Emerging identity in Afro-American womens novels 1892-1937
by Catherine Coughlin Goetz

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in History
Montana State University
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Abstract:
After the failures of Reconstruction, black Americans, particularly black women, confronted a number of identity conflicts. These conflicts are evident in the novels of Afro-American women between 1892 and 1937. This four-part study examines seven novels which reflect social and political developments during these decades and presents identification issues relevant to the Afro-American community. Identification issues generally attached to mulatto heroines and had to do with how black women strove to fit into white dominated society and how they attempted to defeat racist and sexist stereotypes imposed upon them by whites. Post-Reconstruction novels by Frances Harper and Pauline Hopkins dealt primarily with mulattos who, either chose to embrace identification with the black caste or who were forced, to accept their race. The most salient theme of the novels of Harlem Renaissance writers Nella Larsen and Jessie Fauset was marginality. The mulatto heroines were classic marginal characters whose identities, through the imperatives of color and/or class, were in constant flux. Never fully identifying with either caste, the heroines of Larsen's novels engaged in "passing" between the black race and the white. The psychic effects of such practices are alienation from the group and from the self. Fauset's heroines existed in a bourgeoisie milieu, a middle zone of alienation from the black masses and the white elite.

The 1937 publication of Hurston's Their Eves Were Watching God marked a turning point in Afro-American women's fiction. With the introduction of black folk culture, Hurston transcended problems of racial identification. Situating the plot and characters in an isolated rural South, the novel celebrated the distinctiveness of black culture and nullified racial identification difficulties.

The seven novels of this study reflect the impacts of national political and social policy on the black community as well as political and social developments within the community. Further, the novels are a mirror of a racial/cultural group once degraded by slavery moving toward individuation and place in American society.

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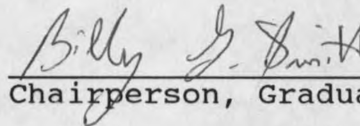
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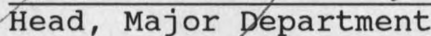
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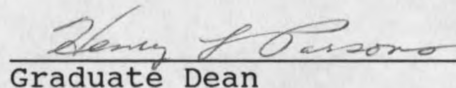
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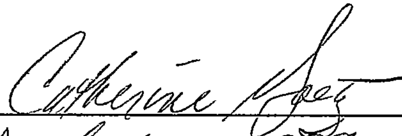
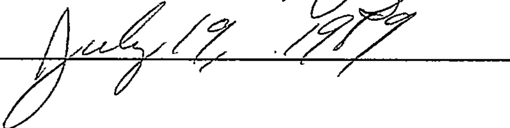
Signature 

Date 

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ABSTRACT

After the failures of Reconstruction, black Americans, particularly black women, confronted a number of identity conflicts. These conflicts are evident in the novels of Afro-American women between 1892 and 1937. This four-part study examines seven novels which reflect social and political developments during these decades and presents identification issues relevant to the Afro-American community. Identification issues generally attached to mulatto heroines and had to do with how black women strove to fit into white dominated society and how they attempted to defeat racist and sexist stereotypes imposed upon them by whites. Post-Reconstruction novels by Frances Harper and Pauline Hopkins dealt primarily with mulattos who either chose to embrace identification with the black caste or who were forced to accept their race. The most salient theme of the novels of Harlem Renaissance writers Nella Larsen and Jessie Fauset was marginality. The mulatto heroines were classic marginal characters whose identities, through the imperatives of color and/or class, were in constant flux. Never fully identifying with either caste, the heroines of Larsen's novels engaged in "passing" between the black race and the white. The psychic effects of such practices are alienation from the group and from the self. Fauset's heroines existed in a bourgeoisie milieu, a middle zone of alienation from the black masses and the white elite.

The 1937 publication of Hurston's Their Eyes Were Watching God marked a turning point in Afro-American women's fiction. With the introduction of black folk culture, Hurston transcended problems of racial identification. Situating the plot and characters in an isolated rural South, the novel celebrated the distinctiveness of black culture and nullified racial identification difficulties.

The seven novels of this study reflect the impacts of national political and social policy on the black community as well as political and social developments within the community. Further, the novels are a mirror of a racial/cultural group once degraded by slavery moving toward individuation and place in American society.

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

> Our friends. . .have been erroneously urging us to lose our identity as a distinct race, declaring that we were the same as other people. . .The truth is, we are not identical with the Anglo-Saxon, or any other race of the Caucasian or pure white type of the human family, and the sooner we know and acknowledge this truth the better for ourselves and posterity. . .We have inherent traits, attributes, and native characteristics, peculiar to our race, whether pure or mixed blood; and all that is required of us is to cultivate these, and develop them in their purity, to make them desirable and emulated by the rest of the world.[1]

Both early and latter day black nationalists like nineteenth-century activist Martin Delany have cleaved to the concept of black distinctiveness and have argued in a variety of forums for its viability. Black intellectuals, some of them women and artists, not operating under the aegis of a formal political "nationalism," have cited cultural and racial distinctiveness as a gift and a wellspring of creativity to be nurtured and kept intact. Other Afro-Americans have called being black a test, a

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[1] From Martin R. Delany, "The Political Destiny of the Colored Race," in Sterling Stuckey, The Ideological Origins of Black Nationalism (Boston: Beacon Press, 1972), pp. 202-203.

trial, and a condition of "shame and grief" from which they long to escape.[2]

Since the beginnings of Afro-American literary tradition, complex internal and external struggles arising from an inability to identify with caste distinctiveness have provided black authors, both male and female, with a leitmotif and theme. This thesis describes these struggles and defines their meanings within the framework of American cultural history. Specifically, the study addresses identification, alienation, and marginality in fiction written by black women.

Black women's novels serve as signposts to Afro-American cultural development before the second half of the twentieth century. From the historical perspective of post-Reconstruction years, to the period of the "New Negro" and the Harlem Renaissance, and into an era of emerging ethnocentrism, this four-part study examines uniquely female perspectives on issues of black identification. The study offers theories about how and why changes in attitude and artistic temperament toward Afro-American cultural distinctiveness occurred.

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"Identification" is understood in positive or negative terms by Afro-Americans--a group born of the processes of

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[2] Nella Larsen, Quicksand and Passing (reprint, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1985), p. 45.

colonization and acculturation, a group suffered to live in a dual caste system of white and non-white.[3] In positive terms, caste identification is characterized by glorification of, and fusion with, the group. Positive assertions about the group and willing association with it engender a security of belonging. This positive view is especially evident in the 1960's and '70's "Black is beautiful" movement and is typified by a freedom from inter and intra group competition, jealousy, and resentment.

Identity problems occur when there is a history of both liberation and depravation of power and autonomy within an individual or group.[4] Alienation may occur when experience or history is not shared, or an ambiguous relationship exists between the individual or group and what is considered "the community." Problems in identification arise when a sense of commonality is absent in personal or group experience, when individuals or groups are defined as belonging to a distinctive caste but view

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[3] "Afro-American" already presents itself as a dual identity. Within this group there are a myriad of other sub-groups linked through locale (or local origin), superficial color, and ancestry. See Frantz Fanon, Black Skin, White Masks (New York: Grove Press, Inc., 1967).

[4] Within slavery blacks were deprived of freedom and power; outside of slavery, blacks were deprived of a fixed identity; with liberation blacks were deprived of parity and power within the new community. With liberation from slavery then, blacks were alienated from one specific community and thrust into another. For an argument of how "only free women and men can be alienated" see Richard Schmitt, Alienation and Class (Cambridge: Schenkman Publishing Company, Inc., 1983), pp. 155-202.

themselves as lacking parity with that caste. In general terms, in the United States, black Americans share a common heritage of out-group status. "Whether pure or mixed blood," blacks share a common background of belonging to a subordinate community. Estrangement, alienation, and marginality are common psychic problems when dominant and subordinate communities meet. Within the defined subordinate community itself further fragmentation may occur as individuals or sub-groups are cut off from access to that community.

Fragmentation may take a variety of forms within the already subordinate black community. The economically successful, for example, may suffer alienation from a financially depressed portion, or the inverse may occur. Bipartite or multipartite heritage may cause total alienation, as in the case of some blacks "passing" from black into white society. Marginality may also result in ambiguous status within the community, causing a sense of partial belonging.

For blacks living in the two caste culture of the United States before the Civil War, identity had been associated with a condition rather than with value. Pervasive racist theories concerning the degraded nature of the black group, both as an inherent, genetic, condition, and as a physical condition imposed for centuries, could only weigh heavy in the psyches of black slaves and their

free counterparts.

The distinctiveness of blackness became a preeminent issue after the Civil War when blacks were displaced from a long-imposed and artificial identity as slaves and thrust into a culture in which they would either be subsumed or alienated. For some Afro-Americans, the anticipation of emancipation and its ultimate realization brought to the surface a new consciousness, a desire to restore cultural forms lost though the physical and psychological conditions of slavery.[5] For others, it brought the desire to acculturate fully, wrenching the conditioned limitations and responses of slavery out of the Afro-American community at large. For still other blacks, emancipation brought the desire to embrace the ideals and benefits of America's dominant white culture and make those ideals and benefits their own. Several Afro-American leaders exemplified and articulated these different desires.

Booker T. Washington, the preeminent Afro-American figure of the post-Reconstruction period until his death in 1915, advocated a philosophy of achievement through

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[5] John Blassingame has pointed out that the attempt to retain an African culture was extant among many bonded people even from very early times in the American colonies. Physical separation from an African homeland or from members of particular cultural sub-groups, as well as imposed language, religion, and life-style, made the process of acculturation inevitable as well as an instrument of personal survival. See John W. Blassingame, The Slave Community (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), pp. 46-48.

industrial and agricultural labor and education. He urged Afro-Americans to work at "useful pursuits" and to be law-abiding citizens in order to fit into white society. Though ostensibly designed to "uplift and make better" the group as a whole, Washington's philosophy accommodated the identity definition whites sought to impose on blacks. By following Washington's policies, blacks could improve their standard of living, acquire land, homes, and skills. However, because this approach rested on conciliation and the need for blacks to prove their worth to whites, the identity of blacks as inferior human beings remained intact.

W. E. B. Du Bois' ideal for Afro-American identity diverged from Washington's and was extremely difficult to fulfill. Du Bois, writer, sociologist, and leading twentieth century spokesman for Afro-Americans, believed that blacks wanted to be Negroes <u>and</u> Americans. Blacks, therefore, had two identities, merging into one.

> Two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings, two warring ideals in one dark body. . .The history of the American Negro is the history of this strife,--this longing to merge his double self into a better and truer self. In this merging he wishes neither of the other selves to be lost. . . .He simply wishes to make it possible for a man to be both a Negro and American.[6]

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[6] William E.B. Du Bois, <u>The Souls of Black Folks: Essays and Sketches</u> (reprint, New York: NAL Penguin, Inc.), p. 45.

Du Bois understood that Afro-Americans wanted to reinstate the cultural integrity of their African heritage while being free to contribute to and participate fully in American culture, free to pursue its economic, educational, political, artistic and social goals. Achievement of this ideal was almost always problematic for acculturation processes, as well as racism and displacement, did not permit the complete reinstatement of cultural distinctiveness. Furthermore, racism, displacement, and black cultural distinctiveness itself would not permit the total integration advocated by Washington and his followers.

Marcus Garvey, early twentieth-century black nationalist, rejected Washington and Du Bois and advocated a doctrine of racial pride calling for a Negro homeland where "[blacks] everywhere would automatically gain. . . needed prestige and strength."[5] The philosophy of Garvey's Universal Negro Improvement Association carried the belief in black uniqueness one step further. By urging Afro-Americans to organize into a separate nation, Garvey's doctrine had the unfortunate and ironic effect of inspiring the active approval of white racists who also insisted on the separation of the allegedly inferior Negro. While Garvey's ideas instilled "race" identity or "Negro pride,"

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[5] E. David Cronon, Black Moses: The Story of Marcus Garvey, (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1969), p. 185.

they strove to diminish Afro-American identity.

Given the inhibiting, proscriptive behavior of the dominant white culture toward non-whites, as well as these diverse racial philosophies, it is surprising so many Afro-Americans responded in the manner of W.E.B. Du Bois who, instead of despairing of the possibility of entering American culture fully franchised, believed himself an agent of progress toward equality, "drawn up into higher spaces and made a part of a mightier mission."[6] Many Afro-Americans for years after the end of Reconstruction could not help but experience alienation from the dominant white culture as well as from those blacks espousing opposing racial philosophies.

Further fragmentation in the Afro-American community occurred over the issue of gender. Held outside white culture by virtue of their blackness, black women suffered an added dimension of conflict. Being female and black made them inferior to males of either caste. In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the "cult of true womanhood" dictated that women, both black and white, remain in the domestic realm. Those wishing to pursue a public life were free to do so but within the proscribed "women's sphere" of home, church, and school. Before female suffrage women could participate in public activity

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[6] W.E.B. Du Bois, Darkwater: Voices From Within the Veil, (1920; reprint New York: AMS Press, 1968), p. 12.

in religious or academic forums. Often these forums were either open exclusively to women, or were fully appreciated only by women. Black women's participation in these limited forums was made more difficult by common stereotypes applied to blacks in general and black females particularly.

After female suffrage in 1920, in a period of intense cultural development, many Afro-American women struggled either to attain the political and intellectual promise of a twentieth century black model designed and defined by black male intellectuals like Booker T. Washington and W. E. B. Du Bois, or the social and economic promise of a white middle-class model. To be educated, talented, beautiful, and monied in the way mainstream white middle-class women seemed to be, was sought by many Afro-American women at the expense of black cultural distinctiveness. In itself, the repudiation of Afro-American cultural uniqueness promoted feelings of alienation and marginality in black women whose families and friends did not seek to attain those same middle-class values.

Individual black women in the early decades of the twentieth century found further complication in an internal, personal struggle for identity. A plethora of physical "improvements" available in the women's marketplace--some invented and promoted by blacks--were designed to make black women white. Hair straighteners,

skin bleaches, and surgical techniques for reducing or eliminating outward caste characteristics, gave black women a negative self-image, one that could be redeemed only by a physical renunciation of black distinctiveness.

> The neurotic structure of an individual is simply the elaboration, the formation, the eruption within the ego, of conflictual clusters arising in part out of the environment and in part out of the purely personal way in which that individual reacts to these influences.[7]

The personal struggle in reaction to the conflicting messages from the community often ended in ambiguity and invariably lead to the devaluation of the self.

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Alienation was the theme of an astonishing number of black authors whose literary creations centered around mulatto characters. As a figure neither black nor white, one "caught between the boundaries of the American caste system,"[8] the mulatto was problematic in Afro-American women's fictions. Since the dominant culture traditionally recognized two categories, white and non-white, the mulatto, or mixed blood person, had no formal, separate racial/cultural category into which to retreat for group

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[7] Fanon, Black Skin, White Masks, p. 81.

[8] Judith R. Berzon, Neither White Nor Black: The Mulatto Character in American Fiction (New York: New York University Press, 1978), p. 4.

identification.[9] When conditions made choosing possible, the mulatto had to decide whether to join the white or the black group. If choice could not, or had not been made, the mixed-blood character in some fiction was left more alienated than black counterparts who identified with the black community. Some early novels and stories centering around mulatto characters quickly dispensed with mulatto alienation as a theme and attempted to solve problems created by the race alienation of slavery and a delimiting social caste system.

Themes of alienation and attached identity problems involved: 1) mulattoes who chose to identify with the black group in order to uplift the group as a whole; 2) mulattos who were unable to choose and whose lives were therefore fragmented irrevocably; and 3) mulattoes who struggled to identify with a white economic and social ideal in order to be accepted by the dominant culture. A fourth category of fiction to be addressed in this study involved characters who did not find choice necessary but accepted themselves as individuals within the black community and within Afro-American culture.

As they followed patterns set by historical and

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[9] Ibid., p. 9. Quoting Eugene Genovese's Roll Jordan Roll: The World The Slaves Made, Berzon pointed out that "New Orleans, Charleston, Mobile, and certain other cities did have some semblance of a three caste system in which the mulattoes constituted a separate caste of the haughty bourgeoisie; and mulattoes constituted a third caste on some of the 'great plantations.'"

literary trends, the novels written before the turn of the century followed common literary conventions. Black women writers strove to meet the standards already set by white writers believing that in making their fiction conform to writing styles and even to some extent, to subject matter, they could reach a white as well as a black audience.

The fiction of this period was first a literature of reform. Its intentions were clearly defined by post Reconstruction degradation of blacks as a racial group and by the need to instill a sense of self-reliance in order to raise expectations for blacks that they may find a positive identity in civic and social America. Women's fiction during the early period was consciously designed to refute negative gender stereotypes of Negro women as harlot and mammy prevalent throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The literature of this period was for the most part highly "race" conscious and its focal characters were representative of "racial corporateness" rather than created as individuals or individualists.[10]

The first chapter of this study will focus on novels by Frances E. W. Harper and Pauline E. Hopkins. These works depict an out-group striving for identity in the mainstream of American life. It will also address the fictive use of mulatto heroines as an attempt to illustrate

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[10] Carole McAlpine Watson, Prologue: The Novels of Black American Women, 1891-1965 (Westport and London: Greenwood Press, 1985), p. 7.

either the ironic history of race disintegration and segregation, or the moral superiority of the black group.

Novels written in the early years of the twentieth-century correlated to the desire of middle-class blacks to achieve economic and social status commensurate with that achieved by the white middle class. Chapters two and three will examine novels by Nella Larsen and Jessie Fauset, two authors whose works reflected the extraordinary cultural changes sweeping black America during the era of the "New Negro" and during the decade of the 1920's known as the "Harlem Renaissance." Fauset's and Larsen's novels depicted the problems faced by urban black women whose color and/or economic backgrounds placed them in a "middle zone" of alienation from either black or white culture.[11]

Zora Neale Hurston, considered in chapter four, was a writer who "deplored the appropriation, dilution and commodification of black culture. . .by the pre-Depression white world, [one who] tried to explain the difference

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[11] Where pigmentation and physical racial traits themselves are a relatively less important feature in fictions centering around a theme of race alienation, major characters struggle for self identification in a white middle-class world of economic and educational achievement. The middle zone of alienation conducive to "passing" therefore, is not exclusively a color consideration but is often economic. Strivers for upper middle-class status are seen by Jessie Fauset's critics as passers of a different sort.

between a reified 'art' and a living culture. . ."[12] Derived from black folk traditions, Hurston's fiction marks the beginning of a new era of Afro-American cultural identification and awareness. Unlike the mixed-blood figures of earlier black female writers, Hurston's mulatto heroine in Their Eyes were Watching God is free of racial identification problems and free of the crisis experience of many black or mulatto protagonists. Because her fiction was created for and in the Afro-American community, it "articulate[d] the Afro-American experience not only as a condition but as a culture."[13] Her work represents a new and unique interest in creating a literary model based on the distinctiveness of Afro-American folk culture.

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[12] Barbara Johnson, "Metaphor, Metonomy and Voice in Their Eyes Were Watching God," in Henry Louis Gates, Jr., ed., Black Literature and Literary Theory (New York and London: Methuen, 1984), p. 208.

[13] Barbara Christian, Black Women Novelists: The Development of a Tradition 1892-1976 (Westport and London: The Greenwood Press, 1980), p. 60.

CHAPTER TWO

SOUNDINGS ON BLACK PRIDE IN THE POST-RECONSTRUCTION ERA

> What a responsibility. . .to have the sole management of the primal light and shadows! Such is the colored woman's office. She must stamp weal or woe on the coming history of this people. May she see her opportunity and vindicate her high prerogative.[1]

Into the post-Reconstruction decades of unrestrained racism and constricted female franchise came a small number of black female intellectuals who attempted to "uplift" their fellow Afro-Americans, overturn the stigma of assumed racial inferiority, and loosen the fetters of female bondage. In the late nineteenth century, Anna Julia Cooper's A Voice From the South called for proper recognition of the achievements of these women and greater social liberty allowing more black females the opportunity to exercise their talents. Cooper was passionate in her message that black women were at the forefront of social change for African-Americans. However, her trust that these women would ready the way for group advancement met with disillusionment. Black women were rarely considered peers of their male counterparts and were excluded in all

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[1] Anna Julia Cooper, A Voice From the South (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), p. 134.

but gratuitous ways from the ranks of the intellectual elite whose "grand and holy purpose" was the uplifting of the race.

In the late nineteenth century black women no less than white took advantage of the limited arena of influence granted them. Black women who sought to affect change in Afro-American social and political life did so within the circumscribed sphere of "true womanhood." The rubric of true womanhood dictated that women could exercise their social interests in the home, in education, and within the church. In keeping with this proscription, two black women wrote novels describing a formula for uplift which included female characters who were able to affect the aims of racial uplift within the "women's sphere." Indeed, in the fiction created by these authors, female heroines were the prime agents and exemplars of Afro-American regeneration. Further, these novels delivered a covert message that exceeded the bounds of true womanhood and suggested, if not a radical restructuring of gender roles, then a more liberal application of "the sphere" as it applied to the future of the Afro-American community.

The years 1877-1914 are characterized by an impulse on the part of Afro-Americans to deliver the black community from the degenerate status as former slaves to equilibrium with whites. This impulse took several significant forms. The advance of education, inculcation of Christian

principles, and temperance were critical for uplift for two reasons. First, with the compromise of 1877, blacks in both the North and South suffered the setbacks of broken promises in social and political life; and second, assimilation into white America remained a goal for many whose personal history of servitude made them cognizant of the benefits of liberty. Blacks during the immediate post-Reconstruction years sought to re-establish a sense of racial self worth, to "uplift" themselves in order to fit into white American culture and reap its rewards. Strategies for the attainment of self-worth were evident in the philosophies of Booker T. Washington and W.E. Burghardt Du Bois. Washington espoused compromise and accommodation to a white agenda of gradual, partial integration through personal pride and industrial education. Du Bois formulated a doctrine of full citizenship rights achieved through the cultural and political education of an already uplifted "Talented Tenth." While the two strategies held integration as their goal, they were wholly incompatible and served as the foundation of a long standing debate within the Afro-American community.

Further, deplorable relations between black and white Americans during this period prompted a number of black writers to put into didactic fiction an optimistic

prescription for the future of the race.[2] A second salient purpose of such fiction was protest, voiced most strenuously and specifically against lynching, an activity which took an incredible toll on the black community during these years.[3] Moreover, the protest of images of Afro-Americans devised, standardized, and directed by Southern white racists was significant. That blacks were intellectually inferior, black males covetous of white females, and black women sexually and morally uncontrolled, were the most common stereotypes. It was the work of such fiction to confront through positive counterimages the effects of such stereotypes.

Nowhere was the dual purpose of uplift and protest more apparent than in the novels of two black women, Frances E. W. Harper and Pauline E. Hopkins, two ardent, race-conscious writers whose literary works reflected backgrounds in abolitionism and the black self-help

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[2] The period from 1877 to 1896 is referred to as the triumph of white supremacy. "Clashes between the races occurred almost daily, and the atmosphere of tension in which people of both races lived was conducive to little more than a struggle for mere survival. . .The law, the courts, the schools, and almost every institution in the South favored whites. This was white supremacy." John H. Franklin and Alfred A. Moss, From Slavery to Freedom: A History of Negro Americans (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1988), p. 238.

[3] Aptheker cites an NAACP study estimating there were 3,500 blacks lynched between 1882 and 1903. Bettina Aptheker, Woman's Legacy: Essays on Race, Sex, and Class in American History (Amherst: The University of Massachusetts Press, 1982), p. 60.

movement. Both Harper and Hopkins called upon common nineteenth-century literary conventions to serve their very specific purposes of Afro-American betterment. Like Harriet Beecher Stowe's Uncle Tom's Cabin and a host of post-bellum romantic novels, theirs was a fiction of pedagogical intent, highly didactic in tone, complex in plot, and rife with romanticized characters. Harper and Hopkins consciously used their novels as effective vehicles "to raise the stigma of degradation from [their] race."[4]

With the intention of uplift, the novels also protested against racist attitudes and behaviors. Central characters in Pauline Hopkins' Contending Forces strenuously objected to violence against blacks, specifically black women. The plot presented characters engaged in arguments against legal, physical, and psychological white supremacy. Lynching was addressed rhetorically in Frances Harper's Iola Leroy, or Shadows Uplifted and was intended to inform the reading audience of the horrors inflicted upon blacks by whites, and as means of directing a subtle, though radical message that a black could "pull a trigger as well as any white man."[5]

Responding to the post-Reconstruction atmosphere in

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[4] Pauline E. Hopkins, Contending Forces: A Romance Illustrative of Negro Life North and South (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1899), p. 13.

[5] Frances E.W. Harper, Iola Leroy, or Shadows Uplifted (reprint. New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), p. 171.

which whites, both South and North, failed to acknowledge Afro-American equality in either social or political forums, Harper and Hopkins attempted to override prevailing notions of black racial inferiority. Both authors created romantic heroines who suffer unjust separation from family, who struggle to make their own way in the world, and who, after searching for their mothers and/or other significant family members, eventually find solace in reunion with family and in marriage to strong, spiritually compatible men. Within this typical plot structure Harper and Hopkins constructed prevailing black ideologies of Afro-American uplift. In both Harper's _Iola Leroy, or Shadows Uplifted_ and Hopkins' _Contending Forces_, the debate between the Washington and Du Bois notions of black education is expressed in didactic exposition. In each of the novels characters proselytize about the virtues of exemplary Christian behavior, good citizenship, education, and temperance.

Furthermore, heroines in both novels express uncommon feminist attitudes regarding the necessity of work for women outside the domestic sphere. Both authors' nascent feminism was made apparent through the self-contained personalities of their heroines. Both novels' heroines are beautiful mulattoes.

The attachment of a protagonist of ambiguous group identification to a fiction whose purpose was to "uplift

the Negro race" and to protest racism, was interpreted by some critics as a device of audience manipulation. However, Hopkins and Harper employed this figure in different ways to serve common ends. But because mulatto rather than black characters emerge as "ideal" and exemplary, the cause of "race" uplift was often ambiguously served. The fictive characters' identification with the black group as well as the contemporaneous audience must be examined in order to determine whether the ambiguity can be dissolved and whether it was possible in the nineteenth century for this fiction to meet its high aims successfully.

As literary critic Barbara Christian has pointed out, "[w]e must not forget that, by necessity, the first novelists were writing to white audiences. . .The thrust of the black novel necessarily had to be a cry of protest directed at whites for their treatment of blacks."[6] While Christian's analysis was valid, it is also true in the case of Hopkins and Harper that the novels were written _for_ fellow blacks. In her preface to _Contending Forces_, Pauline Hopkins remarked

> Fiction is of great value. . . It is a record of growth and development. . ._No one will do this for us; we must ourselves develop the men and women who will faithfully portray the inmost_

[6] Barbara Christian, _Black Women Novelists: The Development of a Tradition, 1892-1976_ (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1980), p. 32.

> <u>thought and feelings of the Negro all the fire and romance which lie dormant in our history</u>.[7] (emphasis in text)

In the closing note of <u>Iola Leroy, or Shadows Uplifted</u>, Harper stated that the major purpose of her fiction was to inspire her black audience:

> [The] children of that new era [must] determine that they will embrace every opportunity, develop every faculty, use every power God has given them to rise in the scale of character and condition, to add their quota of good citizenship to the best welfare of the nation.[8]

The audience the novelists addressed was diverse. Both authors hoped to awaken "all classes and all complexions" to a restructured society which included African-Americans as fully franchised citizens. Blacks would be inspired to reach for and gain that deserving higher status through education, Christian commitment, and temperance. Whites would be made to realize "a stronger sense of justice and a more Christ like humanity on behalf of those whom the fortunes of war threw, homeless, ignorant and poor, upon the threshold of a new era." [9]

Critic Carole McAlpine Watson has argued that mulattos were deliberately drawn to serve as "models which embodied the novelists's ideals of morality, success, and

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[7] Hopkins, <u>Contending Forces</u>, pp. 13-14.

[8] Harper, <u>Iola Leroy</u>, p. 282.

[9] Ibid., p. 282.

race loyalty."[10] The authors, therefore, depicted mulatto heroines as perfect and idealized characters beyond mere human dimensions to defeat the stereotypes of degenerate and sexually insatiable black women. As well as "gentle and honorable," the heroines are "beautiful, faithful and pure," with "eyes. . .blue and complexion white," and of "fair magnificent beauty." Hopkins' Sappho Clark is

> Tall and fair, with hair of a golden cast, aquiline nose, rosebud mouth, soft brown eyes veiled by long, dark lashes which swept her cheek, just now covered with a delicate rose flush. . . a combination of green rose and lily in one.[11]

Further, to combat the negative images of blacks as debased and uneducable, and particularly of black women as morally loose and excessively sexed, Harper and Hopkins fashioned a positive image corresponding to the "white feminine ideal" of dozens of ante and post-bellum Southern novels. The ideal was always evident in the persona of a saint-like white maiden, comely, virtuous, delicate and fragile, of "splendid form" and silken locks. This proximate image of black perfection, like its counterpart in white literature, derived from no real subject or character. The black feminine ideal, the mulatto or mixed-blood character of high moral standards, impeccable speech,

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[10] Carole McAlpine Watson, Prologue: The Novels of Black American Women, 1891-1965 (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1985), pp. 12-13.

[11] Hopkins, Contending Forces, p. 107.

and great, Caucasian-like beauty tinged with an acceptable dram of exoticism, was a montage of positive qualities and wholly unreal.

Beyond its use as a counter-stereotype, and whether or not the authors created the mulatto to appeal to the sympathies and aesthetic tastes of a white audience, the mixed-blood heroines of these novels articulated very specific social and political messages. Frances Harper's character, Iola Leroy, was an instructive idealization of the virtues of the black group. Pauline Hopkins' mulatto characters furthered a historical perspective of intercaste relationships and blurred the distinctions between castes to point up the irrationality of the color line.

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Frances Watkins Harper was born of free black parents in Baltimore in 1825. Trained as a professional seamstress, Harper taught sewing at Union Seminary, African Methodist Episcopal church in Little York, Pennsylvania. In 1853, after a Maryland law allowed transient free blacks to be sold as slaves, Harper yielded to the call of abolitionism. Joining the Antislavery Society of Maine, she traveled widely throughout the eastern seaboard and Canada. She began her writing career as a poet, essayist, and journalist in association with William Still and his newspaper, <u>Underground Railroad</u>. At the close of the Civil War Harper lectured in the Southern states, addressing

herself to black audiences on the virtues of newly won freedom and opportunities for racial betterment. Iola Leroy, or Shadows Uplifted, was not written until 1892 when Harper was sixty-seven years of age.

Frances Harper spoke often on feminist issues, however, in keeping with her abolitionist and educational mission, she believed the urgencies of caste equality outweighed gender parity. Early in her career she stood against Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony in the 1869 debate over women's suffrage. Stanton and Anthony held that

> [i]f intelligence, justice and morality are to be placed in government, then let the question of woman be brought up first and that of the negro last.

Harper believed with Frederick Douglass that the Fifteenth Amendment was crucial for blacks and that in "a question of race we let the lesser question of sex go."[12] Harper's disfranchisement as a black overshadowed her disfranchisement as a woman.

Harper's fictional heroine, Iola Leroy, is a strong, independent thinker and a political radical. However, matters affecting the members of Iola's caste--education, lynching, male suffrage--are addressed directly and take precedence over specific women's issues. Iola expresses

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[12] quoted in Hazel V. Carby, Reconstruction Womanhood: The Emergence of the Afro-American Woman Novelist (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), p. 68.

the wish to earn her own living, and does so, believing that "a great amount of sin and misery springs from the weakness and inefficiency of women" and arguing as well, "I believe there would be less unhappy marriages if labor were more honored among women."[13] Iola's sturdy feminist conviction on this particular issue reflects her independent personality, a trait made manifest in her unyielding dedication to uplifting her "race."

At the chronological beginning of Iola Leroy, the central character, Iola, is the daughter of a slaveholder. She travels North to school where her young friends are either involved in abolition movements or hold abolitionist sentiments. Iola naively believes the slave institution humane and speaks for its viability. Her words reflect typical pro-slavery arguments:

> Slavery can't be wrong. . .for my father is a slave-holder, and my mother is as good to our servants as she can be. . .I love my mammy as much as I do my own mother. . .Our slaves do not want their freedom. They would not take it if we gave it to them.[14]

Iola speaks as one who has first-hand knowledge of a benevolent aspect of slavery, not knowing that her own mother is a mulatto, and that her mother's kindness to family slaves reflects a personal sensitivity to the plight of blacks.

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13. Harper, Iola Leroy, p. 205.

14 Ibid., pp. 97-98.

Iola is the stereotypical Southern belle, interested in a gay life, unfettered by conscience. In the midst of a debate with her friends about slavery, she diverges with flighty abandon, telling them they will have a grand time with her in the sunny South during her "first [social] season," and remarking inanely, ". . .one winter in the South will cure you of your Abolitionism."[15]

When evil Alfred Lorraine murders her father in order to remand Iola and her mother to slavery in his own lecherous custody, Iola learns the degradations of bondage. Once the Civil War begins, Iola is released from her master by the ministrations of members of a Negro regiment who are attracted by her "[B]eautiful long hair [that] comes way down her back; putty blue eyes. . ."[16] Taken to headquarters, the General who will assign her as a nurse to the regiment is impressed by her "modest demeanor," and more so "surprised to see the refinement and beauty she possessed."

> [Could] it be possible that this young and beautiful girl had been a chattel . . .Could [one] ever again glory in his American citizenship, when any white man, no matter how coarse, cruel, or brutal, could buy or sell her for the basest purposes? [17]

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[15] Ibid., p. 99.

[16] Ibid., p. 38.

[17] Ibid., pp. 38-39.

The white General is undoubtedly troubled by slavery's degradations because Iola appears to be white. If both blacks and whites are appalled by the system that would harm this refined "dove" whose "putty white han's" have never done servile work, one may question whether the author herself identified with blacks who did not possess the virtuous traits and physical attractiveness of the ideal Iola. Examination of several mulatto characters in the text who are, like Iola, people of "intelligence, courage, and prompt obedience" reveals the answer.

When the captain of his regiment offers mulatto Robert Johnson a place ranking as a white man, Robert replies,

> When a man's been colored all his life it comes a little hard for him to get white all at once. Were I to try it, I would feel like a cat in a strange garret. . .I think my place is where I am most needed.[18]

The captain observes, "You do not look like them, you do not talk like them. It is a burning shame to have held such a man as you in slavery." Whereupon Robert replies. "I don't think it was any worse to have held me in slavery than the blackest man in the south."[19]

Dr. Latimer, Iola's intended husband, is also a mulatto who can easily pass for white. After reading a

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[18] Ibid., p. 43.

[19] Ibid., p. 44.

paper at a professional convention, Latimer tells his peers that he intends to go South to help "those who much need helpers from their own ranks." Another doctor comments he hopes Latimer intends to confine his relations with blacks to business matters and not to "commit the folly of equalizing [himself] with them" because doing so would drag the white race of America down. "I do not see that the contact has dragged you down. . . " Latimer answers ironically. "The blood of that race is coursing though my veins. I am one of them." Purity of heart, a virtue of his black blood made him

> a man of too much sterling worth of character to be willing to forsake his mother's race for the richest advantages. . .[20]

The dialogue between Latimer and the racist doctor expresses the conviction that the choice to identify with the black group--the choice made by Iola after her release from slavery, the choice of Robert Johnson, and the choice of Dr. Latimer--is an honorable and easy one, for the Negro race is inherently "generous, kindly, and faithful." As a mulatto, identifying oneself as black is morally correct, and in the case of Dr. Latimer, as in the case of Iola, a choice which is made with no difficulty or ambivalence.

The superior ability of whites to dominate "feebler races" pales in comparison to the superior moral ground of

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[20] Ibid., p. 240.

the Negro group. Despite the argument of her white friend, Dr. Gresham, that Negroes have to learn to labor and achieve for the eventual judgement of history, Iola knows that slavery has been the overwhelming inhibiting factor for blacks. And she believes that the Negro race will eventually overcome that inhibition and "assume a better phase," than the Anglo Saxon race. When a discussion turns to Iola's brother, Harry, who has also chosen to be black, Dr. Gresham remarks, "he would possess advantages as a white man which he could not if he were known to be colored." Iola objects to the statement saying,

> To be. . . the leader of a race to higher planes of thought and action, to teach men clearer views of life and duty, and to inspire their souls with loftier aims, is a far greater privilege than it is to open the gates of material prosperity and fill every home with sensuous enjoyment.[21]

Iola's mother decries the corrupt actions of whites and agrees with her daughter that being a martyr to and with the Negro race is a noble calling.

> I. . .would rather. . .see Harry the friend and helper of the poor and ignorant than the companion of men who, under the cover of night, mask their faces and ride the country on lawless raids.[22]

In perhaps the most telling passage, Harper's heroine sacrifices the possibility of love and marriage to white

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[21] Ibid., p. 219.

[22] Ibid., p. 219.

Dr. Gresham to her identification with the black group and her profound belief in its regeneration. Gresham exclaims in his frustration,

> [If] you love your race, as you call it, work for it, live for it, suffer for it, and, if need be, die for it; but don't marry for it. Your education has unfitted you for social life among them.[23]

But Iola stays her ground, saying, "My life-work is planned. I intend spending my future among the colored people of the South. . .I must serve the race which needs me most."[24]

That all of the mulatto characters in Iola Leroy, or Shadows Uplifted choose to be black, attests the overriding theme of Harper's fiction: identification with the black caste. Those near-white mulatto characters who were released from slavery and had the opportunity to go to a new locale and "pass," as well as those free mulattos who could easily have maintained a caste identification with whites, choose identification with "colored people." Identification with the maligned race expressed to Harper's black readership that they must appreciate and value their blackness. In a long speech likening the trials of Afro-Americans to the sufferings of Christ, Iola Leroy exalts the racial "cross of shame is [now] a throne of power."

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[23] Ibid., p. 235.

[24] Ibid., pp. 234-35.

> . . .robes of scorn have changed to habiliments of light, and that crown of mockery to a diadem of glory.[25]

Through identity choice, the text delivered to the black audience a clear doctrine of black pride. Afro-Americans, like their fictional brethren, must embrace their racial virtues and work to bring what has been hidden in the shadows of repression and servitude into the light of deserving reward.

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Early involvement in abolitionist and temperance movements provided Pauline E. Hopkins her lifelong pedagogical and philosophical interest, as well as a foundation and forum for her considerable creative abilities. Though never able to support herself with her writing, Hopkins produced several novels and many short stories, a play, and dozens of editorials and biographical sketches of notable black leaders for the Colored American Magazine which she helped found in 1899.[26]

Hopkins' first novel, Contending Forces, A Romance Illustrative of Negro Life North and South, published in 1900, expressed her belief in the importance of the development of Afro-American fiction. The novel's opening

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[25] Ibid., p. 256.

[26] Three novels were serialized in the Colored American Magazine--Hagar's Daughter. A Story of Southern Caste Prejudice; Winona. A Tale of Negro Life in the South and Southwest; and Of One Blood. Or, the Hidden Self.

note declared "it is the simple, homely tale, unassumingly told, which cements the bond of brotherhood among all classes and all complexions."[27] This sentiment was pronounced more specifically to a black audience in an editorial in the first issue of the Colored American Magazine:

> [The Magazine offers] a medium through which [Afro-Americans] can demonstrate their ability and tastes, in fiction, poetry, and art. . .it aspires to develop and intensify the bonds of that racial brotherhood, which alone can enable people to assert their racial rights as men, and demand their privileges as citizens. . .[28]

Published by The Colored Co-operative Publishing Company, the same house which published the Magazine, the novel was marketed first to a black readership. Considered by its author an important tool in the exigencies of Afro-American uplift and protest, Contending Forces was an example of intercaste interests and education.

The retrospective story of Contending Forces begins on the island of Bermuda in the late eighteenth century. Hoping to better his prospects and retire a wealthy man, planter Charles Monfort decides to moved his family and chattels to North Carolina to avoid British manumission laws. Monfort vows to free his slaves after establishing a lucrative plantation in the United States. Upon arrival in

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[27] Hopkins, Contending Forces, p. 13.

[28] Carby, Reconstructing Womanhood, p. 123.

North Carolina, a jealous neighbor, Anson Pollack, speculates that Monfort's wife, Grace, has a measure of Negro blood. With lustful designs on Grace, Pollack murders Monfort, rapes Grace, and forces the Monfort sons, Jesse and Charles, into slavery. To avoid Pollack, Grace commits suicide. Charles Jr. is sold to a kindly English geologist who takes him to England as a paid assistant while Jesse becomes the hapless slave of Pollack until escaping to Massachusetts.

Jesse's mixed-blood grandchildren, Will and Dora Smith, are the focus of the novel's second half. Will is a philosophy student at Harvard and Dora and her mother, Ma Smith, run a rooming house in Boston. Renting a room in their home is Sappho Clark, a mysterious and beautiful mulatto. Sappho is a stenographer who must work in her room at Smith's because her white employer does not want the other employees to learn of her racial identity. She is the "ideal" mulatto type--nearly white in appearance, physically lovely, and intelligent. She is a good friend to Dora and Will is in love with her. Another roomer at the Smith house, John P. Langley, is also in love with Sappho and at the same time engaged to Dora. Coincidentally, Langley is the great-grandson of Anson Pollack and his black concubine, his full name being John Pollack Langley. Having inadvertently discovered that several years before Sappho was raped and that her

illegitimate child is hidden in a convent in Louisiana, Langley tries to blackmail her into becoming his mistress. Fearing discovery, Sappho forsakes Will, leaving behind a letter explaining Langley's humiliating proposition. In the letter Sappho laments that she cannot degrade Will by continuing their relationship.

With the evil intentions of Langley brought to light, Dora breaks her engagement. Soon she falls in love with family friend Arthur Lewis, a character whose prototype is Booker T. Washington. Dora and Arthur marry and move to Louisiana while broken-hearted Will continues to search for Sappho. Returning from abroad to visit Dora and her husband, Will rediscovers Sappho and they are married with the promise that they will work together to further the aims of Afro-American uplift. Langley subsequently repents his villainy and vows to "do good among his fellows as a sort of atonement for his early mistakes."[29] However, his resolve comes too late as he pays for his sins by languishing alone in the Klondike mine fields.

Contending Forces attempted to serve several agendas at once. With a glance backward toward a past of rape and cruelty perpetuated by whites in the days of slavery, Hopkins described contemporaneous attempts by Afro-American uplifters to overcome similar and continuing crimes. Through historical retrospective and analysis of a

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[29] Hopkins, Contending Forces, p. 399.

family tree grown from the roots of miscegenation, Hopkins outlined the relationship between whites and non-whites in a two caste system from slavery onward. She did so to "challenge contemporary racist ideologies" that drove a broad wedge between peoples."[30] During the time of Hopkins' writing, institutionalized segregation existed nationwide, blacks were effectively disfranchised, lynching was all but commonplace in the South, and the United States government worked its way into becoming a far-flung imperialist power. Hopkins' novel reiterated the stand of black intellectuals against such practices and reinforced for her white audience Afro-American protest against white oppression. The historical displacement, proving itself out genealogically, was meant to blur the outward disparities of "race."

Actuating the crimes of the present through knowledge of the evils of the past, Contending Forces also objectified racism from a female perspective. Actual rape and its metaphorical corollary, slavery, derived from Hopkins' own nascent feminist perspective on the history of blacks in America. Sappho, victim and product of real rape, is allowed to express radical ideas about the course of uplift for Afro-Americans who have been exploited by slavery, just as she, an independent working woman, has been oppressed and used by her past as a "black" female.

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[30] Carby, Reconstructing Womanhood, p. 128.

Through Sappho, Hopkins expressed her own opinion on the Washington verses Du Bois debate. When the naive Dora explains Arthur Lewis's ideas of black uplift as "industrial education and the exclusion of politics will cure all our race troubles," Sappho retorts impatiently, "I doubt it. . . If our men are deprived of the franchise, we become aliens in the very land of our birth." She believes accommodation will leave her people branded as cowards, without respect, "an alien people, without a country and without a home."[31] Sappho also decries Lewis as an "insufferable prig" when Dora tells her he believes women should be seen and not heard. Despite her heroine's independence and intelligence, Hopkins was much less forthcoming in her characterization of Sappho as a feminist than was Harper in her Iola. Both novelists, however, were confined by tradition and unable to articulate a clear vision of female heroes outside the view proscribed by the nineteenth century rubric of "true womanhood."

For Hopkins this particular failure was echoed in the rather murky outcome of her attempt to "blur the color line." In setting up the historical perspective as she did at the novel's opening, Hopkins paradoxically advanced the racist notion that "blood" plays a large part in human personality.

Common looking black women praise Sappho's distinctly

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[31] Hopkins, Contending Forces, p. 126.

Caucasian beauty as "God made," as if to suggest their own black physical characteristics were not. But more importantly, John Pollack Langley is described as the descendant of slaves and white "crackers." "[A] bad mixture--the combination of the worst features of a dominant race with an enslaved race."[32] Langley's "cracker" blood of "the lowest type [mixed] with whatever God-saving quality that might have been loaned the Negro by pitying nature" has left him with no positive moral inclination and no instinct for good.[33] He is an ignominious person whose degeneracy is a result of heredity or biological determinism. If blood counts, one might ask how Hopkins's black audience understood the purity and goodness of the heroine Sappho. She was kidnapped and raped by whites. She was the product of a white man who took advantage of her slave mother. The "black blood," that is, the naturally docile, good, caring, Christian blood, formed for Hopkins the positive traits of racial character. How can Sappho be truly pure if she has any elements of white blood, particularly white blood from a master who had raped? How can she be truly pure since she is obviously infused with a "large amount of white blood?" Hopkins' judgment that biology should not be a factor in determining a person's worth is contradicted by her

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32 Ibid., pp. 90-91.

33 Ibid., p. 210.

representation of Langley, an evil man, one whose evilness is the result of poor quality white blood. Furthermore, the following passage suggests that the author may have believed in an inherent inferiority in the Negro race and that the possibilities for uplift were genetic as well as political, educational and social.

> . . .the mighty unexpected results of the law of evolution, seem to point to a different solution of the Negro question. . .Then again, we do not allow for the infusion of white blood, which became pretty generally distributed in the inferior black race during the existence of slavery. Some of this blood, too, was the best in the country. Combinations of plants, or trees, or of any productive living thing, sometimes generate rare specimens of the plant or tree; why not, then, of the genus homo? Surely the Negro race must be productive of some valuable specimens, if only from the infusion which amalgamation with a superior race must eventually bring.[34]

Biological determinism is not in keeping with Hopkins' often espoused belief that it is not blood, but social degradation which determines the corruption of a group. However, with passages such as the above, articulating a concept that is condoned through the dialogue of various characters, Hopkins delivered an ambiguous, even paradoxical message: It is absurd to measure a person by blood, but, time and again, blood counts. Hopkins may have internalized the nineteenth century racist notion that only

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[34] Ibid., pp. 86-87.

a person whose blood was mixed with blood from the "higher race" was worthy to carry the race forward, improve it, uplift it.

That the mulatto, Sappho, personifies the historical tragedy of rape of black women by white men, and therefore the metaphorical rape of one people by another, was articulated clearly. However, Hopkins' attempt to blur the distinctions between castes was only partially successful, for the diction of racist precepts confused the intended message. Hopkins ultimately failed to serve successfully her most pressing agenda that color and caste should be no measure of human worth. Indeed, the confusion itself is suggestive of an inability on the part of Hopkins to fully identify with her own caste.

Iola Leroy, or Shadows Uplifted and Contending Forces manipulated their respective plots to conform to nineteenth century literary conventions while allowing the messages of Afro-American uplift to take on significant, and at times radical, political and social dimensions. Writing at a time when racism tainted almost all aspects of American life, Harper and Hopkins strove in their novels to impart to their black brothers and sisters a desire to attain the liberties promised all Americans. The authors also delivered a clear message to their white audiences that blacks not only deserved a place among them, they expected a place in American society and would no longer tolerate a

subordinate position. Complimenting this primary dual purpose of uplift and protest was a conviction that black women could be agents of Afro-American regeneration through action and example. That their action and example ultimately conjoined to that of like-thinking black males speaks for the limitations imposed upon women by the nineteenth century "cult of true womanhood."

Despite Mary Helen Washington's observation that the early novels represented a "literature frozen into self-consciousness by the need to defend black women and men against the vicious. . .stereotypes that mark. . .American cultural thought,"[35] Harper and Hopkins depicted a strong people attempting to reconfigure the boundaries of racism and sexism.

However, during the early decades of the twentieth century the stereotypes of black women remained intact. The boundaries of racism were made more rigid by class distinctions and acknowledgment by blacks themselves of caste difference. While Harper's novel Iola Leroy depicted the positive effects of passing from the white caste into the black, the mulatto figure in the early twentieth century was a symbolic representation of blacks struggling in an even more complex urban world for identity and place in white dominated society.

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[35] Mary Helen Washington, Invented Lives: Narrative of Black Women, 1860-1960 (Garden City, New York: Anchor Press, 1987), p. 73.

CHAPTER THREE

PASSING: IDENTITY AND MARGINALITY IN THE EARLY TWENTIETH CENTURY

> From all we know about personality problems there is probably. . . substantial truth in the picture of the passer which our literary phantasy paints for us. But since there has been little observation of the personality problems of the passers, the picture of their difficulty is hard to define.[1]

The covert and solitary nature of the practice of "passing" from the black caste to the white renders authentication and analysis of its psychological effects difficult. However, the personality problems of passers depicted in literature may be, as Gunnar Myrdal acknowledged, substantially true, for these problems are defined in limited ways by testament, biography, and case study. Studies undertaken before the advent of the black activism of the 1960's suggest that skin color and "hair form," two immediate criteria for passing, were in themselves causative factors in feelings of inferiority,

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[1] Gunnar Myrdal, An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy, (New York: Harper & Row, 1944) p. 688.

resentment, and alienation.[2] Furthermore, social and cultural developments after the turn of the century could not fail to contribute to feelings of alienation and marginality for some Afro-Americans and for urban mulattoes in particular. The period of the 1920's known as the Harlem Renaissance provided literary artists the opportunity to express "personality problems" which seemed the result of these social and cultural developments.

Between 1910 and 1920, 330,000 blacks migrated from the South to cities in the North and West, bringing with them expectations of greater social freedom.[3] But for many in the black community, expectations were shattered by violence and segregation, economic failure and political impotence. However, the years immediately following World War I witnessed positive changes in the form of cultural self-awareness brought about by a European interest in African art. During these years progressive leaders in the urban black community demanded full political and social equality. Afro-Americans throughout the United States were part of this new generation, one more ready than ever to

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[2] Evert V. Stonequist remarks of occasional passers, "From an...identification with the white man, he has, under the rebuffs of a categorical race prejudice, turned about and identified himself with the Negro race. In the process of so doing, he suffers a profound inner conflict." Evert V. Stonequist, The Marginal Man; a Study in Personality and Culture Conflicts (New York: Charles Scribners and Sons, 1937), p. 24.

[3] Peter M. Bergman, ed., The Chronological History of the Negro in America (New York: Harper & Row, 1969), p. 396.

listen to poet James Weldon Johnson:

> This land is ours by right of birth,
> This land is ours by right of toil;
> We helped to turn its virgin earth,
> Our sweat is in its fruitful soil.
>
> No! stand erect and without fear,
> And for our foes let this suffice--
> We've bought a rightful sonship here,
> And we have more than paid the price.[4]

This was indeed the beginning of a period of self-awareness and cultural regeneration for Afro-Americans. But Johnson's was not the only voice being heeded by black men and women after World War I.

At the turn of the present century, W. E. Burghardt Du Bois renounced the accomodationist racial improvement philosophies set forth by Booker T. Washington. Du Bois restated the central issue facing twentieth century Afro-Americans, the issue of merging cultures, African and American, and how to affect such a fusion without diminishing either:

> The history of the American Negro is . . .this longing to attain self-conscious manhood, to merge his double self into a better and truer self. In this merging he wishes neither of the older selves to be lost. He would not Africanize America. . .He would not bleach his Negro soul in a flood of white Americanism, for he knows that Negro blood has a message for the

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[4] From "Fifty Years (1863-1913) On the Fiftieth Anniversary of the Signing of the Emancipation Proclamation" in St. Peter Relates an Incident by James Weldon Johnson, collected in The New Negro Renaissance: An Anthology, editors Michael W. Peplow and Arthur P. Davis (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc., 1975), pp. 7-8.

> world. He simply wishes to make it possible for a man to be both a Negro and an American.[5]

By the nineteen-twenties, Du Bois, as leading spokesperson for the community, modified his former belief that blacks should work toward a "cheerful striving and cooperation with their white neighbor," and urged them to strive for the achievement of Afro-American identity themselves, independent of white influence. The struggle was to be taken up by black intellectuals, the university educated and economically successful. That blacks needed to be educated in order to enter political and economic arenas on an equal footing with whites required the emergence of the "Talented Tenth," the top ten per cent whose cultural and academic talents would uplift the masses. Du Bois's Tenth bore the sole burden of black redemption and, indeed, the burden of forming that ideal, the African-American. Bound with the Talented Tenth was a kind of black social Darwinism which held that the elite's leadership may or may not inspire all black people to a "higher level of civilization," but would raise those who were fittest to survive.

> Was there ever a nation on God's fair earth civilized from the bottom upward? Never; it is, ever was and ever will be from the top downward that culture filters. The Talented Tenth rises and pulls all that are worth the saving up

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[5] William Edward Burghardt Du Bois, The Souls of Black Folk (reprint New York: New American Library, 1982), p. 45.

> to their vantage ground. This is the history of human progress.[6]

Du Bois's social equalitarianism, espoused in most of his writings, and his social Darwinism present a paradox which, in part, speaks to identity issues of alienation and maladjustment. Since the Talented Tenth was born of a "black bourgeoisie," class distinctions necessarily prevailed. In his Theories of Social Action in Black Literature, Chester Hedgepeth found in the Talented Tenth

> [A] social ethic which mixes a humanistic concern for the welfare of the masses with a scientific ordering of humans according to their abilities to adapt the learning patterns of their talented mentors.[7]

Not only were prevalent learning patterns derived ultimately from white culture (as education was rarely cross-cultural in the early twentieth century in the United States), so too were the status symbols of the black bourgeoisie derived from white upper-middle-class standards of economic success, higher education, religious and moral propriety.[8]

Antithetical to Du Bois's interest in forming and

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[6] W. E. B. Du Bois, "The Talented Tenth," in Writings (New York: The Library of America, 1986), p. 847.

[7] Chester Hedgepeth Jr., Theories of Social Action in Black Literature (New York: Peter Lang, 1986), p. 64.

[8] Myrdal discusses "The Negro Class Structure" wherein he cites Hortense Powdermaker's analysis of the rigidly "Puritanical standards formed after the white model" and the paradoxical nature of the black upper class. Myrdal, An American Dilemma, p. 702.

securing a fusion of African and American cultures, was the black nationalist movement of Marcus Garvey. Breaking upon Harlem in 1917, Garvey's Universal Negro Improvement Association responded to the racist policies of American imperialism, to decades of lynchings by whites, riots, and the resurgence of the Ku Klux Klan after 1915. Unlike Du Bois's appeal to the intelligentsia and to the rising upper middle-class which spawned it, Garvey's organization attracted an enormous populace of disillusioned black workers, women and men who had come by the thousands to urban centers in the industrial North and who found there only disappointment in the promise of a better life. Garvey's philosophy of separation and racial pride emphasized nationalism: "Negroes everywhere would automatically gain. . .needed prestige and strength" in a Negro African homeland to which they could look for protection if necessary.[9]

Observing Garvey's charismatic appeal, black intellectuals found its radicalism difficult to embrace. During the Harlem Renaissance highly educated Afro-Americans enjoyed for the first time the success of "Negro arts" and were caught up in a cultural and business milieu which precluded truly radical polemics. James Weldon Johnson, secretary of the National Association for the

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[9] E. David Cronon, Black Moses: The Story of Marcus Garvey (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1969), p. 185.

Advancement of Colored People, criticized Garvey's organization stating, "As the world is at present, the United States, with all of its limitations, offers the millions of Negroes. . .greater opportunities than any other land."[10]

The New Negro, title of an anthology edited by Survey Graphic's Alain Locke in 1925, came to be the name applied to Afro-Americans like Du Bois who rejected the conservatism of Booker Washington and who preferred not to wait for political and social parity. The "New Negro" movement represented the psychological transformation of a generation of Afro-Americans whose "Feudal attitudes of servility and dependence were abandoned in favor of the sturdy bourgeois virtues of initiative and self-reliance."[11] The dedicated patrons of the New Negro movement were black upper-middle-class men and women, those desiring higher education, independent political action, economic opportunity, and African cultural regeneration for all black Americans.[12] The artistic awakening, linked

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[10] Ibid., p. 222.

[11] Robert A. Bone, The Negro Novel in America (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1958), p. 57.

[12] Women "patrons" of the movement are now too seldom recognized for their significant contribution to Harlem Renaissance literary success. Some extremely influential women during this period were Ernestine Rose and Reginia Anderson of the New York Public Library (now Schomburg Library), Mary White Ovington of the NAACP, A'Lelia Walker, Jessie Redmon Fauset, and Gwendolyn Bennet.

especially in the dramatic and plastic arts to African themes and forms, coupled with a more radical desire to gain a political and social foothold in American culture, often caused the confusion of allegiance and identity addressed by Afro-American writers during this period. "When one centers on the ferment for a black person or author. . .one finds additional burdens to thought and creativity."[13] On the one hand, blacks were urged to pride their blackness, their African cultural heritage.[14] On the other hand, many aspired to have the political and social wherewithal to secure an American ideal based on the traditional aspirations of upwardly mobile whites. The dictate to embrace their blackness, coupled with middle-class aspirations predicated on white standards, could only compound the confusion of allegiance and identity faced by

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[13] Carolyn Wedin Sylvander, Jessie Redmon Fauset, Black American Writer (Troy, New York: The Whitston Publishing Company, 1981), p. 17.

[14] The most prominent promoter of African or Afro-American themes was Vanity Fair columnist Carl Van Vechten, author of Nigger Heaven (1926). Van Vechten's book received mixed reviews by blacks. Many praised it for showing both the "naturalistic, primitive urges," and the refinement of the Negro intelligentsia. Some (who had learned race-pride lessons well from Du Boise and even from Van Vechten himself, a man who believed that if Afro-Americans would "be themselves artistically" social problems would disappear), dismissed the novel as a faulty depiction of Harlem life. "From the point of view of racial uplift, Nigger Heaven was a colossal fraud in which the depiction of the Talented Tenth in high baroque barely muffled the throb of the tom-tom." David Levering Lewis, When Harlem Was in Vogue (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1981), p. 188.

Afro-Americans of mixed heritage, mulattoes who existed in the margins between black and white.

In contrast to the pre-war milieu of Afro-American uplift and race conscious writing, the fiction of the "Harlem Renaissance" and its "New Negro" in many cases reflected the psychological and social turmoil of the Afro-American experience in the post-war period.

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Harlem writer Nella Larsen recreated the environment of early twentieth-century black America and addressed problems faced by educated and often wealthy mulattoes. In particular, her novels focused on female characters whose experiences were indicative of the difficulties faced by black women who strove to overcome racial and/or gender prejudice. Although passing for white was often carried out in social and psychic isolation and success outside the realm of traditional female roles was unusual, these activities exacerbated the already intensified identity difficulties of alienation and marginality for black women. The attempt to diminish long-standing racist stereotypes of black female sexual degeneracy further complicated those difficulties. Larsen's work depicted the lives of mulatto women during the early decades of the twentieth century and illuminated social frustrations which inhibited and prohibited psychological satisfaction.

Larsen was born in 1893 of a Dutch woman and a West

Indian father. After her father's death, Larsen's mother married a Caucasian who placed his stepdaughter at an emotional distance, alienating her from family, and specifically alienating her from her white heritage. In the brief biography provided by critic Deborah E. McDowell in the introduction to Larsen's volume Quicksand and Passing, she is described as "a delicate and unstable person."[15] Perhaps because of instability Larsen had a number of short-lived careers. Nurse, superintendent of nurses at Tuskegee, science student at Fisk, children's librarian in New York City, and writer, Larsen cast off vocations with seeming abandon. The first Afro-American woman so honored, she won a Guggenheim Fellowship in 1930 on the basis of two her published novels, but her career as a writer became tainted by an accusation of plagiarism in the same year. Though publicly exonerated by her editor, Larsen, in humiliation, never attempted to publish another novel and all but disappeared into obscurity during the next thirty-four years of her life. A number of critical events in Larsen's life parallel the fictionalized events in the lives of her central characters Helga Crane of Quicksand and Irene Redfield and Clare Kendry of Passing.

Helga's is a story of mulatto alienation, of marginality, and identity confusion. Clare and Irene are

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[15] Nella Larsen, Quicksand and Passing, ed. Deborah E. McDowell (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1986), p. x.

women with similar aspirations played out in very different ways. Both suffer the residual effects of racism which drives them to embrace the pretensions of middle-class security and ultimately leads to destruction. Larsen's treatment of passing and class identification can be categorized as literary naturalism if only for the depiction of aberrant psychology called up by two kinds of deterministic forces, heredity and environment. Larsen's female characters confront white racism existing inherently in white American culture, a racism which bears the consequent extension of personal choice--the choice to pass, to seek status, safety, or respectability in an upper middle-class milieu, or the choice to embrace blackness.

Quicksand depicts the psychic chaos of a woman who is "unwilling to conform to a circumscribed existence in the black world and unable to move freely in the white world."[16] Written from a female perspective, Larsen's novel voiced the frustrations and confusion of women of the Harlem generation who found themselves questioning their place in the scheme of American life. Larsen's tragic heroine, Helga Crane, is a classic marginal character, a mulatto who constantly shifts her psychological allegiances, and who is tragically torn between acceptance and denial.

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[16] Mary Helen Washington, ed., Invented Lives: Narrative of Black Women, 1860-1960 (New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1987), p. 159.