



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 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.

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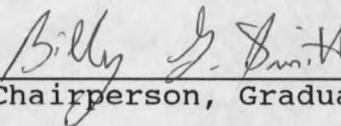
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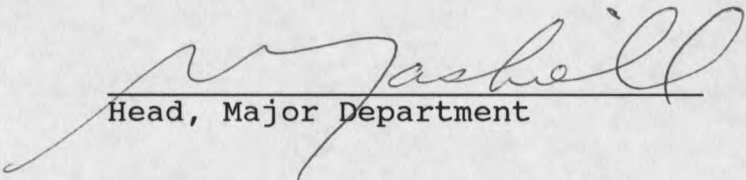


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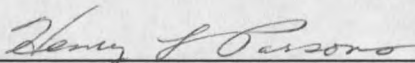
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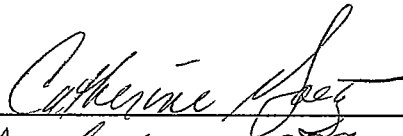
  
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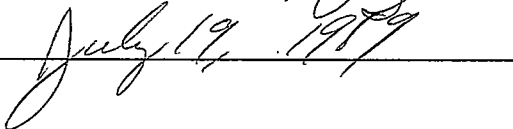
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## ABSTRACT

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.<sup>1</sup>

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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<sup>1</sup> 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.<sup>2</sup>

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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<sup>2</sup> 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.<sup>3</sup> 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 deprivation of power and autonomy within an individual or group.<sup>4</sup> 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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<sup>3</sup> "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).

<sup>4</sup> 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.<sup>5</sup> 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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<sup>5</sup> 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 and 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.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> William E.B. Du Bois, The Souls of Black Folks: Essays and Sketches (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."<sup>5</sup> 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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<sup>5</sup> 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."<sup>6</sup> 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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<sup>6</sup> 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.<sup>7</sup>

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,"<sup>8</sup> 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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<sup>7</sup> Fanon, Black Skin, White Masks, p. 81.

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

identification.<sup>9</sup> 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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<sup>9</sup> 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.<sup>10</sup>

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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<sup>10</sup> 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.<sup>11</sup>

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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<sup>11</sup> 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. . ."<sup>12</sup> 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."<sup>13</sup> 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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<sup>12</sup> Barbara Johnson, "Metaphor, Metonymy 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.

<sup>13</sup> 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.<sup>1</sup>

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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<sup>1</sup> 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.<sup>2</sup> 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.<sup>3</sup> 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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<sup>2</sup> 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.

<sup>3</sup> 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."<sup>4</sup>

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."<sup>5</sup>

Responding to the post-Reconstruction atmosphere in

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

<sup>5</sup> 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."<sup>6</sup> 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

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<sup>6</sup> Barbara Christian, Black Women Novelists: The Development of a Tradition, 1892-1976 (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1980), p. 32.

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

In the closing note of Iola Leroy, or Shadows Uplifted, 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.<sup>8</sup>

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."<sup>9</sup>

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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<sup>7</sup> Hopkins, Contending Forces, pp. 13-14.

<sup>8</sup> Harper, Iola Leroy, p. 282.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., p. 282.

race loyalty."<sup>10</sup> 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.<sup>11</sup>

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

<sup>11</sup> 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, Underground Railroad. 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."<sup>12</sup> 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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<sup>12</sup> 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."<sup>13</sup> 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.<sup>14</sup>

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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<sup>13</sup> Harper, Iola Leroy, p. 205.

<sup>14</sup> 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."<sup>15</sup>

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. . ."<sup>16</sup> 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?<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid., p. 99.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., p. 38.

<sup>17</sup> 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.<sup>18</sup>

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."<sup>19</sup>

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

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid., p. 43.

<sup>19</sup> 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 through 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. . . .<sup>20</sup>

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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<sup>20</sup> 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.<sup>21</sup>

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.<sup>22</sup>

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

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid., p. 219.

<sup>22</sup> 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.<sup>23</sup>

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."<sup>24</sup>

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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<sup>23</sup> Ibid., p. 235.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., pp. 234-35.

. . . robes of scorn have changed to habiliments of light, and that crown of mockery to a diadem of glory.<sup>25</sup>

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.<sup>26</sup>

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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<sup>25</sup> Ibid., p. 256.

<sup>26</sup> 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."<sup>27</sup> 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. . .<sup>28</sup>

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 move 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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<sup>27</sup> Hopkins, Contending Forces, p. 13.

<sup>28</sup> 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."<sup>29</sup> 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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<sup>29</sup> 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."<sup>30</sup> 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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<sup>30</sup> 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."<sup>31</sup> 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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<sup>31</sup> 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."<sup>32</sup> 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.<sup>33</sup> 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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<sup>32</sup> Ibid., pp. 90-91.

<sup>33</sup> 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.<sup>34</sup>

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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<sup>34</sup> 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,"<sup>35</sup> 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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<sup>35</sup> 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.<sup>1</sup>

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

resentment, and alienation.<sup>2</sup> 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.<sup>3</sup> 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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<sup>2</sup> 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.

<sup>3</sup> 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.<sup>4</sup>

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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<sup>4</sup> 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.<sup>5</sup>

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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<sup>5</sup> 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.<sup>6</sup>

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.<sup>7</sup>

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.<sup>8</sup>

Antithetical to Du Bois's interest in forming and

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

<sup>7</sup> Chester Hedgepeth Jr., Theories of Social Action in Black Literature (New York: Peter Lang, 1986), p. 64.

<sup>8</sup> 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.<sup>9</sup>

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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<sup>9</sup> 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."<sup>10</sup>

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."<sup>11</sup> 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.<sup>12</sup> The artistic awakening, linked

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., p. 222.

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

<sup>12</sup> 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 Regina 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."<sup>13</sup> On the one hand, blacks were urged to pride their blackness, their African cultural heritage.<sup>14</sup> 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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<sup>13</sup> Carolyn Wedin Sylvander, Jessie Redmon Fauset, Black American Writer (Troy, New York: The Whitston Publishing Company, 1981), p. 17.

<sup>14</sup> 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."<sup>15</sup> 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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<sup>15</sup> 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."<sup>16</sup> 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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<sup>16</sup> Mary Helen Washington, ed., Invented Lives: Narrative of Black Women, 1860-1960 (New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1987), p. 159.

At the novel's opening Helga is a teacher in Naxos, Tennessee.<sup>17</sup> This fictionalized Tuskegee defines the dissatisfaction of Larsen and other black intellectuals with Booker T. Washington's policies of accommodation and white-proscribed integration. At the same time, Naxos is a metaphor for the choking off of African cultural impulses in a strictly white milieu.

Life had died out of it. . . Enthusiasm, spontaneity. . . were at least openly regretted as unladylike or ungentlemanly qualities. The place was smug and fat with self-satisfaction.<sup>18</sup>

Helga's own dissatisfactions with the stifling conventionality of the school are voiced in the realization of her displacement within a social sphere and cast. Coupled with social displacement is a displacement of sexuality. Helga is oppressed under the weight of sexual propriety; the "life" which is absent at Naxos is the sensual life of Helga Crane. Leaving her teaching position for Harlem via Chicago, Helga acknowledges the stratifications of Negro society and compares its rigidity to the white model. It is a social order based on name, heritage, and financial status. It is a society in which an individual without "family" must, like Helga, remain

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<sup>17</sup> Deborah McDowell points out in her introduction to Larsen's Quicksand and Passing that Naxos is an anagram for Saxon, "suggesting the school's worship of everything Anglo-Saxon" (p. xvii).

<sup>18</sup> Larsen, Quicksand, p. 4.

"inconspicuous and conformable."<sup>19</sup>

In Harlem she is still an outsider and only temporarily happy. There a "sensation of estrangement and isolation encompassed her."<sup>20</sup> A friend, Anne, becomes an annoyance for she is too caught up in "race problems" for Helga's continuing interest. Through Helga's eyes the reader observes the subtleties of identity confusion more acutely:

[Anne] turned up her. . .nose at [the blacks'] lusty churches, their picturesque parades, their naive clowning on the streets. She would not have desired. . .to live in any section outside the black belt. . .She hated white people with a deep and burning hatred, with the kind of hatred which. . .was capable some day, on some great provocation, of bursting into dangerously malignant flames.

Anne personifies an attraction and repulsion for both white and black cultures. It is a duality Helga knows and ultimately cannot resolve. Anne, like her creator Nella Larsen, is physically though not mentally wholly acculturated, aspiring to middle-class comforts and emblems all the while detesting the model. She wears the garments of the white bourgeoisie, strikes their social poses while giving lip service to "the undiluted good of all things Negro." Yet Anne is contemptuous and amused by black culture.

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid., p. 8.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., p. 48.

She preferred Pavlova to Florence Mills, John McCormack to Taylor Gordon, Walter Hampden to Paul Robeson. Theoretically, however, she stood for the immediate advancement of all things Negroid, and was in revolt against social inequality.<sup>21</sup>

Anne mirrors the deepest recesses of Helga's own soul. "Negro culture" is described as exotic, outlandish, gay, physically and socially open. White culture is stifling, attenuated by an almost religious propriety, determined by status facade. When Helga detaches herself from Anne, she is really removing herself from reckoning with her own identity crisis. That Larsen's Helga is autobiographical is an important factor for determining the realism of the psychic dilemma she manifests. Helga, like Larsen, renounces Harlem and flees to Copenhagen, the home of her white mother's people. There, because Helga is dark and beautiful, she stands out vividly against the backdrop of a pale, though egalitarian, social scene. Larsen contrasts the Danes' propensity to enhance personal assets with the American Negro's repudiation of African cultural heritage.

In America Negroes sometimes talked loudly of this, but in their hearts they repudiated it. . . They didn't want to be like themselves. What they wanted, asked for, begged for, was to be like their white overlords. They were ashamed to be Negroes, but not ashamed to beg to be something else. Something inferior. Not quite genuine.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid., pp. 48-49.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., pp. 74-75.

Ironically, in Denmark Helga becomes a "peacock," a mannequin for display, a "yellow beauty," something not quite genuine. She lets herself be dressed in exotic clothing to show off her physical beauty and color. "After a little while she gave herself up wholly to the fascinating business of being seen, gaped at, desired."<sup>23</sup> After a year of happy acceptance, Helga is taken by her Danish friends to the international circus where a vaudeville act is performed by two "prancing black men, American Negroes undoubtedly, for as they danced and cavorted, they sang in the English of America an old ragtime song. . ." Helga is profoundly disquieted by this scene and swings variously and simultaneously through feeling hatred for whites, hatred for her own alienation from, and connection to, the minstrels.

She felt shamed, betrayed, as if these pale pink and white people among whom she lived had suddenly been invited to look upon something in her which she had hidden away and wanted to forget.<sup>24</sup>

But her white friends admire the spectacle, "rate[d] it as a precious thing, a thing to be enhanced, preserved" and Helga reassesses once again her attachment to her race, and begins mentally to separate herself from her white, "transformed existence."

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid., p. 74.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., p. 82.

In Copenhagen the artist who has painted a portrait of her offers marriage. Helga declines, knowing that to him she is an interesting plaything. She is first a woman/object, but one with a fortunate exoticism; through his blue eyes she is a sensual oddity. She tells the artist that she cannot marry a white man, that it is nothing personal. "It's deeper than that. It's racial. If we were married you might come to be ashamed of me. . .to hate all dark people. My mother did that."<sup>25</sup> Looking at the portrait of "some disgusting sensual creature with her features," Helga longs for the company of Negroes.<sup>26</sup> Disdain for this parody of her stereotyped "sensual, racial" traits, is paradoxically transformed into a "suspensive conflict in which were fused doubts, rebellion, expediency, and urgent longings."<sup>27</sup>

Returning to New York, Helga reenters Harlem life, an elite and ultimately dull life that leaves her dissatisfied and out of place. Mistaking the impulsive advances of Anne's husband for a freeing kind of sexual ardor, Helga believes her future lies with him. Anne's husband, who is a model of middle-class propriety, finds her attractive because she has been daring; she has not followed the traditional gender calling of wifhood and motherhood.

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid., p. 88.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., p. 89.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., p. 83.

Upon learning that his advance was a momentary lapse which he regretted, Helga, in humiliation, stumbles out into the Harlem rain to have there a religious experience among hundreds of spirit-stricken blacks at a revival. Here Helga succumbs to a fatalism of race. The quasi-sexual experience at the revival becomes a metaphor for racial identification. Her sense of identity, she believes, will be fixed once and for all by marriage to the black preacher, a man so stereotypical that identity by association with him is unquestionable.

There was a recurrence of the feeling that now, at last, she had found a place for herself. And she had her religion, which in her new status as a preacher's wife had of necessity become real to her. She believed in it. Because in its coming it had brought this other thing, this anaesthetic satisfaction for her senses.<sup>28</sup>

As time wears the anaesthetic away, Helga is left restless and confused, longing always for definition. But her opportunities for slipping again into another existence, for donning another cloak of identity are gone. Helga, with five children, is trapped in a low, evangelical religion and in an unsatisfactory marriage.

In her introduction to Quicksand and Passing, Deborah McDowell identified Helga's "suspensive conflict" as one of sexuality rather than of race. Throughout the novel, Helga

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid., p. 118.

is split between propriety and pleasure, but her sexual nature cannot legitimately be satisfied outside of marriage. McDowell accurately pointed to the unmistakable metaphors of this dualistic conflict, metaphors of clothing style, color, social contact. Helga Crane's conflict between the desire to express her sexuality and her desire to repress it for the sake of propriety is but an overlay of the ultimate cultural identity confusion she experiences. The sexuality conflict rightly identified by McDowell is a metaphor for Helga's ultimate racial/cultural conflict. But Helga's sexuality is not the primary concern of Larsen's novel. Identification, tied closely to her gender, is. Helga Crane is the archetypical marginal woman. A mulatto penetrating uncertainly two distinct worlds, Helga's gender renders her conflict more complex. A black woman must guard against the stereotypes of black female sexual abandon, guard against a gender specific and racial typing. Males, white and black, seek sexual alliance with Helga, the white because she is racially exotic, the black because her lifestyle has not underwritten traditional female roles, lending her an air of attractive danger. Her cultural, black versus white indecision and the identity conflict it engenders have kept her moving much too fast to settle on one or the other. Helga is not rewarded for independence, she is seen, rather, as a woman "with the soul of a prostitute." Her

illegitimate racial heritage and its supposed unbridled sexuality, its unpredictability, and instability, have alienated her from herself and complicated any attempt to identify with either black or white culture.

In an ironic nod to the female uplift writers of the earlier period, Larsen's heroine seeks salvation through marriage. The heroines of the earlier novels marry good, race conscious men to enhance racial uplift. Helga marries a stereotypical black preacher to cement her own racial identity and lend legitimacy to her sexual passions. But marriage for Helga is simply another roadblock to self-knowledge, a convenient and hopeful stopping off place on the way to identity confirmation.

Larsen's second novel, Passing, written in 1929, presents the ironic duality of race choice. Two childhood friends, Clare Kendry and Irene Redfield meet in New York after many years. Both women are light colored enough to pass for white, and Clare, who has chosen to do so, is married to a man who detests blacks. Irene, from whose point of view the story is related, is the wife of a black doctor. She is proper, secure, and protected within the black bourgeoisie from the everyday racism of the streets. During their accidental reunion, Clare expresses her desire to know about her people, her former friends, and to rejoin. Her interest in rejoining, however, is limited to Irene's bourgeoisie environment, one that cannot expose

itself to her own white world. Irene naturally is expected to pass when she is introduced to Clare's husband Jack. Uncomfortable with this situation, Irene would rather not involve herself with a passer under any circumstances. She declines Clare's invitation but impulsively invites her to a party in her own home. Angry with herself, Irene's sentiments demonstrate the restrictive and intolerant nature of the black bourgeoisie. While she assures herself that she is not a snob, she is very much the product of the "petty restrictions and distinctions which called itself Negro society," and fears the notoriety to which any known association with Clare would expose her.<sup>29</sup>

As the friendship resumes on a tentative, uneasy basis, Irene assents to meeting Jack Bellew, Clare's husband, a man who makes a past-time of bigotry. Irene, whom Jack assumes to be white, asks him if he dislikes Negroes. "I don't dislike them, I hate them. So does [Clare]. . . She wouldn't have a nigger maid around her for love nor money."<sup>30</sup>

Despite Irene's distaste for Clare's choice, she does not betray her. The irony of not being able to defend her people from racism for the sake of a woman who has denied her race does not escape Irene.

She had to Clare Kendry a duty. She

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid, pp. 156-57.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., p. 172.

was bound to her by those very ties of race, which, for all her repudiation of them, Clare had been unable to completely sever.<sup>31</sup>

Not only is Irene bound to Clare by ties of race, but the two women become fused into a single personification of irresolution. Irene contemplates breaking off association with her friend but acknowledges her own ambivalence:

We disapprove of [passing] and at the same time condone it. It excites our contempt and yet we rather admire it. We shy away from it with an odd kind of revulsion, but we protect it.<sup>32</sup>

In An American Dilemma, sociologist Gunnar Myrdal confirmed the upper class inclination to protect passers.

Most Negroes, particularly in the upper strata. . . know of many other Negroes . . . who pass as whites. As they usually do not expose them, this shows a significant difference between the two castes in attitude toward passing.<sup>33</sup>

As Clare insinuates herself deeper into Irene's social and private life, wanting greater contact with Negroes, Irene comes to realize that her husband Brian and Clare are having an affair. In anguish, Irene's first impulse is to expose Clare as a Negro to Jack, but she quickly reverses herself, knowing, "If Clare was freed, anything might happen."<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid., p. 182.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., p. 186.

<sup>33</sup> Myrdal, American Dilemma, p. 687.

<sup>34</sup> Larsen, Passing, p. 236.

Clare's motivations for passing are social and financial security in a safe milieu where she will not be the object of racism. Ironically, however, she is surrounded and even taunted by it. Further, Clare, like many bourgeoisie women of the 1920's, attained the security of that milieu by virtue of her association with a successful man. That Clare Kendry is also risk-taker extraordinaire becomes paradoxical in light of her desperation to hold on to that "secure" world. Irene, too, finds safety in her bourgeoisie life, enjoying there, as Gunnar Myrdal pointed out, "considerable protection behind the wall of segregation."<sup>35</sup>

Finding that her husband and her friend are having an affair, Irene is cut from the same cloth as Clare:

In spite of her searchings and feelings of frustration, she was aware that to her security was the most important and desired thing in life.<sup>36</sup>

Irene is guilty of the faults for which passing Clare is blamed. Her dedication to the race is dissemblance: Irene is not a physical passer, she has no immediate need to pass, but she clings tenaciously to the security of the black bourgeois, a class which,

especially the mulatto element that has had the greatest physical and cultural similarities with the white middle class, has placed the greatest emphasis

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<sup>35</sup> Myrdal, American Dilemma, p. 699.

<sup>36</sup> Larsen, Passing, p. 235.

upon white Anglo-Saxon Protestant characteristics.<sup>37</sup>

She is held hostage to superficial respectability, to the ritual of tea, dinner parties, the theatre, and shopping. Depicting these obligatory social gatherings, Larsen satirized the value system of the upper middle class, a system that would frown upon "front-page notoriety" as much as it would disdain known association with a passer or a white racist. Within this milieu Irene is the victim of false consciousness. Determined to hold her marriage together, she vows to maintain her life "fixed and certain," no matter how degrading it is to live with one who has betrayed her.<sup>38</sup>

At the novel's close, Brian, Clare and Irene attend a party in Harlem. Jack bursts in and accosts Clare with his knowledge that she is a Negro. In a panic Clare rushes to Irene who is standing near an open window. The story ends tragically as Clare falls from the window to her death.

A critical strain running through some feminist analysis of Quicksand and Passing focuses on the defeated heroine and argues that Larsen failed to provide "satisfactory resolutions" for characters who are initially depicted as independent, strong women. The novels,

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<sup>37</sup> Judith Berzon, Neither White Nor Black: The Mulatto Character in American Fiction (New York: New York University Press, 1978), p. 165.

<sup>38</sup> Larsen, Passing, p. 235.

according to Deborah McDowell, "sacrifice the[se] heroines to the most conventional fates of narrative history: marriage and death."<sup>39</sup> However, one must acknowledge that Larsen attempted to express the dilemmas of culture conflict and to do so from her own perspective as an Afro-American female writer moving between black and white cultures. Larsen, according to Mary Helen Washington, "lived the conflicts of the marginal woman and felt them passionately."<sup>40</sup> She spent her years after writing Quicksand and Passing isolated and identifying with neither racial group. Her agenda in the novels was to describe and define identity conflict, the psychic chaos of Helga and Irene, the ambivalence of Clare, not to deny its existence or to prescribe a panacea.

Nella Larsen's novels imposed a sardonic and ultimately tragic perspective on the false consciousness of black bourgeoisie security. Larsen did not resort to romantic, anachronistic prescriptions to resolve the identity conflicts of her characters, but sought to expose the psychic dilemmas faced by Afro-American women whose difficulties with color, class, and gender, were made more complex in the early decades of the twentieth century by long standing white racism which defined them as sexually aberrant, by a nascent "black pride" movement, and by a

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid., p. xi.

<sup>40</sup> Invented Lives, p. 165.

black social Darwinism holding that the black bourgeoisie was the agent of Afro-American integration and regeneration.

## CHAPTER FOUR

## THE BLACK BOURGEOISIE IN AMERICAN CULTURE

If recognition of the mixed bloods as a separate caste will not be granted by the white man, then recognition of the achievements of the black bourgeoisie as a class may be conceded. So goes the logic of these black aspirants.<sup>1</sup>

Corresponding to the practice of physical "passing", the intra-race class system--defined here as an identification with and loyalty to a class system based variously on white standards of economic success, education, and heritage--was a source of confusion and, according to W. E. B. Du Bois, "inner problems of contact."<sup>2</sup> Data reflecting psychological problems of blacks stemming from class status is scanty, although these problems were substantiated by the existence of "blue vein" societies--exclusive clubs for those whose skin color was light enough to permit the blue veins to show--as well as by demographic histories of middle-class blacks.

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<sup>1</sup> Judith Berzon, Neither Black Nor White: The Mulatto Character in American Fiction (New York: New York University Press, 1978), p. 163.

<sup>2</sup> W. E. B. Du Bois, Dusk of Dawn (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1940), p. 185. Such problems of contact have been addressed by the black community as a whole, most specifically during the unifying "Black is Beautiful" movement of the 1960's.

Contrary to previous assumptions that higher status for mulattoes had its origin in plantation society, it was not until the twentieth century that status symbolism of the white middle-class began to be sought by urban Afro-Americans. In separate investigations, Gunnar Myrdal and E. Franklin Frazier noted the bourgeois status accorded black men who were physicians, teachers and lawyers; those who worked as butlers, caterers, and porters in respected upper-class white establishments also enjoyed the prestige of the bourgeoisie.<sup>3</sup> Apart from higher education, professional, and organizational membership, a description of the black bourgeoisie during the early decades of the twentieth century included physical manifestations of wealth and status--clothing, automobiles, and homes in appropriate neighborhoods. The black bourgeoisie of that period has been characterized by its tendency to form conservative or traditionally white opinions about abstract matters such as decorum, "good taste," respectability, morals, and family background. "The Negro upper class will often adhere more closely to strict puritanical standards of conduct of the white upper or middle class."<sup>4</sup> In order to maintain a traditional standard of propriety, wealthy

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<sup>3</sup> Gunnar Myrdal An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1944), p. 702. And E. Franklin Frazier, cited in Berzon, Neither White Nor Black, p. 164.

<sup>4</sup> Myrdal, Am American Dilemma, p. 704.

and educated blacks shunned the animated expressions of folk religion and joined Episcopal or Presbyterian churches. Living in segregated enclaves, the Afro-American bourgeoisie shielded its children "as far as possible both from influences of the lower class Negroes and from humiliating experiences of the caste system."<sup>5</sup> In her study of mulatto fiction, Judith Berzon pointed out that the Negro middle-class preoccupation with status symbols and attaining social stature commensurate with white standards indicated "inferiority feelings, self-hatred, and an obsessive need to deny their relationship to the black masses."<sup>6</sup>

Robert Bone correlated the aspirations of the upper middle-class with assimilationism--the desire to integrate at all levels, including social and psychological. Calling assimilationism a social-class phenomenon, Bone asserted that it was a "personal adjustment to being a Negro in America. . . a kind of psychological 'passing' at the fantasy level."<sup>7</sup> "Passing," whether as a projection of a desire for membership in the physical white world, or as the co-option of a social ideal defined by the white social class system, was carried out in isolation from the

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid., p. 702.

<sup>6</sup> Berzon, Neither White Nor Black, p. 171.

<sup>7</sup> Robert A. Bone, The Negro Novel in America (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1958), p. 4.

community. The assimilationist tendency, or passing into the social status group of middle-class America, has been interpreted as an attempt to change ethnic identity or deny group attachment and to identify with the dominant culture.

This identification is so strong that it results in an indiscriminate appropriation of the dominant culture, including even its antiminority prejudices. . . . The assimilationist Negro may likewise direct more hostility toward other Negroes than toward the oppressing white majority.<sup>8</sup>

Since the rise of a strong black nationalist movement in the 1940's and the even more adamant "black is beautiful" sentiment of the 1960's, Bone's observations, if correct, must generally be appreciated as a reflection of the period between the World Wars. Through the fictive literature of that portion of the "Talented Tenth" that had intimate association with the upper strata of the urban black community, a literature which gradually moved away from idealized representations of race toward the depiction of a black urban world closely corresponding to reality, it is possible to draw inferences about the authenticity of identity difficulties among members of the black bourgeoisie. The literature depicting the upper-middle-class strata of the urban black community accurately reflected the physical, social, and psychological characteristics of that class as described by Frazier and

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid., p. 5.

Myrdal. The literature also reflected the identity difficulties subtly manifested in the upper-middle-class tendency to isolate itself and to dissociate from the Negro masses. Through the literature it is possible to infer an attitudinal posture of middle-class urban blacks, and therefore gain valuable understanding of one aspect of Afro-American experience in the early twentieth century.

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Jessie Redmon Fauset, child of the upper middle class, was the foremost writer of the black bourgeoisie during the inter war period. The daughter of an influential African Methodist Episcopal minister, she was born near Philadelphia in 1882. Though not financially secure, Fauset's family enjoyed social prestige due to her father's position in the church, and to the fact that the Fauset family could be traced to eighteenth-century Philadelphia. The agony of racial rejection by her white peers marred Jessie Fauset's early educational experience. Though she had been awarded a scholarship to Bryn Mawr College, that school did not accept her for racial reasons.<sup>9</sup> She received a scholarship to Cornell University in 1901, graduating in 1905. Elected to Phi Beta Kappa, Fauset was the first black female student to receive such an honor. Fauset also received her M. A. at the University of

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<sup>9</sup> Carolyn Wedin Sylvander, Jessie Redmon Fauset, Black American Writer (New York: The Whitston Publishing Company, 1981), p. 28.

Pennsylvania in 1919 after teaching at several high schools, including Dunbar High School in Washington, D.C. While still at Cornell, Fauset began a correspondence with W. E. B. Du Bois which led to a job as columnist at The Crisis in 1910 and eventually an editorship at that publication. The professional and personal respect shared by Fauset and Du Bois has been documented by several commentators. Carolyn Sylvander noted that Jessie Fauset possessed "extensive power and influence in the day-to-day running of The Crisis," and was to Du Bois an "accepted equal."<sup>10</sup> Perhaps of greater importance was Fauset's contribution to the discovery and exposure of such Harlem Renaissance writers as Langston Hughes, Jean Toomer, Claude McKay, and Countee Cullen. Through the vehicle of The Crisis, Fauset argued for Du Bois' approval of new Afro-American writing and his sanction of its publication. Called "literary midwife" of the Harlem Renaissance, Fauset "helped establish a literary climate favorable to black writers of varying persuasions."<sup>11</sup>

Fauset wrote many short stories and poems published in The Crisis. Her career as a novelist began in 1924 with the publication of her first novel There is Confusion. Subsequent novels including Plum Bun, The Chinaberry Tree,

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., pp. 48, 59.

<sup>11</sup> Abby Arthur Johnson, "Literary Midwife: Jessie Redmon Fauset and the Harlem Renaissance," Phylon, XXXIX, No. 2 (1978), p. 145.

and Comedy: American Style, share with There is Confusion an upper-middle-class setting.

Criticism leveled at Fauset's work concerned her alleged desire to apprise the black masses and the white reading audience of the existence of the black bourgeoisie, a milieu which embraced highly educated, financially successful and, most especially, morally upright members. As early as 1927, critics decried the impulse on the part of African-American artists and writers to depict the race always "butter side up" and to feed the public "honeyed manna on a silver spoon." In his 1927 article "Negro Artists and the Negro," Wallace Thurman suggested that two extremes existed in black writing, extremes which, if correct, underscore the existence of fragmentation within the black group. Afro-American artists, Thurman claimed, pandered either to faddism for things African or to the strict assimilationist desires of the masses of blacks who "all revere Service, Prosperity, and Progress." Thurman believed most Afro-American writers deliberately kept from public view unsavory traits that might hold the race back. Further, Thurman noted

[Blacks] who are in the process of being assimilated, and those elements within the race which are too potent for easy assimilation must be hidden until they no longer exist.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Wallace Thurman, "Negro Artists and the Negro," The New Republic, August 31, 1927, p. 38.

Mr. Thurman's argument failed to acknowledge that through the processes of social and demographic upheaval resulting from the "great migration" from the south into northern and western urban areas, a new status for blacks emerged in the early decades of the twentieth century. This new status was a vibrant black middle class, populated by individuals whose trials, interests, and triumphs were found to be worthy topics for artists intimately connected to them. When Thurman derided the work of Jessie Fauset as the "ill starred attempt to popularize the pleasing news that there were cultured Negroes, deserving of attention from artists,"<sup>13</sup> he fairly missed the point and failed to give Fauset's work careful reading. He did not understand that her novels addressed a variety of subjects beyond those having to do with the middle class, including the "faddish" issue of interest in African culture.

While the black upper middle class served as the locus of all of Fauset's novels, their purpose was not to celebrate and advertise that milieu, but merely to offer it as a reality. In addition, Fauset's novels allowed for an ironic interpretation of black bourgeois values and presented characters who had to accommodate or reconcile their African cultural heritage with their heritage as Americans. The novels are populated with characters whose educational and social backgrounds are varied and whose

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid., p. 39.

interests in the Negro middle class are, more than anything else, reflective of a history of struggle against degradation, of striving and uplift. These are characters whose interests are born of the fight for identification. Further, Fauset's novels advanced a number of important themes which reflect concerns common to all classes of Afro-Americans.

There is Confusion, Fauset's first novel, aptly addressed two themes of particular concern here: first, the struggle of a people over prejudice which defined them as inferior no matter how "respectable," well educated, monied, or successful they were; and second, the degradation implicit in the attempt either to breach or to embrace social and cultural boundaries imposed upon black women. Each of these themes hinges upon identity issues, and in this instance, each attaches to the other inextricably. Black characters struggle to find security in the achievement of cultural and social success in a white milieu or in a rarified upper class milieu. Women, double burdened in that they must attempt to overcome both race and gender prejudice, strive to thwart the long-standing stereotypes of black women as mammy or harlot, in order to meet that achievement.

The plot of There is Confusion is complex and overburdened with secondary characters and story lines. Three female characters, Joanna Marshall, Maggie Ellersly,

and Vera Manning, grapple with a variety of identity issues: obsession with what critics have called bourgeois aspirations, including those which are gender specific; with passing; and with fear of rejection by both the dominant and the sub-culture.

The central character of the primary plot is Joanna Marshall, talented and ambitious daughter of a prestigious caterer. Joanna spends her childhood in an upper-class neighborhood in Harlem living a fantasy of fame in the theatre. Extraordinary musical talent allows Joanna to determine that success will be built on a foundation of Afro-American artistry and culture. Fauset established Joanna's conviction as a reflection of the present urge to regenerate original African culture within an American context. Like her critic, Wallace Thurman, Fauset, through her contact with musicians of the Harlem Renaissance, recognized the tendency on the part of black musical artists to embrace a proximity of African culture as a commercial tool. However, Fauset's Joanna does not neglect her American roots but gives testimony to Du Bois's two-part ideal of a truly African-American culture, formed of the best elements of both parts. In response to the suggestion she should forget about the white stage and "build up colored art," the heroine Joanna insists, "You don't think I want to forsake--us. Not at all. But I want to show us to the world. I am colored, of course, but

American first. Why shouldn't I speak to all America?"<sup>14</sup>

Very much like her character, Joanna, the young author nurtured a belief that talent and intellectual success would overcome racial prejudice. In a 1905 letter to Du Bois, echoing his own trust that intellectual achievement was the only reasonable means to ensure equality, Fauset declared her own understanding of prejudice, a naivete she later ascribed to young Joanna Marshall:

Don't you believe that we should lead [blacks] to understand that the reason we adopt such and such criteria which are also adopted by the Anglo-Saxon, it is because these criteria are the best, and not essentially because they are white? This kind of distinction would in the end breed self-dependence and self-respect, and subjective respect means always sooner or later an outcome of objective respect.<sup>15</sup>

In keeping with the concept of the "Talented Tenth," Fauset created Joanna as an extreme "ideal" type, and, indeed, Du Bois would have found in her all the criteria for membership in that select group. But young and overbearing Joanna is soon disabused of the notion that talent, education, and intellect will awaken the Anglo-American world to the error of believing blacks inferior. In her characterization of Joanna, Fauset depicted the

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<sup>14</sup> Jessie Redmon Fauset, There is Confusion (reprint New York: AMS Press, 1974), p. 76.

<sup>15</sup> The Correspondence of W. E. B. Du Bois, I: Selections, 1877-1934, cited in Sylvander, Jessie Redmon Fauset, p. 38.

reality of the ideal breaking down. Under the weight of an obsession born of the historical reality of slavery and stereotyping, the ideal disintegrates under the pressures of contemporary racial and gender bias. After being turned away from theatre work because of her color, Joanna begins to realize that professional excellence is not enough to dissolve racial barriers. She learns as well that as a woman, particularly a "race woman," she is an undesirable commodity. Attempting to secure a position with a white theatrical company, she meets further prejudice when the producer points out that he would "try a colored man in a white company but we won't have any colored women."<sup>16</sup>

That Joanna is a woman striving for professional success earns her the reputation among her peers as "uppity" and "high-brow." Her ambition, made unusual if not extraordinary by her gender, leads to her obnoxious tendency to exclude those who do not belong to her class. Indeed, mulattos like Joanna and her family, those who were more often successful in business and professional endeavors than especially dark colored African-Americans, tended in the early twentieth century to form class distinctions ostensibly based on heritage, education, and professionalism, status distinctions not often allowed less dark skinned people. Joanna draws distinctions between her own class and "stupid, common people." Further, she is a

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<sup>16</sup> Fauset, There is Confusion, p. 275.

young woman obsessed with a dream that allows no room for traditional female interests, including love and marriage. With exaggeration, but certainly in sympathy with her character, Fauset has Joanna view the world of traditional gender roles as prohibitive: "[F]or a woman love usually means a household of children, the getting of a thousand meals, picking up laundry, no time to herself for meditation, or reading."<sup>17</sup> Ingrained knowledge of the historical degradation of blacks makes Joanna almost desperate in her effort to achieve success. She fears most of all sinking into a middle ground of mediocrity, a position which would leave her out of the vanguard.

It was lack of interest and purpose on the part of girls which brought about so many hasty marriages which terminated in--no, not poverty--mediocrity. Joanna hated the word; with her visual mind she saw it embodied in broken chairs, cold gravy, dingy linen, sticky children. She would never mind poverty half so much; she would contrive somehow to climb out of that. But ordinary tame mediocrity!<sup>18</sup>

Believing with Du Bois that "[w]e cannot imprison women again in a home or require them all on pain of death to be nurses and housekeepers,"<sup>19</sup> Fauset placed realistic obstacles in Joanna's path, including psychological

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid., p. 95.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., p. 146.

<sup>19</sup> W. E. B. Du Bois, Darkwater, Voices from Within the Veil (reprint, New York: Schocken Books, 1969), p. 181.

confusion that comes of the inability to satisfy traditional expectations and desires while accommodating non-traditional interests. "Joanna was doomed by her very make-up to a sort of perpetual loneliness."<sup>20</sup>

At school Joanna meets Peter Bye, grandson of ambitious Isaiah Bye and son of Meriwether, a slacker. Joanna encourages Peter in his interest in medicine, hoping he will not succumb to the weak portion of his heritage. As time passes, their relationship blossoms into first love. Joanna is so driven by her own desire to be a great performer that she offers Peter only ambition for her own future and for his. Her support for his career in medicine is tied to proving blacks valuable and accomplished citizens, gaining a firm foothold in the black bourgeoisie, and securing a place in African-American posterity. When Peter rejects Joanna, she strives ever harder to win theatrical acclaim, trying to assuage her disappointment. Finally, performing as a white-masked "America" in the Dance of Nations production, she is successful, although a black aberration. The irony implicit in this conceit is somewhat dissipated by Joanna's words as the audience demands she remove the mask:

I hardly need to tell you that there is no one in the audience more American than I am. My great-grandfather fought in the Revolution, my uncle fought in the Civil War and my brother is 'over

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<sup>20</sup> Fauset, There is Confusion, p. 104.

there' now.<sup>21</sup>

Joanna's inconsistent ethnocentrism, class-based prejudice, and confused desire for a life untainted by racial problems is told in her disdain for performing in black vaudeville. These are also determined in her refusal to marry a very light skinned mulatto. "[H]e was too white and she did not want a marriage which would keep the difficulties of color more than ever before her eyes."<sup>22</sup> What Joanna wanted was a clear reflection of her educated, middle-class understanding of value, proof of racial worth. She, like the heroines of earlier novels, wanted to be needed, to be useful to her race, and to devote her "time, concentration, and remarkable single-mindedness to some worthy visible end."<sup>23</sup>

Professional success, culminated in Broadway stardom, leaves Joanna with a vague desire to prove herself and to meet the challenge of racism which ever threatens her security, a security built around an insulated, upper-middle-class existence. This is the central issue of Joanna's story. It did not occur to her that the success would prove to be hollow fame, based more on color than on talent. Realizing that her artistry is not something useful, and is not particularly "to the advantage of her

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid., p. 232.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., p. 236.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., p. 236.

people," Joanna's confusion and disappointment turn inward and are transformed to a desire for traditional female satisfactions.

Probing relentlessly into an evasive subconsciousness she evolved the realization that in those other days she had expected her singing, her dancing--her success in a word--to be the mere integument of her life, the big handsome extra wrap to cover her more ordinary dress,--the essential, delightful commonplaces of living, the kernel of life, home, children, and adoring husband.

Fauset resolved Joanna's dilemma by having her admit that love and tolerance must take precedence over the externally imposed exigencies of proving "to a skeptical world the artistry of a too little understood people."<sup>24</sup> Realizing that her "desire for greatness had been a sort of superimposed structure, which, having been taken off, left her true self," Joanna reconciles with Peter. Rather than leave her heroine happy and fulfilled in her professional life, Fauset cast off all indications of Joanna's desire for personal success and invested her ambitions and trust solely in Peter. "In a thousand little ways she deferred to him, and showed him that as a matter of course he was the arbiter of her own. . . .destiny, the fons et origo of authority."<sup>25</sup> At the novel's end Peter is a successful doctor and Joanna a mother and housewife, satisfied with

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid. p., 274.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., p. 292.

singing in church and concerts which Peter has arranged.

That Fauset resolved Joanna's story in There is Confusion in this particular fashion testifies to the powerful sway of gender tradition, both social and literary. Women must sooner or later answer their gender instincts; women are rarely left both alone and successful. However, within historical context and the theme structure of There is Confusion, the traditional resolution is justified. Through Joanna's story, Fauset did not negate the values of the black bourgeoisie, a class which opened access to the "American dream," and at the same time flew in the face of white racism. Indeed, Fauset's novels attacked the assumption that African-Americans, by the very fact of their inferiority, could never achieve social, educational, and financial success. Further, as Carole Watson acknowledged in her assessment of There is Confusion, "the promulgation of bourgeois values [in novels] had the same purpose as did the advancement of Christian and religious principles in the earlier period."<sup>26</sup>

Fauset, however, adeptly questioned the ordering of priorities in the African-American bourgeoisie, she "espous[ed] fidelity to the success ideal, and also show[ed] the tremendous personal costs such ambition

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<sup>26</sup> Carole McAlpine Watson, Prologue: The Novels of Black American Women, 1891-1965 (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1985), p. 35.

entail[ed]."<sup>27</sup> Joanna acknowledges that, being black, "You've got to renounce something--always."<sup>28</sup> What she renounces is not so much her artistic talent but its obsessive, and ultimately futile use against racism. Having identified herself with Harriet Tubman, Phillis Wheatley, and Sojourner Truth, Joanna wanted never to be ordinary. From her bourgeois background and her inflated sense of her own future greatness as exemplar of Afro-American worth, she had feared and scorned the ordinary, the mediocre, thereby falling from grace and "by a strange twist, influenc[ing] adversely and warp[ping] her sympathies."<sup>29</sup> Joanna, talented black woman, renouncing the quest for professional success, was the best vehicle whereby Fauset could emphasize her point that too many "superimposed structures," obstruct and misguide the traveller. These are structures of racism, of class consciousness, of success on any terms and for specious ends.

A secondary but significant character, Maggie Ellersley, is "true daughter of the Tenderloin," a hair dresser, whose grand purpose is to lead a "decent life," with a decent man who will protect her from the harsh realities of existence in "wretchedly ventilated rooms, in

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid., p. 36.

<sup>28</sup> Fauset, There is Confusion, p. 284.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., p. 20

perpetual gloom. . .obscene old furniture, boxes, stale newspapers."<sup>30</sup> Maggie, Joanna Marshall's erstwhile friend, grows up with an obsession different from Joanna's. She is determined to find a way out of poverty, constant malnutrition, and social degradation inherent in her underclass station. "Maggie found early that one avenue of escape lay through men. They were stronger than women, they made money."<sup>31</sup> But money is not the panacea.

She had a passion for respectability and decency quite apart from what they connoted of comparative ease and comfort, though she coveted these latter, too, and meant some day to have them.<sup>32</sup>

Determined to overcome her lowly status, Maggie falls in love with the Marshall family, its decency and pride; she loves its status as a family with background. Wanting to identify with the Marshalls and their class, she imagines herself brother Philip Marshall's wife but is early on jolted out of this notion by Joanna who sends her a cruel letter setting her straight:

[A marriage between you and my brother Philip] would not be at all pleasing to our family. . .You can see that a girl of your lowly aims would only be a hindrance to him. Philip Marshall cannot marry a hair dresser!<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid., p. 57.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., p. 58.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., p. 64..

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., p. 87.

In despair, Maggie impulsively runs away and marries a rather mysterious older man, whom she believes kind and upright, a practical compensation for middle-class status. When a friend reveals that her husband is a gambler, Maggie uses the news as a convenient excuse to leave him, for she, like Joanna, maintains a fixed ideal of value. All she had ever wanted was a decent life among decent people and her husband no longer fit the bill. The bitterness and irony of this discovery begins to free Maggie. Her determination to win bourgeois respectability finally veers toward self-reliance and she joins forces with Madame Harkness, a successful black cosmetologist and entrepreneur. When the disappointed Peter Bye enters her life, Maggie reverts to her previous program: to be married into an established, respectable family, one which will shield her from the realities of being a poor, uneducated black woman of no background. At length, Maggie awakens to the vacuousness of her previous aims and resolves to go to the European front to nurse black troops. Coupled with this new outlook comes a dedication to independence.

When she returned to America she would start her hair work again. . .Of her ability to make a good living she had no doubt. . .She would stand on her own two feet, Maggie Ellersley, serene, independent, self-reliant.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid., p. 262.

Reunited with Philip Marshall, now injured and dying, Maggie weds him and valiantly nurses him on his death bed. Through the awakening provided by her new independence, Maggie is able to know the gratification of love for its own sake (as well as the reward for this altruism, the Marshall status) and the satisfactions of self-reliance. She overcomes class identity confusion as well as dispenses with the notion that a man must be the agent of her moral and social redemption.

Though Fauset deliberately created in Maggie a character outside the social class of the Marshalls, the theme of her story mirrors theirs. Like Joanna, Maggie is obsessed with goals derived from social imperatives. These goals for Afro-Americans living amid the philosophical ferment of early twentieth-century black America are defined and intensified by racism and the history of group degradation. They are made urgent and fragmented by the insistence on a lionized "Talented Tenth" through assimilationist or nationalistic policies and through the exigencies of artistic cultural regeneration.

Vera Manning, a third female character in There is Confusion, appears throughout the novel, passing as white and placing her friend Joanna in uncomfortable social positions. Vera is in love with a dark-skinned man but her "color-struck" mother will not allow her to marry him. "[Marriage to a dark man] only meant unhappiness. If [we]

should have children they'd be brown and would have to be humiliated like all other colored children."<sup>35</sup> Vera passes for convenience which offers her "almost unlimited opportunities. . .I have seen sights and places, yes, and eaten food that I never even knew about when I used to go out with Harley." However, Vera is not truly happy without Harley. She tells Joanna that she will continue to pass.

Sometimes I think I will drop it, then I think: 'Oh, pshaw, what difference does it make?' Without Harley I'm bound to be unhappy, anyway, even if I do go back to my own. Since I can't have happiness I might just as well take my abode where I can have the most fun and comfort even though it's making me-- well, no saint, I can tell you.<sup>36</sup>

But virulent racial violence in the South causes Vera to pass now for different reasons. She volunteers to be sent South by a newspaper to investigate and report on white violence against blacks. Fauset uses the character of Vera Manning as a kind of literary absolution for all passers. Vera, through the contrivance of covertly investigating whites, becomes cleansed of her moral weakness by using her absence of color to the advantage of her people. Her lover chooses to remain in Europe after the war where he can enjoy freedom from "this color business," and where he will be free to come and go as he pleases; "No more insults for him, no more lynching

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid., p. 199.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., p. 200.

news."<sup>37</sup> Vera, freeing herself of the taint of passing for mere social and economic ends, gains a moral foothold in black identity, something which would have allowed her the prerogative of choosing to marry a black man, a man of obvious racial identity. Suffering the irony of losing her lover forever to the forces of American racism, Vera is depicted by Fauset as a virtuous and courageous woman.

It was as though at last I had found some excuse for being what I am, looking like one race and belonging to another. It made me feel like--don't laugh--like a ministering angel. Oh, I hated myself so for having spent all those foolish months, years even, away from my own folks when I might have been consecrated to them, serving them, helping them, healing them.<sup>38</sup>

Like Joanna and Maggie, Vera makes choices based on forces outside herself, by the false value of physical comfort and social convenience, by racism which drives away her lover. And like Joanna and Maggie, Vera is purified by a reordering of priorities. Through this reordering, Fauset's female characters overcome confusion and fragmentation though with some concessions to the traditional rubric of womanhood. Maggie grows self-reliant, no longer dependent on men and social prestige to save her from being "nobody." She has also fulfilled her dreams of love, doing so in a virtuous atmosphere of self

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid., p. 272.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., p. 270.

sacrifice, an atonement for her earlier misguided thinking. Joanna too grows into a more amiable person, no longer elitist, self-centered, and obsessively concerned with proving something to herself and the world at large. She finds a virtuous place in a good marriage to Peter. Vera comes to realize the error of passing into a "terrible white race" and so subverts its institutional and insidious prejudice. She passes for noble ends. Imparting moral axioms to the final, virtuous choices of her heroines, Fauset at the same time created the historical and social context in which those choices were the sources of potential psychic confusion for many bourgeoisie Afro-Americans.

As in There is Confusion, the theme of false value emerged in Fauset's The Chinaberry Tree. In that novel, the restrictive New Jersey community of Red Brook provided the backdrop for characters whose ambitions for respectability lead to misunderstanding and emotional tragedy. The fictional community is populated by blacks who are the personification of bourgeois values. "[They] believed in the church. . .in family, in the Republican party, in moderate wealth, a small family, rather definite place for women."<sup>39</sup>

Fauset's heroine, twenty-four year old Laurentine

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<sup>39</sup> Jessie Redmon Fauset, The Chinaberry Tree (reprint New York: AMS Press, 1969), p. 131.

Strange, longs for respectability. But respectability is hard won, for her life is tainted by the shame of her illegitimate birth. Born of a black woman and a white man, Laurentine covers her dishonor with dedication to her craft, sewing lovely dresses for wealthy white customers. Her father, Colonel Halloway, a married man unable to wed Laurentine's mother, provides her with a moderate yearly income and a house with a flowering Chinaberry tree in its yard. In her effort to show the people of Red Brook that she is "decent" despite this legacy, Laurentine rarely goes out, and eschews any situation which might put her name in further jeopardy. Avoiding the scrutinizing eye of potential critics, she is reticent even to date the young men who would be her suitors.

Laurentine's cousin Melissa comes to live with Laurentine and her mother. Melissa is smugly aware of the family humiliation and mentions it inappropriately and often to her cousin and to the suitors who call on her. However, Melissa is nearly destroyed to learn that she too is the product of an illicit love affair.

To emphasize the consuming desire for respectability and status among the black elite of Red Brook, Fauset used the superficial accouterments of bourgeois life as a code for her characters' belief that the accouterments themselves make up life and define the individual. Descriptions of fine clothing and toiletries insist

themselves upon the text and stand out against the words "liable," "illegal," "misbehavior," "scandal," "decency," "normality." Concerns center on the good face one must wear. The strong belief that the consequences of "misbehavior" in the ancestral past will be played out in the present if one is not ever on guard against them motivates characters and truncates their interactions with each other. Though the consequences themselves are rarely articulated, they provide the atmosphere for a pervasive sense of losing ground in a social milieu defined by white standards which have been superimposed on Afro-American culture. Even more immediate than in There is Confusion, the primary motivating force in The Chinaberry Tree is the desire by women to overcome the condemnations of racial and gender stereotyping left as the residue of the historical degradation of slavery.

Fauset's fiction accurately described the black bourgeoisie and the standards of conduct, success, and material possession it imposed upon its members. In the message that success based on the values of the white bourgeoisie blacks will overcome racism, the novels correspond to the uplift literature of post-Reconstruction period. However, Fauset also cautioned against relying on the safety of bourgeois life to the detriment of the human impulses of love, generosity, and acceptance. As did her literary foremothers, Frances Harper and Pauline Hopkins,

Fauset believed that "literary creation was both the highest measure of a race's achievement and the most effective tactic to advance the race."<sup>40</sup> Creating positive outcomes in her fiction was Fauset's strategy for verifying that belief.

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<sup>40</sup> David Levering Lewis, When Harlem Was In Vogue (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1981), p. 123.

## CHAPTER FIVE

## ZORA NEALE HURSTON: CULTURE, RACE, AND IDENTITY

[A] bias in most American scholarship . . . postulates black people as "the Negro" and then poses theories ignoring individuation of thought and feeling.<sup>1</sup>

There is an over simplification of the Negro. He is either pictured by the conservatives as happy, picking his banjo, or by the so-called liberals as low, miserable and crying. The Negro's life is neither of these. Rather, it is in-between and above and below these pictures.<sup>2</sup>

The Harlem Renaissance provided Afro-American artists with the opportunity to express personal creativity while defining a "black aesthetic." Jessie Fauset and Nella Larsen were but two Harlem writers whose works depicted "New Negroes"--educated, urban members of a once degraded group struggling for identity and place in American culture. The Harlem Renaissance also opened the way for an expanded understanding of the aesthetic as a reflection of the Afro-American experience outside of social and political history.

During the 1920's, a decade called the "Harlem

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<sup>1</sup> Robert E. Hemenway, Zora Neale Hurston: A Literary Biography (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1977), p. 35.

<sup>2</sup> Zora Neale Hurston, as quoted in Hemenway, Zora Neale Hurston, p. 229.

Renaissance," black literary artists enjoyed for the first time consistent support and moderate success. But, particularly in the early years, they were confronted with the sometimes contradictory and confusing desires of the disparate community. Divided at times by the notion of an artistic "purpose" more apparent than real, the "New Negro" aesthetic was propaganda for W. E. B. Du Bois and the N.A.A.C.P., and was "pure art" for Alain Locke, Howard University professor and editor of the prose and poetry volume The New Negro (1925). During these years, the intelligentsia, or "Talented Tenth," epitomized by these two men insisted on patterns of racial uplift commensurate with white standards of cultural development--Shakespeare and Milton belonged not to a particular race but remained universal, to be emulated by humanity in general. Art, for both Locke and Du Bois, served truth. For Du Bois, pre-eminent political spokesman for Afro-Americans, all art contained a propagandistic dimension that inured blacks with self knowledge, political strength, and pride in their racial heritage. He believed that the articulate Afro-American artist must speak for the voiceless masses, uplifting them with positive images and the future of the American black community in full focus. Locke's "New Negro" ostensibly created prose and poetry for its primary aesthetic experience and for the enrichment of humanity; however, in order to be accepted by his publication, the

prose and poetry had to adhere to rigid standards of presentation and propriety. Locke and his co-editor of Opportunity magazine, Charles S. Johnson, sought only

highly polished stuff [for publication], preferably about polished people, but certainly untainted by racial stereotypes or embarrassing vulgarity. Too much blackness, too much streetgeist and folklore--nitty gritty music, prose and verse--were not welcome.<sup>3</sup>

While both Locke and Du Bois embraced the notion of black distinctiveness, the "black aesthetic," and encouraged the use of materials drawn from African heritage, they did not condone casting Afro-Americans in negative light. New Negro artists were defined by their superior intelligence and by art "developed along the higher lines." These artists understood the difference between the refined sensibilities of Alain Locke and Du Bois on the one hand, and the more liberal patrons of "black art" on the other. The latter had a penchant for the "primitive," and wanted more African in their Afro-American, more jazz, more steam, more color. Du Bois and Locke gave only a condescending nod to the lively musicals then drawing biracial throngs to Harlem theaters. Shuffle Along, Liza, and Runnin' Wild were productions that called up images of blacks as passionate exotics in European dress. Nor did the intellectual elite know what

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<sup>3</sup> David Levering Lewis, When Harlem Was in Vogue (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1981), p. 95.

to make of the blue jazz of the Harlem clubs or of the sensate dancing found there--all of it lauded by a white coterie willing to support its primitive fancy.

Thinking that a trip uptown meant a safari into an exotic jungle, whites were titillated and exhilarated by Harlem spectacle. Harlem became an aphrodisiac, a place where whites could discover their primitive selves; many of the white fellow-travelers so often in attendance on the New Negro artists sought a vitality in the uptown night absent in their own lives.<sup>4</sup>

While the black elite harbored the awareness that for a white audience "the Afro-American was a salable commodity,"<sup>5</sup> as long as these arbiters of "higher-line" literature remained in a promotional position, the political dimensions of the Afro-American aesthetic remained secure. The political dimensions for Locke in The New Negro were

to display the "creative expression" of young writers. . .in order to further race relations: "the especially cultured recognition they win should prove the key to that revaluation of the Negro which must precede or accompany any considerable betterment of race relationships."<sup>6</sup>

Another more subtle influence on the Afro-American artistic community during the first years of the Harlem

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<sup>4</sup> Hemenway, Zora Neale Hurston, p. 27.

<sup>5</sup> Lewis, When Harlem Was In Vogue, p. 91.

<sup>6</sup> Hemenway, Zora Neale Hurston, p. 40.

Renaissance was Marcus Garvey and his Universal Negro Improvement Association. Garvey emphasized African nationalism and color pride. Equating race loyalty with untainted genetic purity, Garvey offended Du Bois whom he labeled a "cross-breed, Dutch-French-Negro editor" who should be given "a good horsewhipping."<sup>7</sup> Garvey, unlike Du Bois and his followers, appealed to the black masses, those Du Bois expected would eventually be lifted through the solicitations of the Talented Tenth. Garvey's charisma and overt action agenda played to black workers, while Afro-American artists, particularly those who aspired to create art "along the higher lines," shunned association with him and his radical organization. However, even though Garvey's nationalism and his interests in African heritage were compatible with certain artistic attempts to depict African cultural forms, the artistic and nationalistic movements remained in separate realms and never recognized common interests.

These diverse issues affecting the artists of the Harlem Renaissance in the 1920's--white patronage, various strains of class politics, the black aesthetic and its several interpretations of propaganda, pure art, and primitivism--were identity issues that could hardly fail to cause anxiety in those who desired to create lasting art that depicted truthfully a people in struggle against

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<sup>7</sup> Lewis, When Harlem Was in Vogue, p. 42.

racial barriers.

Writer Zora Neale Hurston felt acutely the influence of issues affecting Afro-American identity which prevailed during the Renaissance. In a rural black setting Hurston listened to the banter of men and women sitting on general store porches after supper; culled their signifying language, their music of metaphor and the mock-serious power of their invective. She noted in their voices songs of personal pride and crisis. Never hoping to satisfy fully the imperatives of the Talented Tenth, the elite which governed black artists, Hurston attempted instead to please herself.

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In 1925 Zora Neale Hurston travelled a long and circuitous route from her childhood home of Eatonville, Florida, a rural, all-black town near Orlando. Quickly acclimating herself to New York, Hurston began writing short stories and winning herself recognition by proponents of both the "high art" faction of Du Boise and Locke, and those who believed that the "primitivism"--the streetgeist and folklore--of Afro-American culture could and should be rendered in art. Hurston's Eatonville background supplied her with an as yet untapped and seemingly exotic source of Afro-American art, the folk culture of rural Southern blacks in which some measure of African oral traditions survived.

Coming from outside the elite, bourgeois community with a wealth of new material, Hurston entered the anthropology curriculum, first at Barnard College and then at Columbia University. Under the tutelage of Melville Herskovitz and Franz Boas, she returned to rural Florida several times between 1926 and 1935 and there collected hundreds of tales, songs, and stories.<sup>8</sup> Over the years Hurston attempted to pursue a doctorate in anthropology and in 1935 the Julius Rosenwald Foundation granted her a sum of money in the expectation she would complete graduate studies at Columbia. But she resisted the discipline of scientific study, preferring instead to gather material into collections which would not stagnate in dusty archives in university libraries. Hurston relied on her formal, though unfinished, training as a professional folklorist to mine her former rural milieu for the substance of her fiction. She recognized that the traditions she studied as an anthropologist were a part of her own experience, and therefore a part of her own processes of maturation and creation. Engrafted in Hurston's art, the traditional culture was a part of both her rural and urban experience. She was not an interloper upon returning to Eatonville to collect folk materials, but she wove, with a natural and

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<sup>8</sup> Hurston spent several years between 1926 and 1931 collecting in the Caribbean for Boas and independently. Her books Tell My Horse and Mules and Men reflect Caribbean black folk traditions including Hoodoo and other African religious and medicine practices.

familiar technique, folk belief, gesture, and nuance into her fictional tapestries.

No distinctions [existed] between the lore inherited by successive generations of folk and the imaginations with which each generation adapted the tradition and made the lore its own. Hurston, above all the artists of the Harlem Renaissance, understood this principle of folk process.<sup>9</sup>

Because Hurston understood so well the process of making the lore her own, she created a universe that fused the traditional culture to fictional character. Folkways and folk culture, thanks to Hurston, became accepted as a legitimate expression of Afro-American culture.

Further, Alain Locke's approval of her work may have been won because Hurston refused to incorporate an overt political/racial agenda in her anthropological collections, editorial commentary, or her fiction. During the 1920's when lynching was still prevalent and even during the Scottsboro Boys trial of the 1930's, she did not write polemic or didacticism into her art. This did not constitute a rejection of politics, for Hurston did not demur when asked opinions on political issues. In fact, she addressed racism in her work, but this issue sounded in the lower registers of her fiction; her characters rarely served as mouthpieces for protest or pedagogy.

Hurston, purported to be a great wit and the center of

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<sup>9</sup> Hemenway, Zora Neale Hurston, p. 80.

attention in Harlem during the 1920's, coined a term for whites involved in Afro-American uplift and artistic enterprise. Believing some "Negrotarians" sincere and humanitarian, she surmised that others were merely curious dabblers in exoticism. With satire and irony, Hurston recognized the uncomfortable, dependant position black artists occupied during the Renaissance. Negrotarians helped make Renaissance art accessible and public and made possible its continued production through financial patronage and active promotion. Feminist Ruth Hale and her husband Heywood Broun, for example, numbered among the earnest friends and backers of James Weldon Johnson's poetry. While Carl Van Vechten heartily encouraged black art through his cash gifts to Opportunity, he admitted the fascination would wane and he would "doubtless discard [black artists] too in time."<sup>10</sup> Pearl Buck and Dorothy Parker wrote sincerely and favorably of the Harlem artists. Van Wyck Brooks and Hart Crane were "drawn to Harlem on the way to Paris," trusting that association with black renaissance artists would "confirm their vision of cultural salvation com[ing] from the margins of civilization" (emphasis added).<sup>11</sup>

Hurston flourished for a time under the patronage of a white Negrotarian who encouraged a number of "votive

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<sup>10</sup> Lewis, When Harlem Was In Vogue, p. 98.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., p. 99.

primitives," including writers Claude McKay and James Weldon Johnson.<sup>12</sup> Hurston's "godmother," Charlotte Osgood Mason, an elderly Park Avenue heiress, insisted on the exclusive right to patronize Hurston. Historian David Levering Lewis described Mrs. Mason as the consummate Negrotarian who initially had been involved with American Indians but subsequently shifted her interests to black artists. Mason focused on "the glories of Africa's past," admonishing her "children" to "slough off white culture," and use it only to "clarify the thoughts that surge in your being."<sup>13</sup> She encouraged Afro-American artists to make the "primitive" manifest in the language of the dominant culture. Hurston signed a contract with Mrs. Mason in 1928 to turn over the folklore she had collected in the South in exchange for fifteen-hundred dollars. The Godmother exercised considerable control over the fruits of Hurston's writing for the next five years.<sup>14</sup>

But Hurston played the stereotyped "darkie" reluctantly. In his harsh critique of her major works, Darwin Turner speculated on "whether [Hurston's] vision was merely a caste myopia which caused her to admire representatives of any group which she considered socially

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid., p. 151.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., p. 154.

<sup>14</sup> Alice Walker, ed., I Love Myself When I Am Laughing (New York: The Feminist Press, 1979), p. 12.

or economically superior to her."<sup>15</sup> However one explains her obsequious behavior, it did not escape Hurston's notice that hers was the role of black sycophant to wealthy white heiress, child to (god)mother, pauper-artist to patroness. And the association was just that, but modified by Hurston's knowledge that the role would support her only if she played it out faithfully. At least during the decade of the Renaissance, she donned a mask for Mrs. Osgood Mason and the literary establishment. In those early years, as Arna Bontemps and Langston Hughes suggested, Hurston deliberately "assumed a role designed to gain the assistance of white people."<sup>16</sup> Not surprisingly, the subject of masks worn by females against the oppressiveness of male pride arises in her most important novel, Their Eyes Were Watching God. The protective and disguising mask was a devise quite familiar to Hurston and one that she employed against the oppressive and proscriptive pride of her white patron. As the years wore on, Hurston transformed the mask into a shield against white interference and into a banner for black segregation.

While she wore the mask knowingly and ironically played at being the primitive to please Mrs. Mason, Hurston also bought the notion that her African heritage implied an

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<sup>15</sup> Darwin Turner, In A Minor Chord: Three Afro-American Writers and Their Search for Identity (Carbondale, Illinois: Southern Illinois University Press, 1971), p. 98.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., p. 92.

inherent, even genetic, primitivism.<sup>17</sup> As an expression of black consciousness, Hurston's article "How it Feels to be Colored Me," published in 1928, presented the very stereotype the Talented Tenth elite deplored. Sitting in the New World Cabaret with a white man, Hurston mused, "my color comes." The jazz was a narcotic that sent her with

primitive fury. . .to the jungle beyond. I dance wildly inside myself; I yell within, I whoop; I shake my assegai above my head, I hurl it true to the mark yeeeooww! I am in the jungle and living in the jungle way. My face is painted red and yellow and my body is painted blue. My pulse is throbbing like a war drum. I want to slaughter something--give pain, give death to what, I do not know. But the piece ends. The men of the orchestra wipe their lips and rest their fingers. I creep back slowly to the veneer we call civilization with the last tone and find the white friend sitting motionless in his seat, smoking calmly.<sup>18</sup>

The passage presents a basic contradiction that is difficult to rationalize. Renaissance writer Nella Larsen addressed the urge toward the primitive in her novel Quicksand, where it is described as a part of the dual

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<sup>17</sup> Hurston's behavior ran counter to the tenets of Du Bois's Talented Tenth. During the renaissance, critic George Schuyler disdainfully remarked that whites who wrote about Afro-Americans consistently depicted characters reverting to African primitivism. "Even when he appears to be civilized, it is only necessary to beat a tom tom or wave a rabbit's foot and he is ready to strip off his Hart-Schaffner and Marx suit, grab a spear and ride off wild-eyed on the back of a crocodile." Lewis, When Harlem Was In Vogue, p. 92.

<sup>18</sup> Walker, ed., I Love Myself, p. 154.

consciousness of the mulatto. Similarly, the urge appeared in James Weldon Johnson's The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man and in Jesse Fauset's novel of the staid black bourgeoisie, There is Confusion. Hurston's assertion about herself went beyond internalization of stereotype. Strangely, and paradoxically, Alain Locke enjoyed "How It Is To Be Colored Me" but said Hurston gave too much away to the white audience. By emphasizing ancestral Africanism Hurston may have meant to express a basis for the black aesthetic, a culture-based concept condoned by both Locke and Du Bois. She stepped into the realm of stereotype, however, by implying a racial dimension existed in the aesthetic. The implication assumes further irony by Hurston's wry amusement at her patron Charlotte Mason's desire for her artists to study, write about, and behave like primitives.<sup>19</sup>

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Their Eyes Were Watching God, published in 1937, marks the beginning of an Afro-American literature that celebrates the distinctiveness of black culture. Because the novel is situated in a deep-South, rural, homogeneous

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<sup>19</sup> Mrs. Mason treated the artists who turned to her for assistance like children. Langston Hughes found himself supported by Mason for a number of years, but tired of having to "be primitive." Hughes "did not feel the rhythms of the primitive surging" through him. David Levering Lewis remarked that Hughes "began instead to feel the surge of dialectical materialism." Lewis, When Harlem Was In Vogue, p. 257.

culture, one whose "inherent traits"<sup>20</sup> provide the substance and texture of character and setting, its mulatto heroine transcends the identity conflicts suffered by heroines in the novels of previous black women writers. The heroine of Their Eyes Were Watching God searches for personal identity, and journeys toward self-actualization. This search is universal, a metaphor for the coming into the self of all women. While the mulatto heroines of other black novels were representatives of race and their identities and identity crises were bound up with racial consciousness, Hurston's heroine belongs exclusively to the black community. Her identity as a member is not in question, and her mixed heritage does not provide the antagonistic element of the plot as it so often does in previous Afro-American literature. Further, the white community does not impose itself as condemning, obsequious, or solicitous; nor does the black community judge or shun, alienate or pity, the mulatto. Rather, the primary antagonistic force acting against the heroine in Their Eyes Were Watching God is the tradition of male supremacy. Janie Wood's personal struggle is universal and female, it is a search for the autonomous self. By creating a world situated in a wholly homogeneous Afro-American folk culture, Hurston transcended the proscriptive definitions

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<sup>20</sup> From Martin R. Delany, "The Political Destiny of the Colored Race," in Sterling Stucky, The Ideological Origins of Black Nationalism (Boston: Beacon Press, 1972), p. 203.

of "art" imposed upon Afro-American writers by black reformers and intellectuals of the Talented Tenth.

The novel opens with forty-year-old Janie Woods telling her friend, Phoeby, her life history. Janie's grandmother arranges her first marriage after seeing a "trashy nigger," "lacerating her Janie with a kiss." This marriage to old Logan Killicks, a sullen, tired man, is to ensure Janie's respectability and material security. Two months after the wedding Janie entreats her grandmother for advice. "You told me Ah must gointer love him, and, and Ah don't. Maybe if somebody was to tell me how, Ah could do it."<sup>21</sup>

Obviously unhappy, Janie meets and runs away with Joe Starks, an ambitious man who rises rapidly in the general store business in Eatonville, Florida. Shortly after their marriage and his establishment of the store, Janie begins to perceive herself as his object and this knowledge confuses and disappoints her. When a customer asks her to say a few words at the dedication of the store, Joe shushes him. "[M]uh wife don't know nothin' 'bout no speech-makin'. Ah never married her for nothin' lak dat. She's uh woman and her place is in de home." In reaction,

Janie made her face laugh after a short pause, but it wasn't too easy. She had never thought of making a speech, and didn't know if she cared to make one at

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<sup>21</sup> Zora Neale Hurston, Their Eyes Were Watching God (reprint Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1978), p. 41.

all. It must have been the way Joe spoke out without giving her a chance to say anything one way or another that took the bloom off things. But anyway, she went down the road behind him that night feeling cold.<sup>22</sup>

This recognition of outside influences attempting to shape her identity is problematic for Janie. She is uncomfortable not only with being controlled, but also uncomfortable with self-reliance. Janie is timid about handling the business of the store. "Oh, Jody," she cries. "Ah can't do nothin' wid no store lessen youse there."<sup>23</sup>

Janie is also reticent about voicing an opinion. She disapproves of the cruel treatment of a mule in the street, but holds her contempt in check, saying to herself, "Ah hates disagreement and confusion, so Ah better not talk. It makes it hard tuh git along."<sup>24</sup> In order to get along with Starks she remains quiet and gets her "face straight." Critic Mary Helen Washington found Janie's submission to Starks the greatest shortcoming in Hurston's novel. "Janie is often passive when she should be active, deprived of speech when she should be in command of language."<sup>25</sup>

Notwithstanding that Hurston's story depicts a woman

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<sup>22</sup> Hurston, Their Eyes Were Watching God, pp. 69-70.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., p. 70.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., p. 90.

<sup>25</sup> Mary Helen Washington, ed., Invented Lives: Narratives of Black Women 1860-1960 (New York: Doubleday & Company, 1987), p. 239.

whose youthful passions are quieted by gender tradition and deference to male will, as time passes Janie matures and becomes less willing to "agree with her mouth." Despite critic Washington's reservations, the novel renders the story of Janie's life as the gradual process of the tearing away of her mask, a facade that is not only the outward disguise men have created for her, but a mask that covers her true self. Their Eyes Were Watching God is a classic story of female revelation--a gradual revelation that the image of herself in relation to the men in her life was only that, an image conjured out of her desire to belong.

Joe Starks habitually and insultingly undercuts Janie's abilities in front of customers at the store. When he tells her "You'se uh ole woman, nearly forty," and that no one could possibly be interested in her as a woman, she forthrightly condemns him. Her retaliation with returned insult expresses true feelings regarding her self-awareness and her identity.

Naw, Ah ain't no young gal no mo' but den Ah ain't no old woman neither. Ah reckon Ah looks mah age too. But Ah'm uh woman every inch of me, and Ah know it. Dat's uh whole lot more'n you kin say. . .Talkin' 'bout me lookin' old! When you pull down yo' britches, you look lak de change uh life.<sup>26</sup>

Hearing Janie's shocking insult in the presence of other men, Joe is dumfounded. "What's dat you say, Janie? You

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<sup>26</sup> Hurston, Their Eyes Were Watching God, pp. 122-3.

must be outta yo' head."<sup>27</sup> She is not out of her head, but her interior life issues forth from her mouth. It is an internal life she has been living and rarely acknowledging for years. Her assertion that she is a woman and knows it comes from the place in her that must deny the late hour of her life; a place in her that must dispel the years spent with Joe and Killicks, where she passed time in unfulfillment, waiting for the real Janie to speak and show herself.

Joe Starks physically deteriorates after being insulted and suffers an irreversible humiliation from which he cannot recover. That Janie has rallied time and again from his abuse to continue to live with him under the double edged sword of her revelation is of great consequence in the story. At Joe's death she is a strong woman, one who has endured by wearing the covering mask patiently.

The moment after Joe's death Janie rises to the mirror. "Years ago, she had told her girl self to wait for her in the looking glass." Again, the voice of the narrator acknowledges that Janie had known all along, or had suspected all along, that her identity was forged long ago, but had merely to wait for the right circumstances and the accumulation of life experience to permit it to attach itself to her physical and emotional life. As she looks at

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid., p. 123.

her real self in the mirror, Janie recognizes not only the changes in her girl self but sees too the fine improvement of maturity.

With both Killicks and Starks, Janie had been the submissive woman, defined by men above her. But with her new maturity she is able to break from her false notions of security. After Jody Starks' death, Janie meets and falls in love with a younger man, Tea Cake Woods, who cannot offer her material security and who does not expect her to proffer security to him. She becomes a fused being, at one with her man in the Florida Everglades. With Tea Cake Janie learns mutuality and emotional equality. Tea Cake and Janie share virtually everything, including work. Their lives are not constricted by class or gender conflicts.

In the Everglades, Janie's new identity as an equal in her relationship to her man, is counterpoised with her relationship to Mrs. Turner, a mulatto who lives among the black field workers. Here Hurston addressed a secondary, racial identity theme. Through the character of Mrs. Turner, Hurston acknowledged the propensity on the part of some light-skinned mulattoes to invest superficial racial traits with social value, thereby assuming themselves superior to dark people. The character also allowed Hurston to sharpen the contrast between the racial and the raceless, between the essentially human, and the social and

political.

Mrs. Turner views herself as "uh featured woman," one who "ain't got no flat nose and liver lips. . . Ah got white folks' features in mah face." Mrs. Turner laments that even though she is nearly white and blessed with "thin lips" and pointed nose, she is still considered to be a part of the thoroughly unsavory black caste. Her high opinion of Janie is based on Janie's own appearance, on her "coffee-and-cream complexion and her luxurious hair." Mrs. Turner assumes that Tea Cake had money to attract Janie, for he is a dark man, a "disfavorite" one who has no obvious positive qualities. Mrs. Turner "ain't useter 'sociatin' wid black folks," nor would she have married a black man for she believes that "We oughta lighten up de race."<sup>28</sup>

While acknowledging that "the actual quantitative correlation between class and color is not known," sociologist Gunnar Myrdal speculated that historically in the plantation setting, "[r]elative whiteness [was] one of the main factors determining status within the Negro community" and that over time, particularly in the North, "the Negro community itself. . . accepted this color preference."<sup>29</sup> Hurston may have overlaid Mrs. Turner, a

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid., pp. 208-209.

<sup>29</sup> Gunnar Myrdal, An American Dilemma (New York: Harper & Row, 1944), pp. 696-697.

woman with a particularly jaundiced view of dark people and an attitude one would assume more common among Northern, urban Afro-Americans, on the deep South Everglades setting where one might expect a more uniform acceptance of color difference.

Skin color is of no concern to Janie. When she asks Mrs. Turner, "How come you so against black?" Mrs. Turner scornfully answers that blacks "always sing' ol' nigger songs! Always cuttin' de monkey for white folks." Mrs. Turner believes race problems are the result of blacks who do not behave like white people. If not for these blacks, "De white folks would take us in wid dem. De black ones is holdin' us back."<sup>30</sup>

Janie is a dynamic, universal figure, a raceless figure, journeying out of childhood toward maturity and self revelation, while Mrs. Turner remains perpetually bound by her concern for something she cannot change. Hurston approved Janie's raceless posture, for she argued in her 1942 autobiography that she held the same view herself. Furthermore, Janie must be raceless in order that the particularity and uniqueness of the folk culture in which she resides is made more vivid.

Janie responds to Mrs. Turner's assertion that highly colored blacks are holding the race back by saying, "'course Ah ain't never thought about it too much. . . Ah

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<sup>30</sup> Hurston, Their Eyes Were Watching God, p. 211.

reckon Ah ain't got no real head fur thinkin'." And when she does get her head for thinking, it is not about racial issues, nor is it about the community; her thinking is about self. Her thinking comes in the caring for her rabies infected Tea Cake and in the ultimate action of taking his life for her own protection. It comes in poetic fixity, the memory of Tea Cake, wearing "the sun for a shawl." Thinking comes as well in the consideration that she is strong and on her own, ready to start anew. That Tea Cake must die at her hand countermands Janie's life-long dependance on men, her active seeking of male security. She is now a singular woman concerned with life, concerned with self actualization.

The rural world created in Their Eyes Were Watching God contrasts the urban setting Hurston came to know in New York. Departing from previous Renaissance novels, Their Eyes are Watching God is entirely peopled with "folk," characters who have innate knowledge of their peers and their environment; characters who have no formal education, but who possess the gifts of story and song. The setting of Eatonville was indeed a world away from New York and Harlem; its people were not the Afro-American intellectuals who took themselves so seriously in the offices of publishing houses or in smokey jazz clubs off Lenox Avenue.

As critic Susan Willis has argued, Hurston's separation from her own childhood Southern black folk

culture in Eatonville, a culture that had once "fit like a tight chemise"<sup>31</sup> into the urban environment of Harlem, created distance and estrangement, the essentials of identity conflict. Hurston herself wrote that once separated by time, geography, and the urban environment, she could see herself "like somebody else" and could stand back and "look at [my] garment," that tight chemise of the rural childhood setting. Willis remarked

Hurston's simple expression of alienation. . .can be read in two ways. Either she could see herself as if she had become somebody else, or as if she were miraculously split in two, her old self standing there with her new self looking on. In any case, there is a sense of schizophrenia, not only between the self and the cultural garment, but deep within the self as well.<sup>32</sup>

Hurston's biographer, Robert Hemenway, also found a crisis in identity written into the text of her ambivalent autobiography, Dust Tracks on a Road (1942). Hemenway asserted that Hurston wanted more than an "association" with the two worlds of her experience, the rural and the urban, the professional and the folk; she wanted to identify herself by both at once.

[Hurston] found herself in the uncomfortable position of mediating between two spheres of experience, searching for an interpretive voice

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<sup>31</sup> Susan Willis, Specifying: Black Women Writing (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1987), p. 34.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., p. 35.

that would authenticate both Eatonville and Barnard, a West Indian houngan and a Guggenheim fellow. . . She was trapped in Dust Tracks by the personal identification she cultivated as one of the folk, for it limited her freedom to account for her experience as a part of the larger world.<sup>33</sup>

Hurston's anthropological imperative to document and thereby preserve the folk culture, her life in Harlem during its heyday of artistic development, and her own intimate knowledge of rural Southern folk, their belief systems, their interpersonal relations, were external elements which both enhanced and clouded her purpose. She became so fixed on what she perceived to be a healthy context--the folk community seeming to act upon its own initiative, creating its own culture without taint from outside influences--that she grew ever more conflicted in her pronouncements about race.

On the one hand, Hurston's purpose was to make known black cultural distinctiveness, the "black aesthetic." On the other, her purpose was to establish herself and her characters as individuals, acting out of individual interest, autonomous and apart from group or race interests. These purposes are not mutually exclusive, but one is led to question whether race and culture were separate concepts or whether they fused for Hurston as they seemed to in the jazz passage in "How it Feels to Be

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<sup>33</sup> Hemenway, Zora Neale Hurston, p. 279.

Colored Me." Moreover, if race and culture fused, or were taken to be the same, how does one reconcile Hurston's two major interests, racelessness and racial distinctiveness?

Throughout the 1940's and 1950's Hurston's views became somewhat troublesome for many of her fellow Afro-Americans. She denounced the 1954 Supreme Court Brown vs. Board of Education decision which held that separate education for blacks was inherently unequal. Hurston believed that the decision insulted blacks by implying their schools and teachers were inferior and inadequate. And, in a move similar to black nationalist Marcus Garvey's Ku Klux Klan affiliation in 1922 (an affiliation she condemned in that same year), Hurston actively supported a segregationist politician and declared Jim Crow workable.<sup>34</sup> She passionately believed that her own raceless childhood experience in Eatonville, Florida was a paradigm for segregated America. Documenting the black culture of Haiti, Florida, and Louisiana backwater communities and having it accepted and appreciated by the wider American culture could only have strengthened her belief in Afro-American distinctiveness. But her belief did not allow for the pluralism of black life, much less for the desire on the part of many contemporary Afro-Americans to integrate

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<sup>34</sup> In 1945, in "Crazy for This Democracy," Hurston wrote, "I am for complete repeal of All Jim Crow Laws in the United States once and for all, right now. For the benefit of this nation and as a precedent to the world." Walker, ed. I Love Myself, p. 168.

fully and to participate in American culture and politics.

Notwithstanding these shortcomings, by drawing on folk culture and legitimizing this aspect of the "black aesthetic," Hurston created a world that seemed to her more closely related to African cultural forms, a milieu less tainted by white culture than was the urbanized black culture. By presenting the black experience within an insular folk community, Hurston's novels and folklore collections represented a new acknowledgment of a unique and particularized black culture, one aspect of Afro-American identity.

## CHAPTER SIX

## CONCLUSION

The novels written by Afro-American women between 1892 and 1937 were both anticipated and surprising. Taken as signposts on the geography of Afro-American culture after Reconstruction, plot lines and characterizations reflected not only literary trends but also the realities of black struggles and aspirations. The heroines of the novels were often representative figures shadowed by the concerns of the group, motivated and shaped by the imperatives of race "uplift," and class valuation. However, as they attempted to represent black psychology, these novels often served as covert transmitters for the group, delivering messages of female self-actualization and racial verification.

The post-Reconstruction novels of Frances Harper and Pauline Hopkins depicted Afro-Americans as worthy citizens whose social and political progress was imminent. In addition, these novels set forth the notion that black women could be the agents of racial advancement, carrying the race forward toward acceptance and equality in American society. For Harper especially, the belief in the moral superiority of black people as exemplified by virtuous women, and a strong identification with the group by the

mulatto heroine forged for her readers a nascent sentiment of black pride. Just as Afro-American intellectuals during the later nineteenth century anticipated full social and political equality, the intrinsic message delivered in the novels of Harper and Hopkins was positive and hopeful. Hidden in these romances of Negro uplift were agendas of race pride and female power and independence.

The problematic, ambiguous racial affiliation within the texts of Harlem Renaissance writer Nella Larsen symbolically represented the oppression, anxiety, and psychic fragmentation of blacks in white society. In a period of educational, political, and social advancement truncated by continuing violence and institutionalized racism, blacks were torn between desiring the "American dream," and decrying its false premise. The symbolic representation of mulattoes as black social entities expanded in these texts to include black females who were limited by racial-gender stereotyping. These stereotypes held that black women were sexually aberrant, the source of moral collapse. Significantly differing from the novels of the earlier period, the tidings in Larsen's novels were negative.

Further, the embedded messages of psychic chaos reflected the social chaos of the urban scene, one characterized by potentially opposing forces. The political realm witnessed a struggle between

assimilationist and nationalist influences. Socially, a dichotomy existed between the masses and the bourgeoisie, the people and the intellectual elite. Black women, already struggling for identification as Americans, confronted the added complexity of racial-gender stereotyping which either inhibited their identification with the black group or reinforced pathological behavior within the group context. Veiled behind stories of "passing" for social convenience or economic security was a recognition that sexual and personal liberation for women were inhibited by racism and class proscription.

Stories of the urban bourgeoisie were clouded by the sufferings of the historical past. In the novels of Jessie Fauset, the strivers for middle-class protection from the degradations of racial history succumbed to exclusionary and obsessive behaviors. While the uplift philosophy promulgated by the intellectual elite since the post-Reconstruction period had been attained by the central characters, it left them with a psychic residue of obsession and paranoia. Again, as in the novels of Nella Larsen, the pathology of racism informed the actions of black heroines; they were driven by the desire to defeat racist stereotypes of black women. Behind the narrative veneer of bourgeois achievement for black women lay the knowledge that conformity to white middle-class standards exacted a price in personal and human terms.

The preoccupation of black women writers between the post-Reconstruction era and the end of the Harlem Renaissance with attempts to redress many forms of racism stands in stark contrast to the arrival in 1937 of Zora Neale Hurston's Their Eyes Were Watching God. With the artistic proscriptions of the black intelligentsia to legitimate her efforts, Hurston effectively redefined black women's fiction by eradicating race issues as the central focus of her own writing. The mulatto heroine, searching for personal identity, was submerged in Afro-American folk culture and thus became a raceless figure. This technique allowed Hurston simultaneously to transcend race and to celebrate the distinctiveness of Afro-American culture. In so doing Hurston helped create a new avenue for black Americans who found caste attachment problematic or who were alienated from white society by racism or from black society by restrictions of color or class. Moving from their previous preoccupation with race, black women novelists after Hurston began writing, "less of issues that are particular and more of feelings that are general." As Frances Harper observed as early as 1859,

We are blessed with hearts and brains that compass more than ourselves in our present plight. . . We must look to the future which, God willing, will be better than the present or the past,

and delve into the heart of the world.<sup>1</sup>

Just as Hurston's heroine, through engagement with her culture and with personal exploration, transcended race and the racial past, Hurston declared herself black and proud, always delving "into the heart of the world," providing a new attitudinal model for Afro-Americans. Hurston wrote,

I am not tragically colored. There is no great sorrow dammed up in my soul, nor lurking behind my eyes. I do not mind at all. I do not belong to the sobbing school of Negrohood who hold that nature somehow has given them a lowdown dirty deal and whose feelings are all hurt about it. Even in the helter-skelter skirmish that is my life, I have seen that the world is to the strong regardless of a little pigmentation more or less. No, I do not weep at the world--I am too busy sharpening my oyster knife.<sup>2</sup>

While this new attitude did not eradicate the historical tensions of racism, subsequent generations of Afro-American women writers, calling upon Hurston's freeing departures, effectively transformed black literary tradition. Heroines are no longer marginal or representative figures in struggle against race and class, but are black women who strive for self-definition within the contexts of the present and the past.

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<sup>1</sup> Henry Louis Gates, Jr., The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of Afro-American Literary Criticism (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), p. 173.

<sup>2</sup> Alice Walker, editor, I Love Myself When I Am Laughing: A Zora Neale Hurston Reader (New York: The Feminist Press, 1979), p. 153.

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