limited education and non-existent economic independence.

Following emancipation, Du Bois notes, “What did such mockery of freedom mean? Not a cent of money, not an inch of land, not a mouthful of victuals,—not even ownerships of the rags on his back” (95), and he perceived those initial circumstances of freedom to have marked the developments for the decades that followed. Namely, the education of black children was limited by the demand for their labor in the fields, leaving little time for organized learning (94). This educational impact fed right into the larger structural injustice of the ongoing exploitation of the Southern black tenant: “the direct result of this system is an all-cotton scheme of agriculture and the continued bankruptcy of the tenant. The currency of the Black Belt is cotton” (96). Thus the uneducated black workers are bound to cotton, which in the hands of the white planter class turns into an exploitative structure propping up Southern white power.

Du Bois argues that these underlying conditions are completely glossed over by the “car-window sociologist” (100), the worst kind of evaluator of Southern life, without an understanding of the historical, social, and racial forces at play behind such the circumstances visible from the car window of a visiting Northerner. For instance, because of the “long custom born of slavery,” black tenants were accustomed to “wretched homes,” while the landlords lacked an understanding of the benefits of improving conditions and also lacked the incentives to

do so (92). The poor conditions visible to the casual observer, then, were far from signs of any inherent inability or lack of desire for improvements within the black community. In “The Quest of the Golden Fleece” Du Bois prefaces the work he would later complete in his first novel: he lays out the means of oppression used by white Southerners, and applies his classical and sociological learning to explain the conditions he had observed in the South.

Another *Souls* essay, “Of the Training of Black Men,” extends the discussion to black education, especially higher learning. Du Bois sees education as central to civil rights, and complains about the haphazardly established black educational institutions in the South during Reconstruction (63; 64-65). The idea of the racial veil—hinted at in “Fellow of Harvard” and introduced earlier in *Souls*—emerges again. More important, the construct of the veil is a theoretical one, dealing with perception and perspective, but comes with very real consequences for those within it: the current system resulted in “the wail of prisoned souls within the Veil, and the mounting fury of shackled men” (64). Du Bois’s turn-of-the-century rhetoric of suffering and bodily harm echoes his protest in “Of the Coming of John,” also included in *Souls*, and Griggs’s contemporaneous novel of militant black resistance, *Imperium in Imperio*.

Du Bois’s view of black education rejected the popular and conciliatory approach of his rival in educational thought, Booker T. Washington: “[Washington]’s programme of industrial education, conciliation of the South, and submission and silence as to civil political rights” flew in the face of what Du Bois believed about need for education in order to achieve and secure such rights (*Souls*, 34). The key points in Du Bois’s own program were “political power,” “insistence on civil rights,” and “higher education of Negro youth” (40). Despite the disagreement with Washington’s hugely popular views (which enjoyed widespread support from white benefactors and those in power), Du Bois did not reject all aspects of the educational tools

championed by Washington, his industrial Tuskegee Institute, and the white-run Hampton Institute after which Tuskegee had been modeled. Du Bois's complaint as well as the general "Black protest against the Hampton Idea [were] directed at that particular form of industrial education; it was not a blanket rejection of vocational and technical training" (Anderson 65).

What Du Bois sought in a model for an educational program was balance, to "make here in human education that ever necessary combination of the permanent and the contingent—of the ideal and the practical in workable equilibrium—has been there, as it ever must be in every age and place, a matter of infinite experiment and frequent mistakes" (64). While this idea of balanced curriculum does not emerge as a complete program in *The Quest of the Silver Fleece*, it nevertheless marks the foundational thought for the kind of educational applications that the novel depicts. Whereas "Washington believed strongly in correlating academic and industrial training [that translated to] academic instruction no higher than the three Rs and what was presupposed by the manual labor routines," Du Bois sought to "produce egalitarian social critics," not workers for an exploitative system (Anderson 74, 105).

With these ideological backbones for his project, Du Bois turned to the Southern cotton kingdom to imagine educational avenues to freedom for the black workers. Focused on young Zora, who has grown up in a swamp near Toomsville, Alabama, and Bles, who arrives in town from Georgia to seek education at Miss Smiths' school, *Quest* follows the couple's development from late childhood to productive adulthood. The major hindrance to the education and advancement of blacks in town is the white planter class, dominated by Colonel Cresswell and his privileged and idle son, Harry. Their exploitive practices keep the sharecroppers and tenants under their control, and their influence among townspeople as well as visiting Northerners hinder Miss Smith's schooling efforts as the Cresswells want black children only to work in the fields.

Early in the novel, Zora and Bles strike up a friendship that develops into affection as he encourages her to pursue formal education and she teaches him about farming cotton. They work hard to turn a section of the swamp into a cotton field, a plan that falls apart when their relationship ends abruptly upon Bles learning about Zora's sexual impurity and Zora is swindled by the cunning Cresswells when she attempts to sell them her cotton. As Zora's teacher and mentor, Miss Smith arranges for Zora to leave town as a maid for a prominent Northern woman, and both Zora and Bles end up in Washington, D.C. Both gain broader perspective from their time outside of Toomsville, but neither finds fulfillment in escaping their Southern roots. Upon her return home, Zora launches a settlement house to address comprehensively the needs of young black students and the community as a whole. In this effort, Zora is armed with her formal education, her own life experience, and the ability to move beyond the traps of perpetual servitude offered to black workers in the South. Bles joins her in this effort, and despite the resistance of the struggling Cresswells, they are successful in protecting the settlement project. Building on the earlier version of his educational narrative, Du Bois places his models of progressive, effective race leadership in the Southern swamp, the very site of black oppression, and shows their ability to transcend the white-manufactured ploys of keeping blacks poor, uneducated, and subservient. This ability, I will show, draws from a mixture of formal and pragmatic education applied to the real condition of the Southern black masses.

Formal Education

Trained in the classical tradition at Fisk and Harvard, Du Bois was a strong proponent of liberal education. As James Anderson explains, a classical curriculum for black education meant "providing access to the best intellectual traditions of their era and the best means to understanding their own historical development and sociological uniqueness" (29). Further, what

Anderson identifies as the short-term plan of basic literacy skills and the long-term goal of developing intellectual leaders for black Americans go hand in hand in Du Bois's novel. Despite his disagreement with proponents of predominantly industrial and trade-based education for African Americans, *Quest* is a pragmatic text that supports skilled black labor and the pragmatism of daily life outside of institutional education.

In its blend of black and white characters working together for black schooling, the novel dovetails with Anderson's historical analysis: "[t]o be sure, ex-slaves benefited greatly from the support of northern whites; but they were determined to achieve educational self-sufficiency in the long run with or without the aid of northerners" (15). The novel's goal is self-sufficiency, and Du Bois envisions the path to it by combining formal education, experience-based pragmatism of black life, and application of both types of learning to gain economic self-control in a white-dominated society.

For Du Bois such leadership stems from formal education, which in his novel arises from the work of the New England teacher, Sarah Smith, who has adopted black education in the South as her life's mission in order to sate "this growing thirst to know" among the black Southerners (9). Her years of experience with her country school have given her a first-hand look of Southern life and a pragmatic understanding that Du Bois, the sociologist, would endorse: she declares to a potential donor who argues her characterization of her students and their families, "Drat statistics! [...] These are folks" (8).

This stance is particularly daring given how educational institutions big and small depended on endowments and donations, largely from Northern philanthropic individuals and foundations. When Miss Smith's school receives a large endowment that could pay for much-needed land for expansion, she is moved to tears, and pays no mind to the fact that the

endowment is to be meted out by a Board of Trust (97). This oversight foreshadows a problem for both her ideals of what black education in the South should entail and her experience of what the students under her tutelage need. The tension between Miss Smith's mission and the small Southern town literally materializes at her doorstep when both students and tenants come to her for advice.

The pressure of the white-dominated cotton industry and its expectation for the black youth surfaces through Robert, the promising young scholar choosing "forty acres of good land" over higher education: devastating Miss Smith, as shown at the top of the chapter, he wonders, "what opening is there for a nigger with an education?" (101). While Miss Smith explains that farming is also noble and requires intelligence (101), Robert chooses to become a tenant of the Cresswells, leaving himself vulnerable to manipulation and exploitation by the unfair contracts of a system geared towards bankrupting the tenant, as Du Bois pointed out in *Souls*. Access to formal education certainly remains an important goal, but potential leaders like Robert are still shut out of opportunities to use their talent and education in a racist society.

The shortcomings of Miss Smith's schooling are written in the lives, bodies, and minds of the black townspeople. A woman named Bertie comes to see Miss Smith, prompting the teacher to recall how evil had triumphed over her educational attempts when Bertie had a daughter out of wedlock a decade earlier (103). We later find out that the corrupting force that disrupted Bertie's educational path was none other than the Cresswells. Bertie acts as a cautionary example for Miss Smith in terms of what might become of Zora, revealing the white teacher's motivation to teach and help Zora avoid these consequences of becoming just what the white-dominated environment and attitudes expect of young black women.

Du Bois shows that the kind of commitment and insight needed to improve black

education is rare among white educators. Unlike Miss Smith, Mary Taylor, who joins her effort as a teacher in Toomsville, fails to see her teaching career as particularly meaningful to herself or to her black students. While Mary has moments of wonder regarding what she witnesses in the South and small yearnings for work that might give her life meaning, she never connects those impulses to the world around her. Educated but without purpose, she knows she “did not take a college course for the purpose of teaching Negroes” (12). In specific ways, the character of Mary echoes back to Lillie Devereux Blake’s protagonist Laura Stanley in *Fettered for Life* in the first chapter of this project: like Laura, Mary is educated with the help of a family member, hails from a Northern white family with connections, completes her education at a Northern institution, and ends up as a teacher despite at least vague ambitions to do something else. Unlike Laura, however, Mary seems to retain none of the women’s rights purpose that served as a driving force for Laura 30 years earlier.

Despite her dislike for taking up the work of black education herself, Mary’s college-era “defense of the Fifteenth Amendment had been not only a notable bit of reasoning, but delivered with real enthusiasm” (17). The one student she connect to at Toomsville is the bright and convivial Bles who teaches her about cotton, and she, in turn, shares the Greek myth of Jason and the Argonauts with him. Jason, the son of a deposed king, aims to regain the throne by finding a valuable Golden Fleece, a mythical skin of a sacrificial ram, eventually taking back the fleece in order to gain back the power once held by his father. As the mythical fleece comes to signify cotton in the novel, the very different interpretations that Mary and Bles have about the myth’s application to cotton reveal the profound rift embedded in the novel’s title. After Mary finishes telling the story, Bles notes that’s now the “golden fleece is Jason’s” in Toomsville:

“I thought it was—Cresswell’s,” she said.
 “That’s what I mean.”

She suddenly understood that the story had sunk deeply.

“I am glad to hear you say that,” she said methodically, “for Jason was a brave adventurer—”

“I thought he was a thief.”

“Oh, well—those were other times.”

“The Cresswells are thieves now.” (25)

At first devastated by Bles’s alternative reading of the brave adventurer Jason, Mary nevertheless sees the comparison Bles is making. In choosing to ignore the warnings about the corrupt Cresswells and marry into the family that promises her wealth and position, she abandons her chance to make a meaningful difference in her own life and those around her. Her ultimate purchase of the white privilege in general and the Southern planter class in particular forecloses the moment of awakening offered by Bles’s interpretation of the Golden Fleece. Mary’s denial and rejection of moral ambiguity make her a hindrance to black advancement because even though she is seemingly, if a bit reluctantly, benevolent towards her black students, she does nothing to improve their position, and quickly trades her Northern sensibilities to Southern privilege in marrying into the Cresswell family. This white women, for Du Bois, stand as potential allies against oppression, but only if they find ways to identify with the perspective of black Americans instead of being seduced by the allure and wealth of Southern plantocracy.

While Mary increasingly abandons both her own learning as well as her work as an educator, Bles aims to apply his learning to his environment. One of the surest signs of the transformative power of education is Harry Cresswell’s evaluation of Bles as ““half-educated and impudent” since Bles’s learning has made him less pliable to the Cresswells’ cotton scheme (62). In Washington, D.C., Bles encounters formally polite but equally adamant opposition to his ambitions when his applications for a clerkship work are repeatedly denied despite his excellent test scores (181). That Bles only manages to land a clerkship position after speaking directly with Senator Smith, brother of his teacher Sarah Smith, attests to how educated blacks were

dismissed despite superior qualifications and emphasizes the need for pragmatic means to try and work around those dismissals. By making Bles's path to relative success lead through circumstance and luck, Du Bois stresses the flaws in the system that discriminates against black citizens.

The character of Bles differs from a typical member of Du Bois's "Talented Tenth," the educated black elite, because Bles is not a Northern, thoroughly educated middle-class leader, but the novel insists on Bles as a representative of this group of leaders. Instead of isolated study at an institute of higher education, Bles creates a program of self-directed study during his time in Washington. Despite the absence of an academic career path, Bles "arranged with a professor at Howard University to guide him" in his scholarly work (183). As the novel yokes education to Bles's life, Du Bois's application of the Talented Tenth broadens to include this mode of educated race leadership when Bles eventually returns South and works with Zora to create a self-sufficient black community.

Pragmatic education

The key reason to ongoing post-bellum oppression of black Southerners in the novel is the cotton industry and its intense focus on the productivity of the black worker, and thus the cotton economics acts as the major hindrance to black schooling. As Du Bois notes in *Souls*, the demand for the labor of black children in the fields often kept them out of the schoolroom. In *The Quest of the Silver Fleece*, however, Du Bois suggests cotton also represents cultural values much different for the black and white people involved in the industry. Where the Cresswells treat cotton as currency, a cold commodity, Bles sees cotton as beautiful, understanding and observing its patterns of growth. In short, "cotton was to him a very real and beautiful thing"

(15). For Zora, cotton stands for freedom in complex ways throughout the novel. She knows the right patch of the swamp to choose for her cotton-growing venture with Bles, and she pours her heart into tending for it. When the swamp finally blossoms with cotton, “all the world was sunshine and peace” (117). Unifying Bles and Zora, the cotton represents a means to some financial independence, and the two discuss marriage while picking the cotton, dubbed “the fleece” after the myth Bles had shared with Zora (123). The very site of white oppression of the blacks, the cotton field, turns into a site of liberation in the novel as the protagonists combine their learning with their lived experience.

The joy that Bles and Zora find in cotton’s promise of self-sufficiency coincides with their burgeoning relationship, but both are short-lived as the white world intrudes upon their happiness. Learning about her “impurity” in her adolescence when she was abused by Harry Cresswell, Bles leaves her, holding her accountable for moral standards she did not even learn about until much later. Almost simultaneously, the Cresswells find a way to manipulate the sale of Zora’s cotton so that she actually ends up owing them money in the exchange. It becomes clear to her that they “had stolen the Silver Fleece” (142). Devastated, Zora nearly drifts back into the swamp and lifestyle of her mother’s cabin, but she is saved by Miss Smith who finds Zora a position as a maid with a rich northern woman, Mrs. Vanderpool.

The Southern whites’ lack of connection to the cotton manifests again when Zora’s fleece returns to her as a rejected wedding dress of Cresswell’s daughter. Zora, in fact, makes the dress out of the material given to her without knowing it is her cotton: “the beautiful cloth came to Zora’s room, and was spread in a glossy cloud over her bed. She trembled at its beauty and felt a vague inner yearning, as if some subtle magic of the woven web were trying to tell her its story” (173). She later learns that this is made of the cotton from her patch in the swamp, and she then

plans to steal back the dress since “[i]t was her talisman new-found; her love come back, her stolen dream come true” (175). A more fashionable foreign dress arrives, however, before the bride can miss the one made of the fleece, and Miss Cresswell hands down the gown to Zora who finds pleasure and salvation in it. In a sense, the cotton comes to replace Bles as a Zora’s partner when she protects and stores the gown in her room, and lies in bed with it by her side. The cotton not only represents the beauty and potential of Zora’s dreams but also the very tangible results of her labor, both in growing and harvesting the cotton as well as fashioning it into a gown.

Du Bois suggests that blacks in the South can learn to take control of the potential of cotton as its power slips away from the white planters like the Cresswells. Cotton is necessary for their continued economic power in their communities but a waning source of influence in their relationship with the stronger, industrial North in the decades following the Civil War. A common complaint is voiced by Caldwell, another planter in the town, when he declares that “[w]e raise considerable cotton, but not nearly what we ought to; nigger labor is too worthless,” attributing such conditions to the blacks being “educated but good for nothing” (24). Education, for Caldwell, signals the change from the bygone era of slavery and must be, according to his reasoning, the cause of the economic collapse of the Southern cotton industry. Du Bois point to both black education as well as the entry of Northern money into the cotton market inevitable developments, ones that the stagnant South is unable to absorb.

If the planters are displeased with the black labor, they’re equally agitated by having to cooperate with northern businessmen. The Cresswell son Harry opposes the “damned Yankee trick” of meddling with the cotton industry (57) when the inescapable march of northern money and influence into the cotton trade begins. This development brings in not only new participants

but also new ways of doing business, something for that the conservative Southern whites seem ill prepared. With the support of banks and big merchants, northern capitalists hold the upper hand in the cotton economy. Mary Taylor's brother, John, leads the march, organizing a cotton manufacturers' combine in order to speculate better on cotton prices as well as bringing a new cotton mill to town (79, 302). The Cresswells seem unable to progress in thought or industry from the antebellum models, but future black leaders like Zora are able to adapt to new opportunities and apply their education in the context of their lived experience.

Such leadership in *Quest* builds on the tragedy of "Of the Coming of John" and the cleverness and hope of the latter version of "Fellow of Harvard" when dealing with race, striking a more hopeful tone than those earlier texts. The novel's educational ideas are deeply embedded in the realities of racial assumptions and practices of the turn-of-the-century South. Such practices range from the racial veil facing the black intellectual to the racial panic of the white Southerners to the ways in which black and white characters trade on race-based experience. Du Bois clearly presents the veil as the ongoing condition to be studied and transcended while he exposes the white racial hysteria for its inherent ridiculousness and hypocrisy.

The concept of the racial veil, of the differentiating perspectival divide, emerges in *Quest* through Mary Taylor, the white Northern teacher, when she thinks about the black people among whom she is now living in Alabama: "[a]lways before she had been veiled from these folk: who had put the veil there? Had she herself hung it before her soul, or had they hidden timidly behind its other side? Or was it simply a brute fact, regardless of both of them?" (17). For Mary, the veil presents a curiosity at best, but for the black youth trying to attain formal education in order to pursue some level of independence in the white-dominated South, the veil is very real. As Zora attempts to find such a mode of transcending the veil, a mode she calls "the Way," she faces the

question of remaining in school or working in the cotton fields. This choice represents two equally undesirable contexts, either receiving charity from others or toiling for her sustenance and likely hindering her education in the process (163). Zora faces her dilemma and seeks to find financial independence through sewing her own cotton while Mary cannot, or will not, push herself to learn from experience and seek alternatives to the split between her Northern education and her Southern surroundings.

For Du Bois, the Way to transcend the veil—to combine formal and pragmatic education in service of race leadership--comes from broadened perspective. The danger in choosing the cotton fields is that Zora will end up like her mother, living in a cabin where white men come to gamble, drink, and have sex with black women. The cabin life offers a way to forget or ignore her surroundings, but Zora still seeks to transcend the veil, to find the Way, as she calls it. She escapes the swamp and the rural community by becoming a maid for Mrs. Vanderpool and following her boss to New York City and then to Washington, D.C. Similarly, Bles leaves town for Washington after he breaks up with Zora, hoping to find more opportunities to apply his skills outside of the small town dominated by the Cresswells. Their temporary exiles from the South are necessary in *Quest* to overcome the provincial racial structures of their small town. The perspective that their travels afford Bles and Zora later help them put in perspective the limited power that the Cresswells yield.

Still, the search for a broader perspective is not one of easy learning. Like Griggs's protagonist Belton upon arriving at Stowe University, Bles initially admires the black people he meets in D.C. (177). One such person that counters the rural background of the cotton belt is the educated, middle-class Caroline Wynn. She charms him in Washington, D.C., where he initially mistakes her for a white woman (180). This is not due to Caroline's racial appearance but rather

the way she dresses, carries herself, and speaks, all markers signaling middle class which Bles decodes as “white” based on his limited experience. The two become fast friends, and Caroline makes Bles presentable to the expectations of the elite blacks in Washington (195). He still feels like an outside among them, but learns to hear connections to black issues like civil service reform in the discussions among Caroline’s dinner party guests (199). This both highlights and bridges the difference between urban and rural experience of black Americans: while there are recognizable similarities in the experiences and goals of both groups, finding common ground for dynamic mobilization on such issues seems difficult. Further, Caroline’s seeming acceptance of, and attempts to work within, the unequal political structures in Washington strike Bles as too much of a concession since doing so elevates the individual alone without benefiting the black community as a whole.

Thus, for Du Bois, real improvements on the conditions of Southern blacks cannot come from enclosed political circles alone. Bles’s *ex tempore* speech at a literary society exposes the Democratic Party’s hideous electoral practices in Alabama, connecting his claims to what he knows from his own experience at Miss Smith’s school (201). His rhetoric of not selling out on the basic demands of the black masses is well received by the audience, and thanks to a white reporter in attendance, Bles becomes well known in print as a new black voice in the city. Recruited by the Republicans to speak on the stump, Bles follows his heart when asked to contradict his own commitment to racial advancement and equality in order to tow the party line on education and labor bills. This insistence on being true to himself renders a career in political leadership impossible, at least on the national level, and his stance is equally incompatible with Caroline’s method for dealing with racial politics on the personal level.

While it is notable that the main architects and beneficiaries of Bles’s political demise are

two black males aspiring to take his place as race leaders, it would be a mistake to dismiss Caroline as simply “manipulative” as some critics have done. While Caroline’s strategic scheming and carefully picking her battles seems calculating, it is not without a reason. She lacks faith in the world because she has encountered prejudice and obstacles based on both her race and sex:

[S]he was unusually presentable and always well-groomed and pleasant of speech. Yet she found nearly all careers closed to her. At first it seemed accidental, the luck of life. Then she attributed it to her sex; but at last she was sure that, beyond chance and womanhood, it was the colorline that was hemming her in. Once convinced of this, she let her imagination play and saw the line even where it did not exist.

While Caroline comes to rely too much on trying to work strategically around the race-based limitations, she nevertheless brings emphasis on the position of professional black women finding many doors closed to them despite education. Her cynical conclusion that speaking her mind honestly is “a luxury few of us Negroes can afford” (215) underscores the danger of attempting to change the current system by working within it.

As is the case with Bles’s departure from Alabama, Zora’s apprenticeship of sorts as the maid for Mrs. Vanderpool marks a necessary foray into both learning about the world outside of her hometown as well as testing her moral and ideological fiber in that world. Though technically a servant, Zora, too, exhibits the characteristics of a member of the Talented Tenth when she takes up self-directed study from the books Mrs. Vanderpool attains for her (189), and Zora’s “work took but a little of her time and left hours for reading and thinking. In that thought-life, more and more of her real living centered” (192). In addition to pursuing her scholarly interests through reading, Zora learns about aesthetics, culture, and manners from Mrs. Vanderpool who declares, “I believe I could mold [Zora] into a lady if she weren’t black” (190). The irony of this statement echoes at the heart of black education: Zora is more than capable for

achievement equal to that of whites but the white perception of what she can become is always tempered with reverence to the colorline and its limitations in America.

Upon returning home, Zora applies her learning from both Miss Smith's school as well as her time with Mrs. Vanderpool in her own community for educated self-sufficiency that Du Bois endorse and Southern whites like Cresswell fear from their tenants. When she seeks to purchase the swamp from Colonel Cresswell, he considers her foolish for wanting to do so and allows Zora, upon her request, to write the certificate of sale that they both sign (285). Thus, Zora is able to create a document on her own terms and not be fooled by the complex, predatory contracts the planter class often offered to black tenant farmers. In the same vein, she circumvents the monopoly on goods in town by refusing to purchase supplies from Cresswell or the other merchants that are too afraid of Cresswell to undersell him; instead, she sends Bles to the next town to purchase what they need for farming their newly purchased land.

Educated race leadership

Insight of leaders like Zora and Bles are needed to bypass the conflict between the competing white views of black education and transcend their power to determine black lives. The ideology of Northern visitors to Miss Smith's, those dubbed "car-window sociologists" by Du Bois, clashes with the reality of the institution. A white preacher—a purported education expert—preaches to the students about slavery as a school and emphasizes that the black children should draw lessons from the work of farming, not from books (132). His words are met with silence at first, and then the students join together in an impromptu song, a reaction that confuses and disturbs the Northern visitors. After having witnessed the premises of the school and met its students, the Northern group retains its preformed views on black education. Referencing the Hampton-Tuskegee model of industrial education, wealthy Mrs. Grey notes, "these schools

should furnish trained servants and laborers for the South,” to which Miss Smith replies: “my idea is that this school should furnish men and women who can work and earn an honest living, train up families aright, and perform their duties as fathers, mothers, and citizens” (133). The rhetorics collide here in terms of the expectations of the teacher and the other whites: while Miss Smith wants to help educate financially independent citizens (even if her word choice couches that desire in the most acceptable, Christian terminology that might connect with the Northern observers), the funders of education see the school’s goal as providing a specific, limited labor force. Ultimately, Miss Smith turns down the endowment because it would require her to accept Colonel Cresswell as local representative and executor of the endowment because she finds that this would mean “turn[ing] over the direction of the school, or the direction of the education of these people, to those who were most opposed to their education” (134). Heavily mediated by Southern whites and stereotypically viewed by the Northern philanthropists, the Southern black schools face an impossible dilemma in Du Bois’s novel: their choices are to struggle and perish on their own or accept aid that would significantly, if not entirely, compromise their mission of uplift and educational advancement.

Given these dire conditions, it is the novel’s protagonist Zora through whom Du Bois imagines a workable model of education and uplift. She transforms from an impish child who receives an alphabet primer from Bles and agrees to learn almost as a dare to someone able to lead her community by applying her learnedness as well as her acute awareness of the social conditions in her town. There is much resistance to Zora’s schooling not only from Zora herself but also from the whites in town. Harry Creswell declares that by attending school instead of working on the cotton field, Zora is “giving herself too many damned airs” (58), and Mary Taylor’s aversion to Zora’s organic, unladylike habitus and manners is only mediated by Miss

Smith's advice that "Zora is not to be annihilated, but studied and understood" (51). Miss Smith recognizes that people like Zora, from the most oppressed conditions, can gain the perspective to address the social inequalities that enable such conditions.

By the end of the novel, then, Zora has gained the broader perspective of the world beyond the swamp that helps her understand the black life in her own town. She "sensed the vast unorganized power in this mass, and her mind was leaping here and there, scheming and testing" (273). Like the visits of the educated Minnie to the homes the black townspeople in Frances E.W. Harper's *Minnie's Sacrifice*, Zora's conversations by the firesides of the black families teach her to consider the needs of the community (274). Her first major action based on these conversations and her observations is to establish a settlement house for black girls in the cleared swamp. In this way, Zora has not only escaped the fate of Bertie, the cautionary example of what Zora might have become, but is also able to provide a place for Emma, Bertie's daughter, to follow in Zora's footsteps. This settlement house, where Zora lives with the orphans she has saved, contains books and a phonograph, and the local farmers send in washing and mending which helps the settlement sustain itself (295). When Bles returns home, Zora shows him the settlement, "restful and beautiful," with books ranging from Plato's *Republic* to Gorky's "Comrades" to poetry that form what she refers to as "my university" (309-310, emphasis added). The settlement benefits particularly black girls and women who would otherwise be easy targets for the white men who saw them as little more than sexual objects. Building on her own experience, Zora draws on her formal learning in Miss Smith's school and the knowledge gleaned from her time with the philanthropic Mrs. Vanderpool by bringing the settlement house to the swamp where such an institution helps the black citizens more than education alone would.

Protecting black bodies from sexual exploitation is only one part of Zora's plan, and the settlement house and its potential for independence conveys Du Bois's central messages of the value of education in the lived experience of the Southern blacks since the lack of education results in financial exploitation. As Anderson notes, a key reason for literacy and learning among blacks was not scholarly pursuits as such but rather handling everyday life, namely unfair labor contracts (17-18). Such situations abound in *Quest*: a woman named Rachel tells Miss Smith about her son whose labor condition resemble slavery (99), and Jim Sykes complains of an unfair and complex contract (100). Miss Smith reflects that by cheating sharecroppers, Cresswells—the planter class—maintain their position of power (104). Thus it is not only money as such that is needed for freedom but ways to break the hold of the consistently exploitive model of sharecropping.

Since owning land signals “the beginning of a free community,” Zora approaches Colonel Cresswell to purchase land from the swamp. Having just told John Taylor that the only way to turn a profit on the swamp is “to sell it to some fool darkey” (281), Cresswell is more than ready to surrender the plot to Zora. Learned and experienced, Zora is a “woman who knew how the world treated women whom it respected; who knew that no such treatment would be thought of in her case” (280). Facing the two men, Zora makes the purchase and wisely asks to write the deed to the sale herself. Aware of the systemic exploitation, Zora drafts a smart document of sale that blocks any attempts by Cresswell to cheat or exploit his former claim to the land any further. Later, when Zora and the townspeople have improved the land, Cresswell predictably sues her, but Zora wins her case when the court upholds her deed of sale, legitimizing her ownership of the land as well as her business acumen.

The ownership of the land goes hand-in-hand with Zora's leadership role among the black community at Toomsville. She slowly wins over the townspeople by addressing them in church where she "forgot time and occasion," calling on people to "[r]escue your own flesh and blood—free yourselves—free yourselves!" (286). This speech resounds the kind of leadership that Bles showed in his rather extemporaneous speech at the literary society. Zora, unlike John earlier in the short story "Of the Coming of John," recognizes that she must include the existing social structures among the black community in creating change rather than try to replace those structures with imported tactics. Moreover, Zora recognizes that the system of exploitation reaches across racial lines as those in power seek to pit black and white workers against one another (304). Thus, the communal farm that Zora asks Bles to run with her is to be farmed by "all of us" (314). The religious community extends from its congregational setting to the cotton fields, finding its application in working towards black self-sufficiency under Zora's leadership.

Such shifts towards black independence are, predictably, met with resistance from white regime that has run the South for centuries. The novel's arc threatens, at times, to destroy the black scholar like in "Of the Coming of John," but Zora's ability to transcend the Veil—that black intellectual's dilemma—by applying her critical understanding to her social context allows for her and Bles to survive and potentially even thrive. Zora tells Bles about the rumor that "a Toomsville mob will burn the school tonight," angered by the developments towards independence in the black community (326). The delivery and reception of this news are marked with significant calm: despite the threats of devastation they face, both Zora and Bles refuse to be terrorized by the white mob. After the drunken members of the mob end up shooting at each other, black men with guns are captured by the deputized mob members and lynched. Neither of

them heeded Bles's advice to dispose of their guns as he predicted such an irrational hunt for a scapegoat. One of the lynched men was Johnson, a very conciliatory and servile black worker, whose seemingly good relations to the powerful whites in the community meant nothing in the face of mob violence. For Du Bois, wisdom of experience coupled with a critical mind defeats compliance as a strategy for Southern blacks.

The novel marks its end not with a conclusion but with a series of new beginnings. After Colonel Cresswell's death, Miss Smith is moved to tears to learn that Cresswell has left both money and the Cresswell estate for the use of the school (333). In essence, the New England schoolteacher has outlasted and outlived the Southern resistance to black schooling. Zora receives the news of the inheritance rather calmly and says the battle to educate the people, "the servile black folk" and the "half-awakened restless whites," is just beginning (333). Bles and Zora, after their false starts, end up engaged and working together on their shared program of communal uplift through education and labor. By insisting on the pragmatic application of formal education and lived experience on the most oppressed conditions of black life, Du Bois's novel works its way beyond the dead ends of his earlier educational fictions. Beyond access and beyond anger—although both are necessary steps in the process—*The Quest of the Silver Fleece* transforms the most oppressed conditions, the swamp in the cotton kingdom, into a site of liberation.

Building on the decades-long path of drafting educational fictions, Du Bois concludes by reasserting and refining the value of educated black leadership. While Northern support of black education proves somewhat compatible with Du Bois's educational goals, philanthropies that give to black institutions seldom consider views beyond those of white Southerners. Leaders can rise from within the ranks of black citizens themselves, but not without the support of the

community or formal education that must be applied to the specific social conditions of African Americans. From the earlier fictional arcs ending in madness, intellectual exile, and death, *Quest* arrives at a workable model where formal education and practical knowledge form the most effective weapons against a racist system.

Chapter Four: Jessie Redmon Fauset's Modernist Black Education

This final chapter focuses on the transition from educational fiction to modernism in black fiction during the Harlem Renaissance. I analyze Jessie Redmon Fauset's (1882-1961) middle-class novels that express the growing ambivalence about and frustration towards the institutional and communal pathways to education that grounded the hopeful narratives in the texts I have discussed in the previous chapters. While the earlier writers in this study embraced these opportunities and plotted ways to make them work as models for social advancement, the black writers of the 1920s and 30s focused increasingly on the paradoxical nature of such education and the expanding gap between the ideology of progressive race leadership and the reality of black educational institutions. Where her Harlem Renaissance contemporaries respond by either abandoning educational fiction altogether or directly rejecting it in their works, Fauset draws from the literary tradition of black educational fiction when she develops her pragmatic female characters to update that tradition during black modernism.

Black Higher Education in the Early Twentieth Century

Following the rapid increase in the number of historically black colleges and universities (HBCUs) in the late nineteenth century, this trend of growth died off around 1900 (Anderson 248). The nineteenth-century missionary resources and educational aid to the South could hardly compete with Northern industrial philanthropy, a corporate-backed source of funds for existing schools. The economic pressures on black schools, in tandem with cultural shifts, changed the relationship between black education and black writers in the first third of the twentieth century. The connection between education and advancement was never assumed by the earlier writers, but rather carefully plotted through the work of educated race leaders. Despite their

shortcomings, educational opportunities in white-controlled institution could serve the late nineteenth-century writers' narratives as a site of success. After the First World War, however, the increasing funding and focus on industrial education, the lack of progress toward equality in the decades since the Civil War, and a growing sense of black education as a vehicle to complacency instead of race leadership all contributed to ending the tradition of black educational fiction.

Historically black colleges and universities (HBCUs) like Fisk University in Nashville faced “the lack of federal and state support for the development of black higher education, the opposition of industrial philanthropy, and the impoverishment of missionary and lack religious philanthropy” (Anderson 248). Southern whites, whose resistance to black learning echoes in the fiction discussed in previous chapters, had moved from opposing black institutions altogether to seeking financial control over these schools and thus limiting curricular choices to fit their own white-supremacist views. The nineteenth-century missionary philanthropy that largely supported the first decades of most Southern schools and colleges for African Americans showed commitment to racial advancement of the black Southerners despite missionaries' “paternalistic tendencies to make unilateral decisions regarding the educational needs of blacks”: between “1865 and 1900, there were tensions between the denominational missionary societies and the black leadership, but generally not over the question of the curriculum” (Anderson 241, 243). After 1900, as the missionaries' control of the schools waned, the financial sway of the Northern industrial philanthropists increased. The Northern money was directed increasingly to industrial and vocational training programs, a move that aligned the Northern financial interests with Southern social ones. For instance, “J.L.M. Curry, former slaveholder and congressman in the antebellum South, assumed the position of a field agent for both the Peabody and Slater funds

and advanced further the Hampton-Tuskegee program of industrial education” (Anderson 245). Southerners like Curry mediated the Northern philanthropists’ views of the South, infusing that narrative with their own propaganda as Du Bois revealed in *Quest of the Silver Fleece* (1911) when white planters arbitrate a Northern philanthropic group’s visit to Miss Smith’s school.

Despite this white resistance, the black “schools were quickly creating a black middle class, which boldly began rejecting the white patriarchal system that controlled most HBCUs” (Williams and Ashley 101). While the work of Harper, Griggs, and Du Bois documents the ongoing engagement of the black population in their educational efforts, in the twentieth century in particular many “blacks began to question why, in the wake of an increasingly educated population, more African American were not being appointed to tenured faculty positions and high-ranking administrative jobs” (Williams and Ashley 101-103). The lack of advancement within as well as outside of the educational institutions added to the frustration and distrust towards the white-dominated schools among black students, communities, and race leaders. The increasing influence of industrial education only exacerbated matters, and even Fisk University, which Griggs had imagined as a potential site for subversive black learning, had to turn to industrial money and appoint Tuskegee’s Booker T. Washington to its board in 1909 in hopes of attracting more financial support (Anderson 263). The financial circumstances of maintaining these collegiate institutions put pressure on the principles that had guided their founding and that connected them to the aspirations of independent leadership in black educational fiction.

While the industrial philanthropists’ interests continued to force black institutions towards vocational training, the black alumni, teachers, and scholars expressed increasingly progressive ideas about the state and the future of black education. This is particularly true in the years following Booker T. Washington’s death in 1915: “With the voice of the ‘Tuskegee

Machine' silenced, other branches of HBCU development were able to flourish. Under the leadership of Robert Russa Moton, who succeeded Washington, even Tuskegee began to offer a liberal arts curriculum by early 1920s" (Williams and Ashley 139). At the same time, the establishment of accreditation agencies provided an avenue towards legitimacy for black colleges. Though accreditation often required financial investment, the black educators embraced the chance to professionalize and legitimize black educational institutions and practices. Even though "no formal accrediting agency took black colleges seriously until 1928, [...] there were several evaluations of black higher education from 1900 to 1928. In 1900 and 1910 W.E.B. Du Bois made the first attempts to evaluate and classify the black colleges" (Anderson 250). Having worked on a novel of education for the previous two decades, as shown in the previous chapter, Du Bois largely left the field of higher education after 1910 in favor of his work for the NAACP (Provenzo 12). He nevertheless continued to comment on the state of black education, and sought, through his writings, to provide black educational institutions both financial security as well as validity in the national debates.

Culminating the developments in black education over the first third of the twentieth century, *The Journal of Negro Education* was founded in 1932. Housed at Howard University in Washington, D.C., *The Journal* aimed both to provide factual data about black education as well as to encourage more research on the topic ("Why A Journal of Negro Education?" 1). Such accounts were necessary because of the condition charted above as well as a recent report by the National Advisory Committee on Education. A detailed analysis of the report was published in the inaugural issue, along with a strong refutation of the majority report that suggested no federal funds should be allocated specifically for black education (Lane 5-15). Using historical and

statistical evidence, the journal gave black educators a voice to combat misconceptions about black education that guided cultural perceptions as well as financial decisions.

In its first years, the journal addressed conditions in black schools, characteristics and needs of their students and teachers, and the history and the state of black education in general. The urgency of the first issue echoed in a 1934 article by D.O.W. Holmes, a professor of education at Howard, which claimed that black education found itself at a crossroads during the Great Depression, due to financial strains and the recent reports that challenged the need for specific funding for black schools. Du Bois's 1930 Howard University commencement address, published in the inaugural issue, had already identified a need for new ways of combining collegiate and vocational education that would infuse both with greater purpose and structure. Both Du Bois and Holmes recognize the need for new thinking about black education in order to keep it relevant to the changing times, and one of the ways to do that was through the systematic, evidence-based study that supported the work of black scholars and educators as well as helped solidify the tradition of black education.

This turn to black education as an established discipline signaled a shift away from the model of black education in service of race leadership that the novels in previous chapters had depicted. Underlying the establishment of black education as a field of study was, of course, the ultimate ideological goal of improving the circumstances of black Americans, but the academic turn in the discussions focused on researching the educational concerns of the day in rigorous detail, a practice that was difficult to align with the arc of the postbellum black educational fiction. While the circumstances of educational practices and institutions were far from ideal in the works of Harper, Griggs, and Du Bois, each nonetheless depicted protagonists who made the flawed system work for their development toward race leadership, providing a motivational

narrative model. In the 1920s and 30s, amid the increasing professionalization of the discourse of black education, “Du Bois and other prominent black intellectuals worried that black college students and educators had forsaken their social obligation to become socially responsible leaders of their people” (Anderson 276). Increased educational access over the decades had not necessarily lead to the results the turn-of-the-century intellectuals like Du Bois had expected from the Talented Tenth, even though in “the 1920s a good number of black undergraduates came from homes where college attendance was not the product of bootstrap efforts, but the natural and expected progression of the educational process” (Williams and Ashley 145). In his commencement address, Du Bois feared that black college students “are beginning to sneer at group organization and race leadership as mere futile gestures” while industrial education “has tempered and rationalized the inner emancipation of American Negroes” (Du Bois 64, 65). Black education thus remained a middle-class project like it had largely been in the nineteenth century, but a sense of stagnancy in the end goal of the educational effort concerned Du Bois and, as I will show, Fauset as well.

Education and the Harlem Renaissance

On the cultural front, the dawn of the Harlem Renaissance ushered in a more militant and radical mindset that seemed ill at ease with the new realities of black educational institutions. Black novels of the 1920s in general depicted Harlem and other urban centers through protagonists that—unlike those of Harper, Griggs, and Du Bois—were not students and teachers directly invested in black education.

Closely bound to Harlem Renaissance is the term New Negro, often used interchangeably with Harlem in describing the black cultural renaissance of this era. It refers to the self-identified subjectivity of black individuals, particularly artists and intellectuals. Though the term New

Negro itself is not new, as I explained in the second chapter, writer and educator Alain Locke's definition of it during the 1920s remains its dominant denotation. Locke edited the influential collection of essays on the forces behind the cultural renaissance, or the mentality of the New Negro, as he termed it.

Looking more closely at Locke's definition shows Fauset's context for writing: the black cultural production of the 1920s and 30s, its declaration of a "new psychology" (3) and its developmental view of black arts. By carrying the concerns of the middle-class and black educational fiction into modernity, Fauset's writing both participates in and departs from the tenets of the New Negro as outlined by Locke since her novels straddle the divide between black educational fiction and the New Negro mentality.

For Locke, a main impetus for the New Negro mentality arises from a need to counter the "mere external view and commentary" about black Americans (xxv). The ownership of black history, culture, and knowledge production stand at the center of "a new dynamic phase" in black life, one where black scientists, academics, writers, and artists take charge of the depiction of blacks and replace the "Old Negro [who] has long become more of a myth than a man [...] a stock figure perpetuated as an historical fiction" (3). While this kind of ownership over depicting black life is not new—in fact, authors in each of the previous chapters are committed to a similar mission—Locke nevertheless argues for the singularity of the New Negro, along with Harlem.

Those claims of uniqueness are grounded in Locke's developmental view of black culture. While Locke admits that Harlem "isn't typical," he claims it is "significant, it is prophetic" (7). Specifically,

The migrant masses, shifting from countryside to city, hurdle several generations of experience at a leap, but more important, the same thing happens spiritually in the life-

attitudes and self-expression of the Young Negro, in his poetry, his art, his education and his outlook, with the additional advantage, of course, of the poise and greater certainty to knowing what it is all about. (4-5)

Locke sees the New Negro mentality as the vanguard of the future brought on by the migration to urban areas. Harlem in particular, for him, has accelerated the development of black consciousness in America by “a leap.” This view allows Locke to claim a break from the centuries of black culture during enslavement, Reconstruction, and the nadir of race relations, as well as to apply modernism’s calls for newness into the black tradition. In light of a more educated, urban, and cosmopolitan black populace, “The American mind must reckon with a fundamentally changed Negro” (8). Accordingly, this New Negro perspective mapped out by Locke rejects a sense of lingering forms of sentimentalism or old forms in favor of “fuller, truer self-expression” (9).

In light of Locke’s definition, Fauset’s novels both comply with and resist the definitions of black modernism. Because her fiction attempts to update the black educational tradition, it is often dismissed as sentimental and old-fashioned in comparison to the work of high black modernists like Jean Toomer. Though not modernist like Toomer’s *Cane* (1923), Fauset’s works are decidedly modern in their treatment of the subject matter of the black middle class and the educational perspectives of earlier black fiction. Fauset’s novels also share the New Negro’s sense of individual alienation and challenge to tradition. She turns them against the black middle class, not through rejection but rather a restructuring. Her four novels concern how black educational goals have been accelerated and internalized by her modernist characters who nevertheless do not abandon middle-class life nor reject formal education altogether.

In her first novel, *There Is Confusion* (1924), Fauset establishes the traditional primacy of institutional education in black life and critiques its application to modern life. The novel reveals the resulting hyperfocused individualism and mounting frustration amid mainstream society's failure to recognize the development of black professionals in art, science, and leadership. Here Fauset seeks ways to make the flawed system work through compromise among the competing ambitions among the black middle class. In her best-known work, the 1929 novel *Plum Bun: A Novel Without a Moral*, Fauset challenges education as a central tenet of black life, even as she reaffirms its value and purpose for some, but not all, black Americans. Further, the novel shows education as a stagnant rather than progressive force in the lived experience of many black Americans, and Fauset reveals that the artistic realm of the New Negro cannot transcend the problems imposed upon black life.

Her third novel, *Chinaberry Tree*, involves illegitimacy and miscegenation, and *Chinaberry Tree* has been read largely through that challenge of traditional norms of respectability. Moving beyond that analysis, I show that the stagnancy of the black middle class reflects the complacency of their educational ideology, something that Fauset also seeks to challenge. Her final novel, *Comedy: American Style* (1933), exposes in full the paradoxes of the established black middle class by undermining its fixation with whiteness and education. Since Fauset's novels problematize the foundations of black educational fiction by revealing the splits between different classes of black Americans and the persistent structural prejudices of institutional education, these texts create a model for the new century, culminating in the character of Phebe, the entrepreneurial protagonist in charge of her own education, in *Comedy: American Style*. Determined and practical, Phebe represents the culmination of Fauset's idea of a

post-Harlem Renaissance practical female character. Central and independent, she pragmatically combines education and self-sufficient entrepreneurship to become a middle-class leader.

Considered the most prolific female novelist of the Harlem Renaissance, Fauset was—like the other authors in this study—a well-educated, middle-class author whose path to success perhaps hid, to a degree, the kinds of educational difficulty she encountered along the way. Fauset was the only black student at the Philadelphia High School for Girls during her time there (Sylvander 24), and “after many unsuccessful attempts to gain admission to Bryn Mawr College, Fauset received a scholarship to Cornell University, where she enrolled in 1901” (McDowell xiv). Unable to find teaching work in Philadelphia after she graduated, she taught high school in Washington, DC until 1919 (Sylvander 32). Fauset’s frustration with the Philadelphia school system, both as a student and as a teacher seeking work, would arise in her novels, as I will show.

In 1919 Fauset joined W.E.B. Du Bois in New York to work on NAACP’s publication, *The Crisis*, as its literary editor. In that role, she is credited for helping discover many new black authors like Langston Hughes, who now-famously termed her a “midwife” of the Harlem Renaissance. That moniker has stuck, and it reflects the kind of auxiliary role that Fauset is still often assigned in accounts of the New Negro literary movement. Similarly, with regard to her own writing, “Jessie Fauset is grouped invariably and disparagingly with the writers of the Harlem Renaissance classified as the ‘Rear Guard,’ the ‘tradition,’ ‘imitative’ writers who, in an effort to earn white critical approval, avoided technical and thematic innovations, retreating instead to the safety of outworn literary conventions” (McDowell xii). This view of her is in part due to her middle-class status, which several critics and her biographer Carolyn Sylvander have recently worked to define beyond assumptions of family wealth by

noting that Fauset's culturally middle-class upbringing did not mean her family was financially well off. Moreover, "we have to recognize that middle class does not connote bourgeois, if by that term we mean a failure to embrace a progressive political agenda" (Schenck 105). This is important because Fauset's attention to middle class at a time when modernist authors turned to depicting artists, radicals, and folk life does not mean that her work is entirely conventional. She is both committed to the middle-class respectability as well as increasingly critical of its complacency regarding the failure of racial progress. Similarly, her mode of writing was lacked the experimental approach of the high modernists in favor of what Mary Jane Schenck describes as "plain, American realism" (105). These connections in form and topic tie Fauset to the tradition of black educational fiction during the first third of the twentieth century when black education in America faced both the financial pressure to compromise as well as increasing demands for progress from cultural quarters. She connects black education and middle-class race leadership at a moment of cultural suspicion of the power of black education, allowing us to see how black educational fiction translates into pragmatic modernism in her novels.

There Is Confusion: Black Educational Fiction Meets the New Negro Renaissance

Fauset's first novel was published in 1924, and it was "the first novel of this generation of writers, since the only book available at this time in bookstore by an African American writer about black people was Jean Toomer's *Cane* (1923)" (Federmayer 93). The plot centers on a coming-of-age story of middle-class black protagonists named Joanna Marshall and Peter Bye. As a daughter of a well-to-do New York City caterer, Joanna has learned to work hard at her studies and to believe in her own ability to overcome racially based social obstacles. Peter comes from a well-known black family in Philadelphia, with slavery-era connections to a prominent white family but with no financial advantages. The newly established and old black middle-class

families combine in the friendship and eventual romance between Joanna and Peter. While Joanna pursues her studies and a singing career with a blind ambition and faith in the ability of hard work to overcome racial barriers, Peter works towards a medical degree with much more ambivalence, stemming from years of familial association and stories of the white Philadelphians. While educational beliefs and institutions disappoint them, they eventually compromise their respective racial attitudes when the novel concludes at the start of the Harlem Renaissance.

Along with Joanna and Peter, their childhood friend Maggie Easterly also thrives as an entrepreneur, even though Maggie lacks Joanna's financial security and Peter's established family name as well as any apparent talent that would emerge through schooling. She yearns for Peter and Joanna's middle-class status, both socially and financially, and after being explicitly rejected by Joanna as a potential wife for her brother, she instead marries a violent gambler, a mistake she pays for throughout most of the novel. When Joanna and Peter's views collide during their courtship, Maggie draws Peter to her through her simplicity and desire to please him, only to be abandoned again when Peter and Joanna reconcile. Through her hardship, Maggie relies on herself for her advancement instead of seeking external opportunities or connections as the main determinant of her future. Fauset cautiously suggests that despite her failures, Maggie may provide leadership to the black community through her nascent beauty shop entrepreneurship. As the prototype of the kind of independent black woman Fauset eventually imagines, Maggie only exists on the fringes of respectability: she is poor, working-class, and widowed, but at the same time, free to pursue a career that offers an alternative to the kinds of middle-class paths to which Peter and Joanna are bound.

The ideology of black educational fiction remains strong among the parental generation in the novel. Echoing a Griggsian model of great men (and women) as race leaders, Joanna's father Joel's understanding of a path to race leadership relies strongly on education. For Peter's family in Philadelphia, the historical track from subservience to leadership takes a similar path. As a free man, the family patriarch "Isaiah Bye opened a school for colored youth down on Vine Street. No name and no figure in colored life in Philadelphia was ever better beloved and more revered than his" (28). The family legacy emphasizes both the importance of education for all black Americans as a means of social advancement as well as the power of careers in education as means to a respected, successful life. Joanna's mother had been a school teacher whose "precision and exactitude in small matters made Joel think again of the education and subsequent greatness which were to have been his" (11). Born a slave in Virginia, Joel had worked his way into the middle class as a cook and later a successful caterer in New York, but he nevertheless buys into the idea that only through education could he have achieved his vision of "greatness." This notion guides his sense of advancement and achievement, and he instills these ideals in Joanna by telling her "of Douglass and Vesey and Turner. There were great women, too, Harriet Tubman, Phillis Wheatley, Sojourner Truth" (14). This list of historical black activists provides Joanna with precursors of racial uplift but does not equip her to achieve, or question, such models of greatness in the modern American society.

From these beliefs, the parents instill in the next generation a deep knowledge of the demands of education and a profound belief in its power to help individuals transcend any racial obstacles. When Peter tells Joanna that he wants to become a doctor, she declares, "My, won't you have to study?" (45). In fact, "Joanna could have told an aspirant almost to the day and measure the amount of time and effort it would take him to become a surgeon, a dentist, a

lawyer, an engineer” (44). Here Fauset takes seriously the kind of commitment to education that has guided the previous generation, but she also hints at the kind of irreconcilable paradoxes embedded in that commitment. As Joanna declares, “I’m going to be the one colored person who sings the best in these days, and I never, never, never mean to let color interfere with anything I *really* want to do” (45, emphasis original). Joanna’s belief in the power of hard work contradicts her claim of being “the *one* colored person,” hinting at the specificity of limited racialized achievement that cannot be transcended through effort.

This belief in education seems bound to the middle-class experience in particular. Fauset critiques the connection that these potential leaders could have to the black masses:

Like many of the better class of colored people, the Marshalls did not meet with grosser forms of color prejudice, because they kept away from the places where it might be shown. This was bad from the standpoint of development of civic pride and interest. But it had its good results along another line. The children took most of their pleasures in their house or in those of their friends and devoted their wits and young originality to indoor pastimes. (49)

The sheltered middle-class existence keeps Joanna and her siblings removed from how racist practices affect the educational aspirations of black Americans. Only after encountering resistance to her singing career as an adult can Joanna relate to the account of her maid Essie: “Them white folks where my girl Myrtle goes to school act so mean all the time, always discouragin’ her. ‘What’s the good of you comin’ to high school?’ they ses. ‘What’re you gonna do when you finish?’” (223). The white students recognize and articulate the futility of black education in order to silence black students.

Joanna, faced with limitations she has been unable to predict because “she had grown up in her own and Joel's belief,—namely, that honest effort lead to invariable success” (149), grows confused about the model of education she has believed in her entire life. Despite her hard work and undeniable ability, she is told by a music agent that “the white American public ain't ready for you yet, they won't have you' despite her talent” (148). The disappointment she encounters not only renders Joanna disillusioned but also undermines her ability to be a race leader, something the “greatness” that her father has envisioned would entail. The father's hope for Joanna turns out to be an impossible goal: he has been infatuated with the idea of education even though his own success shoring up their middle-class existence has come through his catering business, not advanced learning.

The educational paths that were seen as avenues to race leadership by the authors in the previous chapters become, for Fauset's characters, sites of frustration that do not serve a purpose or spur them to work harder towards inherited and internalized goals of race leadership. Fauset carefully hones in on Peter's exasperation with his training as a surgeon, where he is denied opportunities to learn and observe because an instructor declares a white hospital to be “Not the place for Bye” and hinders Peter's career with “confounded hypocritical patronage” (144). Peter says he is “sick of the whole business,—college, my everlasting grind, my poverty, this confounded prejudice” (155). Peter sees in these behaviors echoes of the past injustices committed by the white family that first owned and later employed his own. Furthermore, Peter and Joanna's friends and family provide ample evidence of a systemic problem in education. Beyond the instructors in the formal settings, the connected associations rejected black applicants despite ability, like Joanna's cousin who was “black-balled” out of an academic

honor society (156). The problems with education extend from institutional policies and practices to instructors, other students, and student associations.

To transcend those limited, but systemic, frustrated educational circumstances, Fauset recalibrates the goals of black Americans in the 1920s. In doing so, she both embraces more ambitious versions of old models but also rejects parts of them, and *Confusion* ultimately does not offer any clear answers to the questions it raises about how to replace the black educational fiction mode as a guiding imaginary of success. In a very thinly veiled connection of Du Bois's National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), Fauset imagines Joanna's older brother—a Harvard graduate like Du Bois—planning “that an organization be started among the colored people which should reach all over the country” (129):

"White and colored people alike may belong to it," said Philip, his eyes kindling to his vision, "but it is to favor primarily the interests of colored people. No, I'm wrong there," he corrected himself. "It is to favor primarily the interests of the country." (129)

Complete with a national network and publications, Philip's plan echoes the mission of NAACP, but Philip later dies of injuries sustained in the First World War. Here Fauset seems to both celebrate the potential of such an ambitious, independent national project while also questioning its feasibility because of the limited reach of such projects beyond the middle class.

Similarly, the South has a role in the plans of the young and gifted African Americans, but that role is not a particularly flattering one. Where Harper, Griggs, and Du Bois depicted the South as potential site for racial sovereignty when connected to the national scene, Fauset paints it as distinctly separate from the northern black society. It is a last resort, a place to which the characters might escape when things go wrong. For instance, when Maggie's sudden marriage takes Joanna's brother by surprise, the heartbroken Peter goes to teach in South Carolina for the

summer (95). Similarly, when Joanna and Peter have fought and he has begun seeing the newly-separated Maggie, Joanna contemplates going to the South to teach as a means of getting away from her heartbreak. More specifically, “Her preference would be for the less-known, poorly endowed schools where there would be lots of work” (222). While recognizing the labor of teaching amid the particularly trying conditions in the South, Fauset sees in it only the chance for losing oneself in endless work rather than a site of race leadership and advancement.

In the end, *There Is Confusion* destabilizes the beliefs that underlie black educational fiction. Fauset shows the variety of paths taken by the novel’s minor characters at the end of the war, and at the ostensible start of the Harlem Renaissance: one of Peter’s friends opts to stay in Europe rather than return to the atmosphere of racial tension in America, and Joanna’s light-skinned friend Vera has used her ability to pass to expose systemic prejudice in the South, working for racial justice there (272; 274). Here Fauset notes the transformative effect of the First World War. On the one hand, it had brought into greater relief the inequalities in the U.S.: “America was founded for the sake of liberty and the establishment of an asylum for all who were oppressed. And no land has more actively engaged in the suppression of liberty, or in keeping down those who were already oppressed” (245). Even at war, racist American soldiers from the South heckle Peter (250). On the other hand, such disillusionment has pushed black citizens towards a greater sense of pride: “The War was over, the men were coming home. All Harlem was delirious with excitement”(269) at the cusp of the 1920s New Negro Renaissance.

Fauset ends her novel with a compromise between the two main characters’ ideologies when they settle into domestic life together. Joanna’s single-minded passion and belief in transcending race is tempered by Peter’s weariness of the white world, and Fauset suggests that such a reimagined mode of middle-class black life can be sustainable. But Fauset offers a

tentative model in Maggie, who abandons her aspirations of joining the established middle class through marriage to pursue a career as an entrepreneur. While she suffers the consequences of her impulsive marriage to a man she barely knew and who turned out to be an abusive gambler, she atones for her life by volunteering during the war. Unlike other middle-class black women like Joanna, the working-class Maggie joins the men on the European front, and similarly, she pursues the unconventional avenue of entrepreneurship: “I think I’ll have a career, too, a business one! A chain of Beauty Shops!” (264).

In the tentative version of a heroine that Fauset finds in Maggie, the author is testing the ground for a different kind of a heroine. Maggie is able to unlearn her fascination with her well-to-do friends and overcome her circumstances, but she does so in a limited, socially acceptable role for a single woman: as a widow. She ends up marrying Joanna’s brother Philip, only to witness him die shortly thereafter from injuries sustained in the war. Though not the central figure in *There Is Confusion*, the figure of the businesswoman would re-emerge in Fauset’s final novel, *Comedy: American Style*, nine years later in 1933. Before then, Fauset explored the expanding gap between the ideologies of black educational fiction and the Harlem Renaissance in her best known work, *Plum Bun: A Novel Without a Moral* (1929).

Moving Beyond Education in *Plum Bun*

Among Fauset’s novels, *Plum Bun* (1929) is probably the best known at the time of its publication and now. In light of the increased interest towards black women writers of the New Negro era, *Plum Bun*’s themes of passing and gender politics have made it a natural pairing with texts like Nella Larsen’s *Passing* (1928). Both novels explore the opportunities of young, artistic black women during the Harlem Renaissance, but where Larsen turns completely away from black educational fiction, Fauset remains engaged with the problematic connection between the

African American community and the educational structures and aspirations. In this novel, Fauset draws a distinction between her protagonist Angela Murray's aspirations and what the traditional path of education has to offer. Furthermore, Fauset troubles what Ann duCille calls the coupling convention by revealing how arbitrary racial obstacles hinder black family life, undermining the idea of a domestic sphere as a theater of potential for greater political participation. Through passing for white, Angela witnesses both black and white life, and by positing passing as the only logical yet ultimately doomed solution for black individuals like Angela, Fauset critiques the lack of feasible models of social advancement that would apply to all black citizens.

The novel begins with a Philadelphia family, the Murrays, who are divided by their appearance: the mother and the younger daughter Angela appear white, while the father and the older daughter Virginia have dark skin. Questioning structures and practices of education in general and Philadelphia's school system in particular, Fauset depicts the two sisters as two different intellectual strands of black middle-class life. Artistic and uninterested in schooling, Angela only becomes a teacher to please her parents. Virginia, on the other hand, seems able to fit her musical talent well within the teaching role, shaping her life to fit the avenue best available to her. Angela's mother occasionally passes for white when out with her equally light-skinned daughter, instilling in Angela an inflated sense of what is possible in the white, mainstream world, and Angela turns this practice from a temporary game into a permanent choice by moving to New York and changing her name after both of her parents die. Seeking entry into the wealthier, artistic mainstream circles of New York City, she makes a series of increasingly complex choices in her effort to pass. Her performance of whiteness moves from a simple omission of her racial background to implicit betrayals of her race, culminating in her

rejection of Virginia who approaches Angela in the presence of Roger, Angela's white, racist lover.

As in her first novel, Fauset depicts the parents' generation as the proponents of education as the focal pursuit in life, both as an avenue to a career and, often, that career itself. Teaching as a profession ties directly to a middle-class status that Angela's mother Mattie aims to protect, because she "was old enough to remember a day when poverty for a coloured girl connoted one of three things: going out to service, working as ladies' maid, or taking a genteel but poorly paid position as seamstress" (27). The established, steady work of teaching ensures an income and provides a level of freedom that the working-class options she recalls do not. Still, the pursuit of education has become something different from its depiction in the works of Harper, Griggs, and Du Bois: "'My girls shall never come through my experiences,' Mattie would say firmly. They were both to be school-teachers, and independent" (34). Teaching, then, is an end in itself, not an avenue to leadership, to transformation of existing conditions. Here Fauset acknowledges the obstacles overcome in black life during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, while she also sets the stage for the increasing frustration with the stubborn prejudice of American society during the New Negro era.

Angela is a prime example of this detachment from education: she is an artist drawn to painting, and schooling is only a means to pursue her art. Where Joanna in *Confusion* has internalized the ideology of education from her father, Angela never embraces her parents' attitude towards education. Only interested in art and French, "she had a fair enough mind [but] she was lacking in Virginia's dogged resignation to unwelcome duties"(37). Through Angela, Fauset shows how foreign the previous generation's commitment is to the 1920s' young, black middle class.

For them, the frustration with limited opportunities is mounting as the established occupations appear as poor compromises. Angela's male friends complain about the relatively secure but limiting choices ahead of them:

"What's the matter with the post-office?" Henson asked indignantly. He had just been appointed. In reality he did not fancy the work himself, but he did not want it decried before Angela.

"Tell me what better or surer job is there for a coloured man in Philadelphia?"

"Nothing," said Sawyer promptly, "not a thing in the world except school teaching. But that's just what I object to. I'm sick of planning my life with regard to being coloured. I'm not a bit ashamed of my race. I don't mind in the least that once we were slaves. Every race in the world has at some time occupied a servile position. But I do mind having to take it into consideration every time I want to eat outside of my home, every time I enter a theatre, every time I think of a profession." (52-53)

Life overdetermined by racial obstacles despite high achievement among the talented, hard-working black students undermines the belief in education and in roles established as appropriate black positions.

The desire for recognition based on individual ability and talent reflects a more frayed connection between the black individual and the black community than that imagined by Harper, Griggs, and, to a lesser extent, Du Bois. The flipside of race leadership charted by these authors is race representativeness, which, while welcomed by the earlier protagonists, carries with it the skewed mainstream perceptions of African Americans. Another character in the novel, Arthur Sawyer, articulates this objection: "If you're only a half-baked poet they'll think that you're a representative of your race and that we're all equally no account. But if you're a fine dentist, they

won't think, it's true, that we're all as skilled as you, but they will respect you and concede that probably there're a few more like you. Inconsistent, but that's the way they argue" (68-69). Like Angela, Arthur acquiesces to familial aspirations only as a temporary solution before pursuing personal goals: "I'm going to teach until I've saved enough money to study engineering in comfort" (69). Angela, too, declares herself "sick of this business of always being below or above a certain norm. Doesn't anyone think that we have a right to be happy simply, naturally?" (54). She sees passing for white as a way around such limitations, being a means to secure "scholarships and special funds, patronage" (78) since she has "had enough of [teaching]" (112).

In particular, *Plum Bun* critiques the Philadelphia school system in which both of the sisters have grown up. The city's specific model of education makes it a microcosm of the nation's racial dynamics:

The Philadelphia, Pennsylvania Public School System in 1881 abolished Black public school as such, giving Black children the right to attend any public school for which they were eligible without regard to color. But the tendency remained toward separate schools, or social separation in schools, with whites in the following twenty years becoming more and more reluctant to go to school with Blacks, and with "few friendships" across race lines. (Sylvander 27)

Fauset, too, points out the hypocrisy of the increasingly unequal system: "Yet, by an unwritten law, although coloured children may be taught by white teachers, white children must never receive knowledge at the hands of coloured instructors" (48). In the Philadelphia schools and in the nation more broadly, these seemingly or potentially equal situations where separate racial practices have not been established nevertheless fall under the influence of social custom that dictates a separation of the races. Thus, Angela "could not be appointed in any but a coloured

school, and she was not supposed to substitute in any but this kind of classroom” (48). These practices call back to Frances Harper’s depiction of Minnie’s experience in a white school in Pennsylvania, where the institution rejects her once her blackness is revealed: more important, her expulsion is not any about any school policy or about race but rather the fear of other students’ and their families’ reaction to her presence. Nearly sixty years later, as Fauset reveals, similar practices of catering to mainstream racist preferences still occur in American education.

A broader frustration with American society echoes in Angela's memory: “men talking painfully of rents, of lynchings, of building and loan associations; the women of child-bearing and the sacrifices which must be made to put Gertie through school, to educate Howard” (117) and “ideals and inevitable sacrifices for the race; the burnt-offering of individualism for some dimly glimpsed racial whole” (118). Education, on the whole, has failed to remedy or lessen any of these obstacles faced by the community, because even as college graduates, black professionals are denied employment. As one acquaintance of the family was told, “a position would never be given to her ‘not if you passed ahead of a thousand white candidates’”(264). Angela feels justified in turning away from obstacles, because “she was sick of tragedy, she belonged to a tragic race. ‘God knows it’s for one member of it to be having a little fun’” (144-145). The same impulse guides her to reject Anthony, whom she loves but who is poor, in favor of her rich suitor, Roger.

By passing, Angela leaves behind her the issue of race only to encounter it from Roger’s different perspective. He gets black diners turned away from a restaurant where he has taken Angela, and he proudly details other “instances of how effectively he had “spoked the wheel ” of various coloured people. He had black balled Negroes in Harvard, aspirants for small literary or honour societies” (134). Roger’s comments lay bare the kinds of attitudes that bolster and sustain

racism in educational institutions and beyond. In disbelief, Angela forces herself to stomach Roger's outburst while she still hopes to marry him to secure a financial and social position for herself. When Roger only offers to set her up in an apartment as his mistress, she begins to reflect on the cost of passing in her life.

Angela comes to realize that "Life, life was what she was struggling for, the right to live and be happy. And once more her mother's dictum flashed into her mind. 'Life is more important than colour'" (268). As Angela embraces her race, which for her is largely embodied by her sister Virginia, Fauset emphasizes that education and teaching remain valuable, and viable, paths for some black Americans, since Virginia enjoys her life on "139th Street, in 'Striver's Row'" (243) and teaching in "Public School 89" (243-244). Even as Angela sees her sister with "a happy, intelligent, rather independent group of young coloured men and women; there was talk occasionally of the theatre, of a dance, of small clubs, of hikes, of classes at Columbia or at New York City College" (215), she cannot see herself as part of the same community. She sees Harlem as limited—"a great city, but after all it was a city within a city"(98)—even as she finds life in the white culture increasingly difficult, "an atmosphere of falseness, of tangled implications" (273). Ultimately, the black artist in Fauset's novel finds no place within the confined roles within the educational system or in Harlem, the center of the black renaissance. Even the black intellectual Van Meier, a transparently Du Boisian character, fails to provide answers to Angela. He both calls for beauty, pride, and pleasure in black life and also the leadership of educated blacks in instructing what he calls the "untutored herd" (220), but while Fauset's protagonist desperately seeks the former, she cannot dedicate her life to the latter. *Plum Bun* reveals time and again that even though Virginia can follow that call, Angela the New Negro artist cannot. Fauset's deep ambivalence here reflects the suspicions of 1920s and 30s'

black intellectuals about the lack of race leadership among the students and educators.

Having admitted to herself and to Anthony that she wishes to be with him, Angela is left with the option to leave the country when she finds out Anthony is engaged to her sister. As she grows increasingly impatient for solutions and change in her life, she leaves for France on her own after turning down a stipend in solidarity with another black student whose scholarship had been rescinded based on race. In this act of solidarity, Angela reveals her race identification, and the prejudice of both her teachers and her employer at a fashion magazine expose the extent to which Angela had deceived herself about the liberalism of the art world.

Fauset ends the novel with Angela's self-imposed exile in Paris, where she has moved without the benefit of scholarships. In the final scene, Anthony has decided to join her abroad, and as Mary Condé notes, this "rather glib resolution is perhaps alluded to in the subtitle of *Plum Bun*: 'A Novel Without a Moral.' It is certainly achieved more smoothly in Paris, where Angela has gone to study, than would have been possible at home in America" (101). America offers no space for Angela and Anthony, the intellectual artists of the Harlem Renaissance, since limitations based on color confront them there at every turn.

Middle Class, *American Style*: The Pragmatic Black Woman

This exile, like the compromise between Joanna and Peter's perspective in Fauset's first novel, was only temporary. Her final two novels, written after the Harlem Renaissance and during the Great Depression, return to seeking progressive solutions for middle-class race leadership. In *Chinaberry Tree* (1931), Fauset reworks the middle-class family narrative familiar from her first novel *There Is Confusion* (1924) into a story of the pragmatic heroine previously assigned to the margins of the story. The novel follows the coming-of-age and romantic lives of two cousins in the Strange family, both children of their black mothers' forbidden relationships with white men

in Red Brook, New Jersey. The protagonists occupy two social positions within their shared situation: where Laurentine's white, married father's identity has been an open secret in the town where she lives, Melissa's parentage is known only to a few members of the community even as she herself does not know the truth. Here Fauset calls out the hypocrisy and danger of denying interracial relationships since Melissa's first love is found out to be her half-brother just in time to prevent an incestuous marriage. The author further shows how intermingled black and white lives can be, positing real love and companionship between Laurentine's parents who were denied public respectability because of social custom. The novel ends in the two young women enduring the weight of their pasts and finding love, leading critics to find the text's critique of the black middle class in its questioning of prevalent ideas about black female sexuality. The embrace of unconventional sexuality in *Chinaberry Tree* parallels Laurentine's role as a pragmatic businesswoman, a role delegated to a marginal character in Fauset's first novel.

Like Fauset's other novels, *Chinaberry Tree* raises the question of the role of education in black middle-class life. The blind faith in the power of education from *There Is Confusion* has dissipated, and *Chinaberry Tree* refuses the escape valve of Europe and the world of art that seemed to resolve the plot tensions in the New Negro-era *Plum Bun*. The family at the center of *Chinaberry Tree* consists entirely of women, but the black middle-class nuclear families around them are sending the male children to secondary and post-secondary institutions as a matter of course. In comparison to Griggs's enthused future race leaders and Du Bois's determined intellectuals, the male characters in Fauset's novel seem fairly nonchalant about their educational paths that work to sustain their middle-class lives rather than better the conditions of their race.

This individual focus emerges in Malory Forten, Melissa's suitor who is eventually revealed to be her half-brother. He is headed to the Massachusetts Institute of Technology since

his grandfather has left him “a little trust fund enough for an education,” stipulating that Malory pursue a career in medicine or engineering (113). The grandfather’s wishes are bound to the educational hopes of the previous generations, which for Malory translate to increasingly personal goals rather than the pursuit of race leadership:

Even at his age, twenty, his views were definitely fixed. He believed in the church [...] He believed in family, in the Republican party, in moderate wealth, a small family, a rather definite place for women. He planned to be an engineer and follow just that profession. (131)

Malory’s complacency about his education reflects his middle-class status, and he seeks to perpetuate the small black middle class that excludes many in his community, including women like Laurentine’s and Melissa’s mothers and, by extension, the daughters themselves. Even so, Melissa questions the perceived safety of Malory’s plans: “Where will you, a colored man, get a chance at engineering?” she asked, practically” (113). Malory declares himself “not bothered by that side of things”: he might go to South America to practice if no other opportunities arise (113), highlighting his self-willed middle-class detachment from race matters.

Melissa’s friend Kitty, too, fails to see the larger purpose of higher education. She fears that due to poor grades in one class, her father “won’t let me go to Howard next year. And I do want to go there. You have lots of fun at the colored schools” (96). Kitty’s attention to fun at college contrasts with Melissa’s other suitor Asshur’s dedication to agricultural education in attending Tuskegee and then farming his uncle’s land (94, 92). Mirroring the black middle-class resistance to industrial and agricultural education during modernism, Melissa is reluctant to commit to such a future, “her ambition stronger than her fear of loneliness” (92). Fauset undermines the anti-Tuskegee thrust of the Harlem Renaissance through the character of Asshur

who, in the end, returns as the restoring force in Melissa's life after her near-marriage to her biological brother who had represented to Melissa both "conventionality" and "definite position" (136). Still, Asshur's plan of farming does not take to task the status quo of a complacent black middle class.

Fauset suggests that the stagnancy of the middle class can be updated with the pragmatic philosophy of the black female characters in *Chinaberry Tree* and in her final novel, *Comedy: American Style*. In *Chinaberry Tree*, Laurentine represents the independent businesswoman—in her case, a modiste—whose entry into the middle-class community from its margins signals restoration for that entire community. Her isolation stems from her illegitimacy and racially mixed origins, and her success as a dressmaker both alleviates and stresses her seclusion. Among the black middle-class families, her "work, [...] her distinguished clothes were bringing her a half-begrudged, half-admiring recognition. She was still a creature apart, but no longer a pariah, rather someone choice, unique, different" (19-20). Her skill at her work may garner her positive attention among black women, but it also forces her to retain a solely white clientele. Mrs. Ismay, a black, middle-class doctor's wife, comes to her shop, her first "colored customer, chiefly because they had never come" before (56). Laurentine explains: "Some of my other customers wouldn't mind it a bit. Others would very much. You know how Jersey is. I can't afford to trifle with my living" (56). Mrs. Ismay understands, asking Laurentine to visit her. Laurentine slowly connects with the black professionals at the Ismay house, where for "the first time in her life Laurentine broke bread with colored people of her own rank and sympathies" (87). With Laurentine's invitation into the social space among established black professionals, Fauset signals a respectable space for the entrepreneurial, pragmatic woman at the center of her narrative.

What makes Laurentine independent is her pragmatic training. While Melissa connects with her friend Kitty and her suitor Malory to associate with people of wealth and position, Laurentine has independently acquired a financial and cultural status that makes her a refined dinner guest at the Ismays. When Laurentine's white half-sisters, the daughters of her mother's late lover, come to see her offering money, Laurentine refuses to "take the money outright. But she would and could take training" (12). Thus, she is sent to Newark to learn her trade, having turned her illegitimate past towards a professional future, and by the time Melissa, who was raised by her mother in Philadelphia, returns to Red Brooke, "Laurentine's earnings alone could" take care of her, "with no stint or effort" (18). Laurentine, then, has built her independence and respectability through her pragmatic labor, preparing her for an entry into the middle-class circle of black citizens of the town.

Accordingly, *Chinaberry Tree* also revises the marriage plot from Fauset's first novel, *There Is Confusion*, where Joanna sidelined her ambition in favor of becoming a doctor's wife while the female entrepreneur, Maggie, was relegated to the margins of the narrative. Laurentine becomes romantically involved with a physician, the Howard University-trained Dr. Stephen Denleigh, who represents established black middle-class professionalism. Laurentine feels compelled to confess that she is "not only illegitimate, Stephen, but the child of a connection that all America frowns on. I'm literally fatherless" (121). Denleigh accepts Laurentine despite the flaw she perceives in her parentage, and the two epitomize a functional black couple amid the more rigid social structures of their town. In the end, both Laurentine and Melissa have challenged their family backgrounds, and the novel ends with a quiet moment of celebration of that strength within the confines of their middle-class society.

Where black middle-class life is depicted as conservative and fairly stagnant in *Chinaberry Tree*, Fauset's final novel, *Comedy: American Style* (1933) shows it as increasingly stultifying and regressive. *Comedy* returns to the kind of middle-class family history introduced in *There Is Confusion* by focusing on a Philadelphia family's life over three matrilineal generations. Spanning from the late nineteenth century to the 1930s, the Cary family story reveals the evolving connection to education while also highlighting the vacillating level of access to education and its rewards. The novel does not, as one might perhaps expect, unify the core family. Rather, the narrative focuses on the deterioration of the family due to the obsessive mother Olivia, who is excessively "hipped on color" (22), and her slow but necessary expulsion from the family and the home. In the end, while recognizing the useful genealogical links of the past, *Comedy: American Style* reorders the middle-class black family as synchronically defined rather than as historically stable, as more reliant on its current character rather than its inherited pedigree. This reordering specifically rejects whiteness, family background, racial passing, and unusable education in favor of race pride, pragmatism, business, and self-sufficiency through a revision of the uses of education. In the decade since her first novel, Fauset has gained confidence in exploring alternatives to black educational fiction without abandoning its premises entirely.

The novel opens with the mother, Olivia, becoming aware of her racial identity as a young child in a scene of racial realization that echoes the slave narratives. The incident spurs in Olivia a sense of shame as well as anger toward her parents, particularly her dark-skinned father, for "mak[ing] her colored" (4). The solution and the main impetus for the novel's tragedy—since Fauset's *Comedy* is one of those ironic, tragic ones in the word's original sense—emerge at the school, when Olivia's teacher baffles her by assuming her to be a "little Italian girl" (5). In this

misrecognition, Olivia gains a chance to recategorize herself as “white,” and her subsequent life is changed because of this initial moment of inadvertent passing. Fauset’s narrator is quick to point out, however, that Olivia’s belief system, rather than the reaction of the white world, changes at this point. Fauset suggests that willed passing constitutes ideological interpellation rather than a subversive act.

The counterpoint to Olivia’s early passing comes later in the novel in the proud proclamation of her daughter Teresa’s light-skinned friend Phebe Grant: “I belong to the black or Negro race” (35). School once again demands racial categorization; however, it is not blackness that Phebe is being asked to declare but simply “which race [she] belong[s] to” (35). At the teacher’s disbelief, Phebe repeats herself until the message sinks in. Phebe, the character whom Fauset ultimately positions as the most resilient female character in the novel, shows a locket picture of her dark-skinned mother to the teacher, and she attests to looking just like her white father, a man who is married to someone other than her mother. The teacher’s blushing drives home Fauset’s point about racist and racialist hypocrisies of white America, but does not detract from Phebe’s faith in her declaration.

Olivia’s daughter Teresa is unable to make such a declaration despite her diverse group of friends and increasing level of education. Thus, Olivia has raised her as white and scoffs at associations with those she terms “colored people” (34), and Olivia insists on Teresa’s racial passing. Sending both Teresa and her other light-skinned child, Christopher Jr., away to white schools for their higher education, Olivia attempts to socialize them out of blackness. Teresa tells her brother that their mother “thinks either you or I, or both of us, will marry white, and she’ll come and live with us” (54), a feat to be accomplished through the socially mobile networking afforded by the white educational institutions. While her brother objects to this notion and vows

to rebel, Teresa cannot, feeling “like a fly in a spider’s web” (55). Her inability to move beyond her mother’s racist views becomes Teresa’s failure: as Fauset puts it, “[s]he possess[es] her mothers’ single-mindedness without her mother’s objective” (115). Fauset’s definition of a healthy middle class is anything but white or white-driven; she attempts to divorce it from such connections by showing the detrimental results of Olivia’s obsession with whiteness.

Teresa’s education provides a rich site for analysis of the conflicting forces of education and its relations to middle-class life. Forced by her mother to attend the de facto all-white Christie’s Academy in New England, Teresa finds that the school is, in theory, open to black students as well as Jewish and foreign ones, but “it happened that none had ever registered within their portals” (70), again highlighting the strength of enduring de-facto practices. Fauset deepens this irony later as the presumably first black student is about to enter the academy, and the faculty members express their concern over the students’ ability to “reserve judgment until you really know her” (81). A discussion among the students proves that while some of them hold stereotypical racist views of African Americans, many of them express nothing more than a mild curiosity towards the newcomer.

As much as her mother’s obsession with color subsumes Teresa’s will, her initial plan at Christie’s is to “[keep] to herself, ma[k]e practically no friends under these false pretenses [...] and when the two years were over she could go comfortably to Howard or Fisk” (71). These two historically black universities, founded in the wake of the Civil War, represent more progressive options for Teresa. Instead, she befriends the black student Alicia, whose proudly African American and well-to-do family provides an alternative to the stultifying atmosphere of the Cary household. Omitting the details of their skin color, Teresa impresses her mother by telling her that Alicia’s father is a judge in Chicago, and Teresa is allowed to spend the summer with the

family. Described by Fauset as Teresa's happiest times, her stay in Chicago exposes her to a healthier family dynamic as well as a very academically driven environment. The emphasis on the value of higher education shifts from social association with the white middle class to recognition and advancement of black knowledge, uplift, and its own version of black middle-class status.

Yet, even as Teresa shares her secret with Alicia's family, she continues to pass and becomes "a girl without a country" (89). Fauset points to the psychological harm of Teresa's forced passing in the next step of her education. She moves to Northampton, Massachusetts, to attend Smith College. For Teresa, getting to college is "neither preparation nor consummation [...] merely an interim" (113), as she continues to pass and detach herself from her education and wait for a time when she can elope with Henry, her black fiancé she met in Chicago. She does find herself "interested," "in spite of herself" in an education and the academic environment that seems "more cosmopolitan" and "universal" than what she has known (114). Her engagement and her educational path both end abruptly when Olivia finds out about the romance and Henry finds out about Teresa's internalized pressure to please her mother by passing.

The choice of Smith College as the site of Teresa's promising yet ultimately futile attempt at higher education carries particular importance for Fauset. At the time as well as today, the college is not known for ethnic diversity in its student body, and in 1913, Fauset had been actively working on an NAACP case at the college when its administration refused to provide dormitory housing to a black female student it had accepted. According to Fauset's biographer Carolyn Sylvander, "The school claims that it is not biased against Miss Lee [, the student in question,] a Massachusetts native, but that it must make concession to the discriminative tastes of

its Southern students” (40). Fauset’s text indexes similar concerns, and Teresa’s time at Smith as a passing student ties Fauset’s argument to a history of such educational customs.

Teresa’s thwarted college education finds a more promising and pragmatic form when she begins to tutor her brother’s college friends in French. She discovers that she enjoys tutoring even though she had earlier rejected the idea of teaching at an institution, thinking of herself instead as a businesswoman with “new life, new determination” (159). This kind of pragmatic use of Teresa’s education reflects an opportunity for the black middle class, and it echoes her grandmother’s—Olivia’s mother’s—business of running a boarding house while she took extension classes at Harvard. Fauset endorses Teresa’s attempts at independence and mobility because they derive their power from a combination of entrepreneurship and education, not whiteness. The rooting of black middle class firmly in independence and pragmatic use of education counters old readings of Fauset where her subject matter and style alone constituted evidence enough to dismiss her as regressive.²²

When Teresa and Olivia travel to France for Teresa’s summer course at the University of Toulouse, Teresa’s potential for independence from her mother’s color-mania proves short-lived. Blinded by her instructor Aristide Pailleron’s exotic Frenchness, Teresa declares that, “If he were American, [...] I’d say he’s a very fast worker. As it is he seems just a simple, rather sweet, little man” (172). Olivia of course supports their whirlwind marriage whole-heartedly, seeing Aristide’s academic standing and genuine European-ness as her ticket to whiteness and life in France. With Teresa bound by an unhappy marriage with a poor academic in Europe, the decline of the Cary family in Philadelphia seems certain. Fauset does, however, bring in the character of Phebe to resolve the novel through a restoration of the middle-class black family after the

²² The main source of the view of Fauset as regressive comes from Robert Bone’s influential *Negro Novel in America* (1958) that guided critics to see Fauset solely as an auxiliary figure in the New Negro era.

poisonous element—namely Olivia’s mania for whiteness through social and educational interactions—is expunged from its midst.

Replacing Olivia as the female head of the family by marrying Christopher, Jr., Phebe reflects a pragmatic amalgamation of different forms of black uplift and education already present in the earlier generations. The households of the grandparents manifest different approaches to this pragmatic middle-class model. The paternal grandfather, a graduate of Philadelphia’s Institute for Colored Youth, “was no scholar. It is doubtful after his graduation [...] if he ever read any book entirely through except Booker Washington’s ‘Up From Slavery’...But he did read newspapers and without having formally studied history, he had a historian’s comparative sense”; furthermore, he insists on “greatness kn[owing] no race, no color” (193). This approach balances the one found at Olivia’s mother’s house, where the influence is extensive and “more democratic” (194). Focused on great individuals from Sojourner Truth to Susan B. Anthony to W.E.B. Du Bois as well as current modern literature, this is another way to be “strong ‘race-people’” (194). These approaches to education and uplift are literally wed through the marriage of Christopher, Sr. and Olivia, but Olivia’s push for whiteness obliterates their potential.

With Olivia unwilling and Christopher unable to carry out their promise, Phebe emerges as the successful heroine of the novel. Fauset follows her heroine through the difficult beginnings of her marriage where she supports and cares for not only her mother but also her husband and his family, provoking Olivia to leave for France. Phebe earns her financial independence through business, and although she is asked to pass tacitly during the daily transactions by the white shopkeeper for whom she works as a dressmaker, she continues to claim her blackness in social contexts, turning down a proposal from a wealthy white man.

Phebe supports her mother, whose vernacular and distinctly black features she brings into the Cary household when she marries Christopher, Jr. Like Olivia's mother, Phebe excels at her business and takes evening classes, this time at Temple University in French and English. Phebe, "alternatively enjoying and not enjoying a story in the *Saturday Evening Post* and a lesson on French idioms in 'The New Chardenal French Course,'" is Fauset's independent heroine, keeping "busy and profitable at the dress-shop. It was really marvelous how slightly they were feeling the much advertised depression" (291). Thus, Phebe extends the combination of inherited models from the grandparents, a model that marries Du Boisian literariness and talent with Booker T. Washington-style business savvy and practicality. Phebe's middle-class pragmatism relies on her ability to draw independently from both business and liberal arts education.

Which brings up a key distinction between the educational ideals of earlier generations and that of the novel's present: Phebe's "part-time" higher education, Teresa's thwarted college aspirations, and near-invisibility of historically black colleges and universities in the novel speak to an uneasy relationship with institutions of higher education. The novel's insistence on race pride and the genealogy of education strongly suggests that Fauset has worked to resolve, or at least to a certain extent bypass, the turn-of-the-century Washington-Du Bois debate over the most suitable model for black education. Further, it demonstrates that the absence of HBCUs in the narrative does not indicate a rejection of those institutions in particular: in fact, while Fauset earned her degree from Cornell, she appears to have thoroughly appreciated her experience of teaching "English grammar [and] American literature" at Fisk in the summer of 1904 (31). Why, then, did Fauset not engage the idea of the HBCUs in her novel?

With black education no longer simply a question of access and admission, or the industrial against the classical model, scholars focused on the consequences of educational

policies. Historian Rayford W. Logan argued that while HBCUs did not create or exacerbate segregation in white schools, the growing number of black students in black colleges were “enrolled in ‘Education’ [and] preparing to teach’: upon graduation, these same people would be facing a grim job market, and in turn liable to create a de facto need for segregated schooling since they were unlikely to land teaching jobs in mixed or white schools (67). For Fauset, the situation would have resonated on a personal level: she had, in fact, won honors in her high school but been denied teaching work at the same place because of her race despite having graduated from Cornell. Such grim prospects, echoed in Angela’s concerns in *Plum Bun*, might have pushed Fauset to imagine other ways to represent female practicality in her fiction.

Moreover, Fauset’s model rooted in a negotiation between Du Bois and Washington was not a residual version of the black educational debate. Du Bois himself noted on the persistence of the question of higher education in his commencement address at Howard University in 1930, when he saw science and business as the key arenas for these new kinds of black colleges. Gone would be the classical education he had once advocated as well as the industrial modes which prepared students for old-fashioned mechanical work that was rapidly disappearing as technology developed. Fauset seems to recognize similar developments as well, but *Comedy* refuses to wait for the colleges—black or white—to catch up with the times: the novel proposes a workable solution, a practical model, for middle-class black female empowerment.

Thus, these developments in black education help further situate Fauset’s narrative. Its heroine Phebe is not born into but rather achieves middle-class status, supporting herself through her business acumen and skilled labor while also pursuing some classical education on her own terms. Even Teresa’s momentary success as a self-employed French tutor reflects the necessity of female entrepreneurship combined with an educated history. Neither white schools with their

racialist assumptions nor black colleges in flux can provide models for success in *Comedy: American Style*, yet the presence of education informs much of the novel's plot. Fauset's ambivalence towards education establishes her pragmatic approach for black middle-class women, one of financial independence and eclectic education. The celebration of Phebe's progress represents a crucial step: the other novels discussed in this chapter tend to convey personal resolutions, but *Comedy* suggests a more radical rethinking of the middle-class black family. Unlike Fauset's earlier black female characters, Phebe begins to transform the Cary family upon joining it. In this way, Fauset's final novel hints at the possibility of a larger social and cultural transformation through the pragmatic female character that has moved from the margins of the black middle-class narrative to its center.

Coda

This dissertation has mapped the development of a specific mode—black educational fiction—that aligned itself with the prominent middle-class project of racial uplift in the later nineteenth and early twentieth century. From the Reconstruction-era calls for access to higher education to the subsequent debates about the nature and applications of that learning, my readings of these texts have traced a tradition that challenges the idea of a sparse pre-Harlem landscape of black American literature. Further, I have identified and tracked the educational conversation that marked this era from the Civil War to the Harlem Renaissance.

My work shows the complexity of this tradition as I build on the work of Xiomara Santamarina. She argues for the value of analyzing minority American literature within the national frame to uncover previously unrecognized modes and traditions (“‘Are We There Yet?’: Archives, History, and Specificity in African American Literary Studies”), and I follow her method to move beyond the recovery of individual novels and authors. I show that the tradition of black educational fiction spoke to, and of, national concerns about the reorganization of American society after 1865. Unlike critical works that narrow their focus on a shorter time period or ones that widen it beyond that national framework, *A Novel Way to Learn* establishes black educational fiction as a part of the decades-long national educational debate. Not merely reflecting that debate, these novels craft a compromise between the black community and white-controlled educational institutions in order to foreground a black middle-class identity necessary for leadership and social advancement of African Americans.

The Limits of Black Educational Fiction

At stake in this mode of writing was the project of black social advancement, which relied on the formal education as a component since these writers build their novels on the possibility of counteracting the limitations and problems in formal institutions with black communal and individual knowledge and agency. They augment their depictions of formal education with portrayals of informal methods of learning as well as novelistic modeling of black achievement through education. As formal schooling proved a necessary but an insufficient source of advancement for black Americans during the turn-of-the-century nadir of race relations, the writers of black educational fiction based their models in the perceived power of the black middle-class to represent both potential for social change as well as a connection to the larger black community.

Generically, the mode of black educational fiction is committed to realist novels as a vehicle for advancing the middle-class mission of racial uplift. In the postbellum decades, the black writers in this study perceived formal institutions of higher education as sites flexible enough to contain both calls for black advancement and for white recognition. Thus, they insisted on advancing a particularly bourgeois black identity as the best means of working towards racial equality, and their novels take on a pedagogical function by modeling such middle-class educational paths. From Harper's novels to those of Jessie Redmon Fauset, these texts reveal a belief in what W.E.B. Du Bois termed the Talented Tenth, the upper echelon of talented, educated black leaders.

At the beginning of the 1920s, the New Negro consciousness of the Harlem Renaissance ushered in both a more modernist understanding of literature and its function as well as a more radical, progressive focus for educational politics. The protest embedded in the frame of black

educational fiction was no longer considered a meaningful part of black literary production during the New Negro era. Compared to works of high modernism, Jessie Fauset's novels that update the educational narrative to meet ideologies of the 1920s and 30s appear out-of-date in their politics, particularly to many critics in the latter half of the twentieth century.

The opportunities for publication and readership during this era came with new limitations and expectations, and the new mode of black writing tended to separate educational protest from artistic expression. While many black writers of the 1920s and 30s were college-educated and teachers, there were also an increasing number who moved away from the kind of educator-writer persona that Harper, Griggs, Du Bois, and Fauset embodied. Replacing the educator-writer who fashioned narratives about the transformative power of education and its ultimate malleability in the service of black uplift, Harlem Renaissance writers like Nella Larsen directly rejected educational institutions in their work while others, like Langston Hughes, focused on stylistic innovations in their work, including texts that critiqued the state of black education.

As the black literary production shifted away from its previously close connection to higher education, the black colleges of the early twentieth century, too, were shifting away from the models of compromise suggested by black educational fiction. Serving a total of 14,000 students at the start of the 1920s, the historically black colleges and universities (HBCUs) became centers "of protests that involved black students, some administrators and faculty, and black communities, which included alumni" (Jackson and Nunn 32). Following the unrest that helped fuel the start of the Harlem Renaissance, the calls for equality had become louder on college campuses that were largely controlled by white administrators and faculty members (Jackson and Nunn 32). Such events on college campuses both built upon and exceeded the

expectations of black educational fiction: like the black students at Griggs's Stowe University in *Imperium in Imperio*, those enrolled in HBCUs in the 1920s demanded steps towards equality, but instead of waiting to earn recognition and rights through education, the demand of the New Negro era protesters was for "full privileges and right of American citizens" immediately (32). In such an atmosphere, then, it was the task of literature to inspire more radical views rather than to depict middle-class models that seemed, by that time, to advocate working towards a slow inclusion and acceptance by the white mainstream over more forceful demonstrations and direct demands.

Beyond its ill fit to the new HBCUs, black educational fiction as a mode could not fully account for the variety of black experience depicted in the Harlem Renaissance literature. Authors like Zora Neale Hurston in her emphasis on folk and Jean Toomer in his high black modernism depicted black life beyond the middle class and beyond the models of educational advancement, and the Harlem Renaissance writers focused more on depicting black life as it was rather than as it could be. The onus of social advancement had shifted outside of the mode of black fiction.

The Interpretive Potential of Black Educational Fiction

In seeking recognition for black educational fiction, this project has aimed to include a greater sense of genealogical understanding of how we read black American literature from the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. From Reconstruction onwards, these authors used black educational content in their novels to envision the path of black educated individuals as a representatives and leaders of the black community. As a significant strand in the development

of black American writing, black educational fiction bridges antebellum black writing and black modernism.

Recognizing the influence of the interpretive context I have mapped here requires that we also acknowledge the complexity of that tradition. Black educational fiction, then, responded to the different moments along this trajectory. In Harper's Reconstruction text, the impetus is on access to education, something that Griggs's turn-of-the-century novel complicates with a limited critique of formal education. Seeking viable alternatives to white-controlled education, Du Bois's development of his educational narrative shifts towards questioning white-controlled institutions altogether. Finally, in Fauset's pragmatic model we see the black entrepreneur detached from educational institutions, seeking ways to use education with greater individual agency. Far from monolithic, the tradition of black educational fiction negotiates and records the shifting subject positions of black Americans in the half-century following the Civil War.

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