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Reading the (In)visible Race: African-American Subject Representation and Formation in
American Literature

A Dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in

English

by

Lauren Colleen Hollingsworth

March 2010

Dissertation Committee:

Dr. Jennifer Doyle, Chairperson

Dr. Steven Axelrod

Dr. Katherine Kinney

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2010

The Dissertation of Lauren Colleen Hollingsworth is approved:

Committee Chairperson

University of California, Riverside

It is important that I acknowledge here the wonderful people who have helped me achieve this project. First and foremost, I would like to extend an enormous thank-you to my dissertation committee, Dr. Jennifer Doyle, Dr. Steven Axelrod, and Dr. Katherine Kinney for their support during this process. Special thanks goes to Dr. Jennifer Doyle, the Chair of my committee, who consistently and very immediately gave extensive, thoughtful, and astute comments and advice on many drafts of individual chapters. Virtually all of this took place during summer vacations and winter breaks, and I am eternally grateful for her kindness, devotion, and patience.

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Reading the (In)visible Race: African-American Subject Representation and Formation in
American Literature

by

Lauren Colleen Hollingsworth

Doctor of Philosophy, Graduate Program in English

University of California, Riverside, March 2010

Dr. Jennifer Doyle, Chairperson

This project began with the intention to examine the connection between the aesthetic and the political in American literature's construction of African-American subjectivity, or the relationship between resistance and representation in literary portrayals of the African-American subject. I was specifically interested in the moments in American literature where the convergence between aesthetic form and political practice creates a particular crisis in representation for African-American subjectivity, many times rendering scholarly discussion of these problematic texts dismissive of their purported politics, or even non-existent. Some of the questions I wanted to grapple with included how one accounts for texts that have "good politics" in mind when written, yet

still possess racist or “bad political” aspects through the manner in which they are presented, and the manner in which the subject position of the author affects our perception of the text.

I chose to discuss American fictional texts whose readers and critics have experienced difficulty reconciling the text’s aesthetic properties with the political moves they seemed to be making in their representation of African-American subjectivity. Through close analysis of Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, Harriet Jacobs’s *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, Frances Harper’s abolitionist and post-Civil War poetry, and her novel *Iola Leroy*, Mark Twain’s *Puddn’head Wilson*, Carl Van Vechten’s *Nigger Heaven*, Zora Neale Hurston’s Their *Eyes Were Watching God*, and research of the criticism surrounding these texts, I found that we should not necessarily reject the notion that aesthetic representation always implies a political stance. However, if ideology and form are so closely connected, than closely examining the aesthetics of a text becomes crucial to understanding its political repercussions and the cultural work it is performing. Ultimately, I end with a plea that we acknowledge the complexity of resistance for the African-American subject and expand the ways in which we as readers and critics tend to define it. It is our continuing exploration of the complexity of racial representation in literature and cultural subject formation/construction that aids us in understanding and overcoming racism.

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Introduction

This project began as a desire to explore the relationship between resistance and representation in constructions of the African-American subject in American literature. The more specific goal involves the examination of and emphasis on the complexity of the convergence of the aesthetic properties of literature with the inherent political gesture that seems to be involved in representing an African-American individual within a literary text. This relationship between aesthetics and politics in general, has always been a complicated one. Marxist criticism has discussed the relationship between art and ideology in great detail, most notably in the examination of realism. Bertolt Brecht rails against the “formalistic nature of realism,” stating that “One must not construct the concept of formalism in purely aesthetic terms.”¹ For Brecht, literary works in general cannot be separated from their “social functions.” Thus, all literary form (even as Brecht terms it, “works which do not elevate literary form over social content and yet do not correspond to reality”²) is inherently connected to ideology. Theodor Adorno complicates Brecht’s theory by claiming that “Style, form, and technique ... are the features that distinguish art as knowledge from science ... works of art which ignored their own form, would destroy themselves as art.”³ Adorno further claims that art does not become knowledge or “social truth” by directly mirroring reality, but instead “reveal[s] whatever is veiled by the empirical form assumed by reality, and this is

¹ Bertolt Brecht, “Against Georg Lukacs,” *Aesthetics and Politics: The Key Texts of the Classic Debate within German Marxism* (London: Verso, 1977), 71.

² Brecht, “Against Georg Lukacs,” *Aesthetics and Politics*, 72. Brecht most notably uses the avant-garde as an example of a genre which does not overtly “correspond to reality.”

³ Theodor Adorno, “Reconciliation Under Duress,” *Aesthetics and Politics*, 153.

possible only by virtue of art's own autonomous status.”⁴ Thus, for Adorno, it is the inextricable connection between aesthetics and ideology that leads him to question the possibility of an artistic work that achieves a successful political end, since, as Adorno points out, artists and political “affinities” are “rooted within society itself.”⁵ Adorno also points out the particular phenomenon of “bad” politics resulting in “bad” aesthetics, or as he terms it, “The political falsehood stains the aesthetic form.”⁶ In other words, how we interpret and understand “aesthetic form” can have a direct correspondence with the manner in which we understand “political truth.”

The convergence between aesthetic form and political practice creates a particular crisis in literary representation of African-American subjectivity. In *American Anatomies: Theorizing Race and Gender*, Robyn Wiegman examines closely the relationship between visibility and cultural narratives that surround race formation in American culture, stating at the beginning of her first chapter, “While not the only means for the articulation of racial essence, the visible has a long, contested, and highly contradictory role as the primary vehicle for making race ‘real’ in the United States.”⁷ Making the African-American subject “visible” within American literature thus involves a complex relationship between politics and representation. In other words, how literary narrative “visualizes” the African-American subject creates a causal relationship with the

⁴ Adorno, “Reconciliation,” *Aesthetics and Politics*, 162.

⁵ Adorno, “Commitment,” *Aesthetics and Politics*, 184.

⁶ Adorno, “Commitment,” *Aesthetics and Politics*, 186.

⁷ Robyn Wiegman, *American Anatomies: Theorizing Race and Gender* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1995), 21.

manner in which we understand the “reality” of race within American cultural narrative. The representation of an African-American individual within a literary text then, always seems to involve an inherent political gesture.

Indeed, in all of the American fictional texts I discuss here, the relationship between aesthetic form and political persuasion has been complicated by virtue of their popularity and widespread public availability. The visibility of these texts has also had a profound impact on academic responses to them, most notably when they involve portrayals of raced subjectivity and identity. In *Political Fiction and the American Self*, John Whalen-Bridge states, “Few scholars now accept the dogmatic division of politics and culture, and yet the obsessive linkage of politics and culture in today’s academy is better understood as the eclipse of culture by politics than as the rich intermingling of two areas of human activity.”⁸ In other words, according to Whalen-Bridge, especially when it comes to studies in Minority Discourses, examinations and interrogations of the political implications involved in representation, win out over analysis of textual form.

At the very least, for many literary critics involved in the broad spectrum of American Studies and Minority Discourses, the intersection between artistic form and political representation when it comes to discussing race in literary works becomes complicated and oftentimes problematic. For a feminist scholar like Hazel Carby, just the inclusion (or representation) of post-Reconstruction African-American women writers within the canon constructs a profound political gesture that resists racial and sexual oppression. Carby’s 1985 work *Reconstructing Womanhood* exhorts us to view these

⁸ John Whalen-Bridge, *Political Fiction and the American Self*, (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1998), 6.

writers anew. This work is considered groundbreaking, and rightly so. Working within a cultural studies approach, Saidiya Hartman points to the problems that arise from white subjects “reading” African-American subjects in *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America*. Here, Hartman critiques the notion of empathy, claiming that since empathy involves self-substitution of another, it inherently signifies a profound appropriation of another’s subject position.⁹ As noted in my discussion of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, Karen Sanchez-Eppler too points out the ways in which nineteenth-century texts’ use of sentiment for political purposes can result in an appropriative self-substitution. Additionally, In *Love and Theft: Black Minstrelcy and the American Working Class*, Eric Lott introduces a discussion surrounding nineteenth-century American minstrelcy that involves complicating the practice, rather than just dismissing it as a racist one. Lott points out the complex forms of identification and imitation in nineteenth-century American minstrelcy that constructed white and African-American subjectivity. What unites all of these varied and rich discussions of race in American literature and culture, is the crucial relationship between how one reads the African-American subject in literature and how one culturally “reads” the African-American body. Consequently, the way that American culture “reads” raced subjects and the manner in which one effects political resistance against racism and oppression proves a complicated and fraught discussion.

The intention here is neither to argue for a purely formalist approach to American texts that represent race, at the expense of interrogation of the politics that surround them,

⁹ Saidiya Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America*, (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997).

nor necessarily even to engage in a debate about the extent of the connection between aesthetic form and ideology. Instead, I would like to posit that it is the careful examination of those works within our literary and cultural consciousness whose formal elements have become completely entangled with political ideology (either consciously or unconsciously) that allows us to view and understand the cultural work these texts are performing more fully, especially those who are farther removed from us historically. How we evaluate a text as both a “work of art” and a political tool has become increasingly complicated as our conceptions of both aesthetic “worth” and political efficacy and accuracy have changed over time. How we account for and grapple with texts that have “good politics” in mind when written (i.e. the abolishment of slavery) but yet still possess racist or “bad political” aspects through the manner in which they are presented thus has become increasingly complex and difficult.

Consequently, I would like to extend and complicate the conversation that scholars like Carby, Lott, and Hartman have begun by examining American texts where the convergence between aesthetics and politics in the construction of an African-American subject has proven especially difficult and/or complicated, some of them to the point that they are rarely even discussed anymore. All of the texts I have chosen to discuss here are bound up with specific political agendas, many of them overtly. More specifically, these texts include those where readers and critics have experienced difficulty reconciling the text’s aesthetic properties with the political moves it seems to be making in its representation of African-American subjectivity. I am just as concerned with the places where these texts fail politically despite their good intentions. It is in fact,

these moments that continue both to shape and reflect our literary and cultural consciousness surrounding race.

In Part I, “Reading Slavery,” I examine specifically the ways in which the slave body is read and understood in two abolitionist texts: Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1852), and Harriet Jacobs’s 1861 slave narrative *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*. Both Stowe and Jacobs contain explicit political messages (the abolition of slavery) in their works, whose particular aesthetic qualities (domesticity, melodrama, and a slave narrative), ultimately render those politics complicated in terms of their own subject positions. Since both authors overtly present themselves in their texts, absences and silences play a very visible role in the experience of them. Since what each author chooses to leave out and include, becomes key to understanding the construction of both the text and their subjectivity, the manner in which we interpret their politics is inherently and clearly shaped by the aesthetic staging of each text.

In chapter one, “The Eyes/I’s of Uncle Tom: Form, Resistance, and Subjectivity in Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*,” I tackle a practically universally acknowledged tricky text which is often treated seriously as the quintessential domestic novel, and just as often dismissed in terms of its treatment of race. Since this novel overtly resists slavery, an institution based upon racial categorization, the question that arises as the modern reader reads this text involves what we do with a novel that possesses good political intentions, but whose portrayal of raced subjectivity leaves us uncomfortable. I argue in this chapter that what this novel effectively accomplishes (for better or worse politically) is the destabilization of racial categories. *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*

is in fact, a highly unstable novel in both its construction and perceived meaning. Stowe's singular text encompasses multiple genres, flitting back and forth between melodrama, domestic narrative, and polemic, oftentimes overtly and certainly not always seamlessly.

The novel also possesses a rich history of controversy surrounding its reception. Both its contemporary audience and current readers have heavily criticized both its aesthetic construction and its political representation of the African-American subject. It remains however, one of the most widely read books of its time. What it means to read this novel then, proves highly important and complicated. Nowhere is this complexity more evident than the authorial intrusion into the narrative during the scene of Uncle Tom attempting to sound out letters of a book he is reading. The narrator overtly includes the reader in this scene with the charge, "Let us follow him a moment, as, pointing to each word, and pronouncing each half aloud, he reads, 'Let - not - your - heart - be - troubled.'" ¹⁰ As the text asks the reader to put him/herself in Tom's place, and imagine that he/she cannot read, (a task that is effectively impossible, since the reader is in fact reading these instructions), the convoluted interplay between empathy, identification, and appropriation that is elicited from the reader, speaks to the heart of the experience of reading this text. The text's instability in its aesthetic and political categorizations, renders it indeed problematic, but definitively worth reading and studying further.

¹⁰ Harriet Beecher Stowe, *Uncle Tom's Cabin, or Life Among the Lowly*, ed. Ann Douglas (New York: Penguin Books, 1981), 229.

Chapter two, entitled “Domestic Boundaries: Resistance, Complicity, and Domesticity in Harriet Jacobs’s *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*,” explores Harriet Jacobs’s 1861 slave narrative. While both Harriet Beecher Stowe and Harriet Jacobs share the common goal of ending slavery, one of the many crucial differences between their two texts involves the way in which their subject identification informs their writing. Stowe’s identity as a white woman (although certainly not without oppression and subjugation) yields her a different amount of overt power than Jacobs in terms of the manner in which she presents both herself and her narrative. Stowe’s authorial intrusions into her fictional narrative, where she beseeches the reader to see and understand the horrors of slavery still render her body (and thus visual subjectivity) relatively invisible. In other words, although we can view Stowe’s words and voice, we do not see her as a character within her narrative. It is thus only Stowe’s words that construct her argument about slavery.

Harriet Jacobs on the other hand, as the author and narrator of her autobiographical slave narrative inserts herself and body as subjects to be read. The use of autobiography to represent slavery that is endemic to slave narratives performs the dual functions of representing the horrors of slavery while simultaneously establishing the fundamental humanity of the slave, exemplified through the overtly literate and sentient self hood of the slave both writing the narrative, and being represented within it. Frederick Douglass’s 1845 slave narrative for example, is often discussed in terms of its writer’s establishment specifically of human masculinity. In *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, Harriet Jacobs is faced with the task of proving herself not just a human, but a

true woman. Thus, Jacobs's text is bound up with her placement within the nineteenth-century American cultural narrative of the cult of true womanhood, or the notion that women's proper role and sense of identity belonged within the domestic sphere.¹¹ This cultural charge, in of itself already an overdetermined category and means of oppression for white women, of course becomes literally impossible for a slave woman to achieve, whose status completely prohibited legal marriage, and the maintenance of her own family and home.

As a result, Jacobs's unique appeal to her audience, and means of establishing her own sense of self hood, involves aligning herself with the cult of true womanhood in her expressed desires, yet also significantly differentiating herself from it, by emphasizing its specific paradoxes for her. Jacobs carefully outlines her desire to remain pure until marriage for example, by expressing her repeated disgust at and rejection of her master's sexual advances. She simultaneously and paradoxically however, informs the reader that the only way for her to rebuff her master completely is to have illegitimate children with another rich white man. As a result, Jacobs deliberately blurs the boundaries of subject categorization. The scene where Jacobs hides by lying down in a very small attic for years to escape her master exposes the narrative of domesticity as a fixed category. The domestic sphere is liberating, as it allows her to escape slavery, but it also simultaneously and quite literally confines and restricts her body.

¹¹ Barbara Welter classifies the "four cardinal virtues of True Womanhood" as "piety, purity, submissiveness and domesticity." *Dimity Convictions: The American Woman in the Nineteenth Century* (Columbus: University of Ohio Press, 1976), 21.

Through the continuous inclusion of scenes like these, Jacobs is able to construct a fluid self hood that resists categorization, but also importantly collapses the boundaries between the writer and the reader. As the notion of authenticity continuously arises in this narrative, whether it be Lydia Marie Child's testimony to the truth of Jacobs's narrative at the beginning of the text, or Jacobs's adopted pseudonym for the narrative, Linda Brent, whom and where the real Jacobs is, continuously become questioned. Consequently, the reader's own role within the narrative becomes fluid as well, since the specific body and subject we view and relate to, cannot be definitively fixed or authenticated. Thus, I ultimately argue in this chapter that Jacobs utilizes this fluidity to create empathy that places responsibility upon the reader, rather than appropriation. Jacobs is thus also able to construct a unique identity that resists definitive categorization.

In Part II, entitled "Reading the Black Body," I explore the ways in which post-Civil War texts read the African-American body as national and cultural discourse. The works of Frances Harper and Mark Twain both render political and sociocultural discourse visible through aesthetic mediums (poetry and novels). In playing with narrative and language through such mediums as humor, dialect, and voice, they expose them as discursive, thereby disrupting seemingly naturalized hierarchal structures based upon racial identity. Chapter three, "Reconstructing Discourse: Feminine Voice in the Work of Frances Harper," discusses Frances Harper's pre and post-Civil War poetry and her novel *Iola Leroy*. In the poetry section of this chapter, I primarily compare the construction and establishment of Harper's poetic voice in her pre and post Civil War poetry. I focus on two of Harper's abolitionist poems "Eliza Harris" (1853), a poetic re-

telling of the scene in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* where Eliza escapes the slave catchers, and "The Fugitive's Wife" (1854), a poem that speaks of a female slave's mixed feelings over her husband's decision to run away. It is my contention that these poems establish a community with her white readers through demonstrating slaves' common humanity. The importance and significance of audience cannot be overstated in Harper's poetry, since many of her poems were read aloud as she lectured on the abolitionist circuit. How readers/listeners then read both Harper's message and her own body/subjectivity becomes of the utmost importance. It is thus through constructing this connection that Harper additionally constructs a unique and powerful voice.

An important and significant shift takes place in Harper's post-Civil War poetry. Through the discussion of the 1874 poem "The Slave Mother, a Tale of the Ohio" and the 1872 poem "Learning to Read," I show how the tumultuous Reconstruction era caused Harper to become more overtly resistant in her poetry, and create a poetic voice that is decidedly more distinct. "A Slave Mother," based upon a real event, revolves around the tale of a runaway slave mother who kills her children, rather than surrender them to slavery. This decidedly more visceral treatment of slavery, contrasts heavily with the sentimental retelling of Stowe's text in "Eliza Harris." Similarly, "Learning to Read," as part of the series of "Aunt Chloe" poems beginning in 1872, depicts an elderly African-American woman, and her struggles to learn how to read at all costs during Reconstruction. This poem is actually constructed in Aunt Chloe's distinctive and unique vernacular, which is decidedly different from the discourse Harper employs in her

abolitionist poetry. Through Aunt Chloe establishing her own unique voice as a literate one, she achieves her own discursive power.

In the next section of this chapter entitled “The Visible Text,” I focus on Harper’s 1892 novel *Iola Leroy*. Written four years before the landmark case of *Plessy v. Ferguson*, which ushered in the Jim Crow era, this text utilizes the tragic mulatta narrative to expose the narrativization of cultural discourse. The abundant use of dialogue in this novel heavily revolves around constant conversation about the “race problem.” Indeed, the actual plot of this text seems to be highly driven by the exchange of different ideas about this situation, emphasized by the fact that different characters within the novel begin themselves to represent different ideological stances surrounding racial uplift. As a result, I argue that what the novel effectively accomplishes is rendering discourse itself visible, thus exposing and disrupting its true narrativization.

Chapter four, “Fingerprinting Racial Identity: Ambiguity and Paradox in *Puddn’head Wilson*,” discusses Mark Twain’s 1894 farcical novel *Puddn’head Wilson*. Much of the scholarship surrounding this novel expresses discomfort at best with the text’s treatment of look-alikes (one a slave, one the son of the white master) switched while babies, by Roxy the slave mother, to live the other’s life. As the reader watches the slave baby (now living the life of the white slaveowner), become self-absorbed, spoiled, and almost downright villainous, while the white baby (now living the life of a slave), remains good, noble, and a very sympathetic character, what the novel is in fact imparting about innate racial identity and behavior can indeed prove puzzling, if not troubling. The element of wit that pervades this text additionally compounds this

problem, as the “truth” of the novel’s position on race becomes virtually impossible to decipher.

While I understand and acknowledge the apprehension many readers have surrounding this novel’s political intentions, I would argue that the messiness of this novel is deliberate on Twain’s part. This incredibly self-conscious narrative that begins with the author’s commentary on writing the book, and often refers back to his method of composition, demonstrates just how self-aware the author is regarding this text. Through the use of humor, irony, and the constant switch in point of view among different characters, this text works within discursive gaps to expose them. In other words, by deliberately reflecting through novelistic narrative, the ways in which racial identity is hopelessly entangled with cultural and national discourse, the text is able to expose its dizzying power that both blinds us and literally constructs our vision. The novel thus exposes the gaps within discourse that are normally glossed over. As a result, the lack of definition surrounding the innateness of racial identity may prove to be exactly the point in *Puddn’head Wilson*. Within the novel itself, discursive power becomes disrupted, as we cannot rely on the language of the narrative to give us easy answers.

Part III of this project, entitled “Overcoming the Stereotype” includes discussion of two works from the first half of the twentieth century: Carl Van Vechten’s 1926 Harlem Renaissance novel *Nigger Heaven*, and Zora Neale Hurston’s now wildly popular 1937 novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. In this portion, I trace the ways in which these works conform to and/or reject overdetermined linguistic categorization of African-American subjectivity. Van Vechten and Hurston both struggle with a political and

aesthetic issue surrounding race that emerged specifically in the twentieth-century: that of the particular type of racialized subject they present in their works. In these texts, the potential overdeterminacy of African-American subjects and cultural narratives has played a large role in the manner in which readers respond to them. As a result, the success and reception of each text has consistently been heavily informed and affected by the literary and cultural movements that surround them at any given time.

In Chapter five, “(Un)Popular Demons: Raced Subjectivity in Carl Van Vechten’s *Nigger Heaven*,” I tackle a novel that is virtually never taught or discussed anymore within academic circles, despite its widespread popularity at the time of its 1926 publication. Just the words in the title of this work alone (although actually referring to the balcony section in movie theaters where African-Americans were forced to sit during segregation) can cause complex emotions and assumptions about the subjects reading it in modern day society.

Indeed, reading this novel proves a highly complicated task. This novel about a series of African-American characters and their struggles, was written by a white author during the Harlem Renaissance, who often funded African-American artists. As a result, questions regarding appropriation have always surrounded Van Vechten’s text. Many readers are also highly uncomfortable with the seemingly stereotypical African-American figures that seem to abound in the text, from the pimp character that begins the novel to the educated Mary Love’s desire to be more “primitive.” In this chapter, I do not take a position on Van Vechten’s true intentions regarding African-American identity and subjectivity. What is much more interesting to me is the way in which this text

(intentionally or not), reveals and exposes the process by which we construct categories of racial identity. The indeed sometimes stereotypical figures within this novel, are constantly destabilized through structural fragmentation. In other words, the multiplicity of stereotypical character perspectives, ultimately undermines the stereotype's power. For every one "type" of figure, we also see its opposite. As a result, the novel showcases the manner in which stereotypical constructions operate discursively, rather than naturally.

My last chapter, "(De)Categorizing Janie Crawford: Self-Making, Voice, and Narrative in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*," discusses Zora Neale Hurston's 1937 novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. I end with Hurston's text, because of the way in which it mirrors Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (the text I begin with) in terms of its initial and modern reader reception. As Stowe's text was wildly popular at the time of its publication, Hurston's almost immediately fell into obscurity. As Stowe's novel seems slowly to fall off of college syllabi and mainstream reading lists, ever since Alice Walker's "rediscovery" of Hurston in 1970, her novel has enjoyed a steadily increasing popularity among both academic and general public reading circles. Yet both texts have created a consistent controversy among readers ever since their publication surrounding their political intentions, and their representation of African-American subjectivity.

Hurston's novel, centered around an African-American female character, Janie Crawford trying to discover who she is, follows what many readers acknowledge as a sentimental and/or folk tradition that proves puzzling, on both the level of resistance, and

its chronological placement. The naturalist movement that emerged after the Harlem Renaissance, exemplified by Richard Wright's raw and excoriating 1940 novel *Native Son*, could not be more different from the type of language, narrative arc, and journey of Janie Crawford in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. The same charges of lack of artistry, stereotyping, and insufficient resistance to white patriarchy that were attributed to the novel at the time of its publication still arise frequently today. A common criticism of the novel today involves Janie's self-discovery taking place largely through her different relationships with men, and her perceived refusal to resist white oppression and injustice overtly. The fact that Tea Cake (the man with whom Janie is wildly in love, and to whom she openly attributes her self-awakening), actually beats her at one point during the novel certainly and understandably does not sit well with current audiences.

However, it is my contention that what are often perceived to be flaws in the novel's structure (such as the use of sentiment), or political meaning (her relationship with Tea Cake for example), are actually necessary for Janie to discover a self that is entirely her own, and not determined by others. Janie constructs a unique sense of self then, by trying on and consistently rejecting highly specific discourse of all kinds. By the end of the novel, her sense of self has ultimately transcended all of these discursive categorizations, emphasized by her refusal to speak when she is on trial for Tea Cake's murder. While many readers of this novel point to this scene as demonstrative of Janie's lack of symbolic voice, her refusal to speak constructs an ultimate resistance, in the sense that she absolutely refuses to participate in a discourse that is not hers, and certainly does not welcome her within it. As Bigger Thomas in *Native Son* famously moves through the

space of Chicago, to make a political point, ultimately becoming cornered by white oppression, until he cannot move anymore (symbolized by the black areas on the map of Chicago becoming boxed in by the white), Janie migrates through different people and relationships to construct a sense of self that resists categorization.

While literary representations of African-American identity have evolved since Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, the enduring controversy surrounding them certainly has not. What significantly unites all of the texts discussed in this project revolves around the manner in which they continue to cause difficulty for readers today. Notably, all of these works were either widely popular at the time they were written, or remain so today. However, all of these texts remain highly controversial within the academic community. It is the ultimate goal of this project then to keep the conversation going surrounding the political implications of representing racial identity in literature, rather than just dismiss the more difficult or uncomfortable aspects of them, or even the texts altogether, a move that I fear is beginning to happen in academic circles and classrooms. *Nigger Heaven* for example, is barely read anymore, and almost never taught. Certainly, the intense popularity of both *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and *Nigger Heaven* at the time they were written, warrants their examination, given their obvious cultural influence.

It is imperative then that we directly confront and contextualize our discomfort with these important and admittedly problematic texts. Even amongst more contemporary literature, we still seem to have trouble reconciling a text's political message with its aesthetic properties, when dealing with race. A work such as Toni Morrison's 1987

novel *Beloved* takes a postmodern approach to representing an individual story about slavery and its aftermath. What we as readers do with a novel that is so obviously constructed in a particular aesthetic manner, but carries with it such a weighty political issue surrounding race is going to prove consistently perplexing to ourselves and students, unless we allow ourselves to accept and really study this particular convergence.

If as Stuart Hall says, “The end of the essential black subject also entails a recognition that the central issues of race always appear historically in articulation, in a formation, with other categories and divisions and are constantly crossed and recrossed by the categories of class, of gender, and ethnicity,”¹² scrutinizing racially problematic works more closely and in context, only helps us recognize the ways in which our own culturally discursive traditions “define” and shape us. It is our continuing exploration of the complexity of racial representation in literature and cultural subject formation/construction that aids us in understanding and overcoming racism. If one works under the general assumption that aesthetic representation always implies a political move (an argument that does have merit, and one I would argue we should not nor cannot necessarily move away from), then examining textual form closely becomes crucial to understanding its cultural repercussions. Most of the texts I have chosen to discuss here are openly (sometimes famously) controversial for the manner in which their aesthetic properties reflect a political view. My intent is not to focus so much on tracing and explaining the controversies surrounding these texts (although I of course must do so to some extent) but rather to take a closer look at what cultural work these texts are

¹² Stuart Hall, “New Ethnicities,” ed. Houston A. Baker Jr., Manthia Diawara, and Ruth H. Lindeborg, *Black British Cultural Studies* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1996), 166.

actually performing. My ultimate goal is to acknowledge the complexity of resistance for the African-American subject (and representations of him/her) and expand the ways in which we as readers and critics tend to define it. The key to refuting an overdetermined identity (constructed through culturally imposed hypervisibility as Weigman points out) may reside in the indeterminacy of resistance itself.

Part I: Reading Slavery

Chapter 1: The Eyes/I's of Uncle Tom: Form, Resistance, and Subjectivity in

Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*

Nowhere is the entanglement between representation and ideology more evident than in Harriet Beecher Stowe's 1852 abolitionist novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin: Or Life among the Lowly*. Because so many Americans (both Northern and Southern) read this text at the time of its 1852 publication), the novel's depiction of and polemic against slavery constructed an unprecedented moment where literary representation of the African-American subject became pervasively visible within the public sphere. The text's combination of fictional characters and stories with rhetorical persuasion to refute slavery thus represents arguably the most famous convergence of aesthetics and politics surrounding race in American literature. The enduring controversy specifically surrounding the portrayal of race in this novel, points to the manner in which Stowe's African-American characters have been imprinted on American literary and cultural consciousness, thus leaving a particular legacy (however problematic it might be) for African-American authors and their own representations of African-American subjectivity. Thus, the lasting popularity and simultaneous controversy surrounding *Uncle Tom's Cabin* revolves around the manner in which slavery (and consequently race) are not just represented, but enacted politically and consequently made, in a sense, culturally "real." As Eric Lott states in his chapter devoted to nineteenth-century minstrel

performances of Stowe's text in *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class*, "More than its taking a full evening's performance time, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was revolutionary in its effortless and near-immediate replication everywhere; rousing for its politics but apprehended as pop-culture iconography, the story so transcended the usual media of culture that it put an uncanny new spin on one's relation to the culture. Uncle Tom was at once all places and specifiably nowhere."¹³ This text's unprecedented popularity, dissemination, and ability to yield "near-immediate replication" within troubled spaces¹⁴ such as minstrel plays, demonstrate the manner in which specifically its aesthetic properties create and inform its political discourse about race, a convergence that continues to be the source of intense debate among scholars today. Ultimately though, it is through its emphasis on visuality, melodrama, and mimicry in its refutation of slavery (an all-too real institution), or in effect, its particular usage of language and form, that *Uncle Tom's Cabin* actually neither fully refutes nor embraces essentialist racial categories that theoretically justify slavery, but instead destabilizes them through its particular representation of racial identity and identification.

It is the specific convergence of the aesthetic representation of both African-American and white subjectivity with its overt political aims about race that has caused many readers and critics (both initial and contemporary alike) to become uncomfortable

¹³ Eric Lott, *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 216.

¹⁴ I use the word "troubled" to point out and echo Lott's argument in *Love and Theft*, regarding the complex racial politics of minstrelsy. As Lott claims, "In blackface minstrelsy's audiences there were in fact contradictory racial impulses at work, impulses based in the everyday lives and racial negotiations of the minstrel show's working-class partisans." (4) The performance of "blackface" for and by white bodies reflected and shaped the "contradictory racial impulses" white nineteenth-century Americans enacted and literally embodied towards the African-American subject.

with, if not downright hostile towards the novel, despite its continuing popularity. Initial reception of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* at its 1852 release was as intensely widespread as it was divided. As Richard Yarborough explains,

Frederick Douglass reported that the first edition of 5,000 was gone in four days and that in one year *Uncle Tom's Cabin* sold more than 300,000 copies. This figure is particularly astonishing when one considers that out of a population of roughly 24 million in the United States, much of the South has to be excluded from any serious estimation of Stowe's readership – both because of the huge slave population and because the novel was banned in many communities. Furthermore, one must forget neither the degree of illiteracy in mid-nineteenth-century America nor the widespread practice of passing books from hand to hand. Another indication of the reading public's infatuation with Stowe was the reception accorded to *The Key to Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1853), a ponderous compilation of the factual material she claimed to have used in composing her best-seller: In the space of a month, roughly 90,000 copies were sold.¹⁵

Not only was the novel instantly and “astonishingly” read by such a large audience (despite widespread bans and illiteracy), it was also immediately and profoundly controversial and influential. Abraham Lincoln's famous greeting of Stowe at the White House in 1863 with the words “So this is the little lady who started this great big war”

¹⁵ Richard Yarborough, “Strategies of Black Characterization, ed. Eric J. Sundquist, *New Essays on Uncle Tom's Cabin*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986.), 45-46.

speaks volumes not only about the virtually unprecedented cultural visibility of Stowe's text, but its perceived ability to effect actual political change.¹⁶

It should also of course be noted that Stowe's abolitionist text was politically controversial among nineteenth-century American readers as well for more reasons than just her stance on slavery. Stowe of course alienated Southern readers through her condemnation of the slave system. Accordingly, many Northern abolitionist readers embraced Stowe's text wholeheartedly. For example, Richard Yarborough additionally points out "Most free northern blacks in the 1850s ... saw *Uncle Tom's Cabin* as a godsend destined to mobilize white sentiment against slavery just when resistance to the southern forces was urgently needed."¹⁷ However, Stowe's assumption of a highly public stance about the politically charged and controversial issue of slavery also raised eyebrows among both Northern and Southern audiences about her proper role as a woman. As Jan Pilditch states, "As a Christian woman, and in common with many others, Stowe determined to speak against slavery; but as a nineteenth-century American woman, she did not easily assume the authority to do so. For a woman to preach or even to comment publicly on any matter was to court social ostracism."¹⁸ Stowe's entrance

¹⁶ The tangible effect Stowe's novel had on the Civil war is decidedly complicated. However, Lincoln's words demonstrate the complex connection between cultural perception/consciousness and historical fact. One could argue in some sense that whether or not *Uncle Tom's Cabin* can be definitively traced to the breakout of the Civil War, in terms of understanding American antebellum life, is equally as important as the fact that policymakers and the general populace believed it to be.

¹⁷ Yarborough, "Strategies of Black Characterization," ed. Sundquist, *New Essays*, 68.

¹⁸ Jan Pilditch, "Rhetoric and Satire," ed. Mason I. Lowance, Jr., Ellen E. Westbrook, and R.C. De Prosopo, *The Stowe Debate: Rhetorical Strategies in Uncle Tom's Cabin* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1994), 59.

into two realms that were off-limits to women at the time (the public and political spheres) rendered her text doubly controversial.

Significantly, the artistry or aesthetic worth of the novel was also debated intensely at the time of the novel's publication. Leo Tolstoy, in the words of Ann Douglas, "hailed [the novel] as one of the greatest productions of the human mind," while Henry James deemed *Uncle Tom's Cabin* in what is now a very famous assessment, a "wonderful 'leaping' fish" of a text even though he thought it failed "to meet his own standards of highly crafted and conscious fiction."¹⁹ Similarly, Charles Dickens called the purpose of the novel "noble" but the text itself "defective."²⁰ Many of Stowe's (notably male) contemporaries found the novel aesthetically lacking, but acknowledged its political value.

With the abolition of slavery in 1865, the immediate or overt political aims of Stowe's text appeared to have been met. Yet, the novel's popularity almost actually increased at the turn of the century, largely due to the rise of minstrel performances. In *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class*, Eric Lott traces this complex phenomenon, explaining "Turning this conflict [the Civil War] into affecting tableaux, *Uncle Tom's* dramatists deepened sectional discord; for every one of the three hundred thousand who bought the novel in its first year, many more eventually saw the play ... Even in the version most faithful to Stowe's novel, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was itself a compromise between antislavery politics and established entertainment

¹⁹ Ann Douglas, "Introduction: The Art of Controversy," Introduction to Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin or, Life Among the Lowly* (New York: Penguin Books, 1981), 10.

²⁰ Douglas, "Introduction," *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, 11.

conventions.”²¹ Thus, for late nineteenth-century audiences, the “entertainment” value of seeing the novel performed in blackface became completely intertwined with its politics.²²

In the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, questions surrounding the aesthetic worth of Stowe’s novel have been completely tied to its political value. For most literary critics though, the political controversy over Stowe’s text has transformed from a debate regarding the author’s position on slavery into one surrounding her particular representation of race. In his 1956 work *Goodbye to Uncle Tom*, J.C. Furnas asserts “Insidiously commingled [in the novel] is ... a flavor of Southerners telling how and why the ‘darky’ is so dear to his white folks and can always so touchingly count on taking care of him. It takes genius, perhaps a specifically female genius, thus to mix these two attitudes without a hint of transition. In one form or another, racism was always tempting Mrs. Stowe’s intruding feet.”²³ Thus, where Stowe’s work had caused immense controversy through its perceived progressive stance on the issues of race and gender, by the middle of the twentieth century, readers had begun to view the novel’s stereotypical representation of African-American characters as profoundly reactionary.²⁴ Significantly (his own ironically sexist comments about the nature of “female genius” aside), it is what

²¹ Lott, *Love and Theft*, 212.

²² As Lott points out in his work, the “politics” of blackface minstrelsy itself is also extremely complicated in its inherent connection to “entertainment” and performance, thus adding entirely new aesthetic and political dimensions to Stowe’s novel.

²³ J.C. Furnas, *Goodbye to Uncle Tom* (New York: William Sloane Associates, 1956), 49.

²⁴ In fact, the term “Uncle Tom” already possessed a negative connotation by this time, as Furnas cites in his text.

Furnas judges to be the political value of Stowe's work (or the lack thereof) that specifically constructs his assessment of the novel's aesthetic worth. The stereotypes Stowe represents become "commingled" with her language and structure.

The rise of the Civil Rights movement in the 1960s ushered in a more intensely visible reaction to Stowe's novel. During this period, both James Baldwin in "Everybody's Protest Novel" and Richard Wright in a collection of short stories entitled "Uncle Tom's Children" condemned Stowe's representation of African-American characters in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*.²⁵ Within the past twenty years or so, the growing debates over the literary and academic canon have compelled scholars like Jane Tompkins in *Sensational Designs: The Cultural Work of American Fiction 1790-1860* to include and examine anew texts like Stowe's and other examples of the domestic or "sentimental" novel on the grounds that "it is the context –which eventually includes the work itself – that creates the value its readers 'discover' there. Their reading is an activity arising within a particular cultural setting (of which the author's reputation is a part) that reflects and elaborates the features of that setting simultaneously."²⁶ Tompkins's plea that we not dismiss works for their failures according to our contemporary political standards, but instead contextualize them according to their own historical eras, has been embraced and echoed by some scholars but many contemporary

²⁵ James Baldwin, "Everybody's Protest Novel," *Notes of a Native Son* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1955); Richard Wright, *Uncle Tom's Children* (New York: HarperPerennial, 1940). Baldwin overtly excoriates the novel while Wright's particular title of a collection that specifically deals with twentieth-century white racism and paternalism towards African-Americans speaks to the particular political legacy that Stowe's text has bequeathed.

²⁶ Jane Tompkins, *Sensational Designs: The Cultural Work of American Fiction 1790-1860* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 33.

readers have found themselves unable to look past what they view as persistently damaging depictions of racial subjectivity. Sarah Smith Ducksworth, for example claims “[Stowe’s] real concern in writing the novel was not to raise lowly Africans up to a position of equality in society, but to help bring an end to slavery for the sake of white salvation. When filtered through a cultural lens, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* reveals a conservative bias that does not at all conflict with racial beliefs and attitudes held by the majority of nineteenth-century Americans.”²⁷ Additionally, Eric J. Sundquist points out “Despite seeming at times oblivious to crucial realities in America’s great debate over slavery ... [*Uncle Tom’s Cabin*] has often been considered a strange hybrid of polemic and sentimental melodrama, a work that helped instigate the Civil War and then ceased to have value once its purpose had been accomplished.”²⁸ For over 150 years then, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* has remained consistently controversial for both its aesthetic and political properties despite major shifts in criteria for how Americans attach merit to these spheres.

It is particularly then, the manner in which Stowe represents racial subjectivity and identity that causes political problems for her readers. The particular narrative structure of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* involves a combination of fictional characters and stories with rhetorical persuasion, which contributes to the melodramatic experience that the novel imparts to its readers. As Saidiya Hartman argues, “Melodrama [in antislavery

²⁷ Sarah Smith Ducksworth, “Stowe’s Construction of an African Persona and the Creation of White Identity for a New World Order,” *The Stowe Debate*, 205. It should be noted that Ducksworth also argues that the novel should not be eliminated from college syllabi on the following grounds: “Viewed as a cultural product, [*Uncle Tom’s Cabin*] may be useful as a cautionary tale to help students recognize not only how truly self-deceiving the concept of a ‘degraded other’ can be, but also, on a larger scale, how collective self-images enhanced beyond reason and laws of nature perpetrate social injustice against those with the least power to protect themselves.” (234)

²⁸ Eric J. Sundquist, Introduction to *New Essays on Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, 1.

plays] provided the dramatic frame that made the experience of slavery meaningful in the antinomian terms of the moral imagination. The emotional power of melodrama's essential language of good and evil armed antislavery dissent with the force of moral right and might."²⁹ Similarly, in his description of the melodramatic structure of nineteenth-century American theater, David Grimsted explains that melodramatic characters were always portrayed as exaggerated stereotypes, stating

The amorphousness of American life made persons with no particular social status eager to watch characters who were simple, naïve, and imperfect, but who at bottom had a wealth of practical good sense and wholesome good sentiments. And the exaggeration of the stereotypes' naivete and quaintness enabled even the least sophisticated people in the audience to feel safely superior, comparatively worldly-wise ... These conventions gave to the melodrama an aura of unreality, an existence within a world of its own upon which 'real life' touched mainly through established channels.³⁰

As Grimsted and Hartman point out, melodramatic structure exhibits a complex slippage between social truth and discourse. In "essentializing" language, characters, and concepts, melodrama reflects a world infinitely relatable to audiences while its stereotypes simultaneously present an "aura of unreality."

This "essential language" of melodrama that simultaneously enacts a "moral force" can be evidenced in Stowe's particular usage of discourse in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*.

²⁹ Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*, 27.

³⁰ David Grimsted, *Melodrama Unveiled: American Theater and Culture 1800-1850* (London: University of California Press, 1987), 195-196.

After the narrative has established the injustice of the indignities visited upon George Harris (a passionate, literate, and particularly bright slave), the narrator interjects “A very humane jurist once said, The worst use you can put a man to is to hang him. No; there is another use that a man can be put to that is WORSE!”³¹ Here, the reader fully experiences the melodramatic impact of the narrative through the narrator’s use of “essential language” to achieve “emotional power.” In this passage, the narrator emphatically modifies a well-known saying to proclaim its decidedly “worse” use. The reader then, must literally view the more “WORSE” use a man can be put to than hanging (the evils of slavery) and must pause after reading this particular passage. The essential finality of this “worst” use is emphasized not only by the capitalization of the word “worse” but by the fact that Chapter II in the novel ends with this passage. The narrative uses its own language (as well as relies upon the reader’s previous knowledge of a particular discourse) to invoke an emotional response towards “moral right and might.” The novel thus uses the “emotional power” of melodrama through essentializing the concept of what is indeed the “worst” use a man can be put to, to achieve its political purpose; the abolition of slavery.

However, it is precisely Stowe’s particular use of melodrama that additionally underscores and exposes the performative aspects and thus instability of her language and its connection with social “truth.” In *How to Do Things with Words*, J.L. Austin describes the performative speech act as follows: “To utter the sentence (in of course, the

³¹ Harriet Beecher Stowe, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin, or Life among the Lowly*, ed. Ann Douglas (New York: Penguin Books, 1981), 58. All subsequent citations will refer to this edition.

appropriate circumstances) is not to *describe* my doing of what I should be said in so uttering to be doing or to state that I am doing it; it is to do it.”³² In the performative speech act then, the statement additionally is a concrete action.³³ In his discussion of rhetorical discourse within novelistic forms, M.M. Bakhtin argues

All rhetorical forms, monologic in their compositional structure, are oriented toward the listener and his answer ... It is highly significant for rhetoric that this relationship toward the concrete listener, taking him into account, is a relationship that enters into the very internal construction of rhetorical discourse ... Responsive understanding is a fundamental force, one that participates in the formulation of discourse, and it is moreover an *active* understanding, one that discourse senses as resistance or support enriching the discourse.³⁴

For Bakhtin, the relationship between discourse and the “listener and his answer” is in part what “actively” creates the discourse itself. Thus, by definitively linguistically delineating what constitutes good and evil for its readers, melodramatic anti-slavery discourse can be construed as constructing a particular performative speech act. If, as intended, the reader connects the textually essentialized concepts of good and evil with abolition and slavery respectively, the reader aids in “actively creating” abolitionist

³² J.L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1975), 6.

³³ Austin cites the marriage vow “I do” as an example of a linguistic act that simultaneously performs an action.

³⁴ M.M. Bakhtin, “Discourse in the Novel,” ed. Michael Holquist, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays by M.M. Bakhtin* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), 280-281.

discourse through his/her emotional response. The words of abolitionist discourse thus theoretically and simultaneously become action on the part of the reader.

This particular phenomenon can be witnessed in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, through Stowe's use of melodramatic language to achieve her abolitionist purpose. After Uncle Tom has been traded to the ignorant and coarse Haley, an anonymous bystander remarks "He's a shocking creature, isn't he, - this trader? so unfeeling! It's dreadful, really!" (212) Immediately after this character's speech, Stowe inserts her own voice into the narrative by forcefully declaring "But who, sir, makes the trader? Who is most to blame? The enlightened, cultivated, intelligent man, who supports the system of which the trader is the inevitable result, or the poor trader himself? You make the public statement that calls for his trade, that debauches and depraves him, till he feels no shame in it; and in what are you better than he?" (212) Here, the novel definitively solidifies Haley's role as an "unfeeling" trader for the reader through moving beyond mere depiction of Haley as such to the actual employment of the voice of another character to say so. The fact that this character is nameless, and speaks to someone who is unidentifiable to the reader, emphasizes his universality. He is any and every man. He thus represents a universal and consequently definitive response to Haley.

The particular use of Stowe's voice in this scene additionally proves extremely significant. Bakhtin defines "double-voiced discourse" as "[one that] serves two speakers at the same time and expresses simultaneously two different intentions: the direct intention of the character who is speaking, and the refracted intention of the author ... The internal dialogism of authentic prose discourse, which grows organically out of a

stratified and heteroglot language, cannot fundamentally be dramatized or dramatically resolved (brought to an authentic end); it cannot ultimately be fitted into the frame of any manifest dialogue, into the frame of a mere conversation between persons; it is not ultimately divisible into verbal exchanges possessing precisely marked boundaries.”³⁵ In other words, in novelistic double-voiced discourse, the theoretical split between what a character and the author states, does not follow easily “manifest boundaries” or resolutions.

In this particular scene, Stowe rhetorically collapses her voice and that of the anonymous character’s to draw the reader into the dialogue. Ironically and pointedly, through asking the reader whom is “most to blame,” Stowe creates a moment within the space of the novel where the reader must fill in his/her own answer. Significantly however, Stowe only leaves room for one type of answer. If the reader is to acknowledge the “truth” of the world of this novel, the reader must accept the fact that it is the “enlightened, cultivated, intelligent man” who really creates the horrors of the slave system. Consequently, although this scene renders the resolution of certain important *concepts* finite (the decided recognition of the “unfeelingness” of slave traders and “cultivated men’s” own complicity within this system), the voices of the reader, Stowe, and the anonymous character all infinitely merge together to create the actual discourse. The novel thus uses the naturalization of binary concepts that characterizes melodramatic structure to convince readers of the evils of slavery, thereby theoretically conflating its words with action. In literally calling upon the reader to renounce slavery verbally, the

³⁵ Bakhtin, “Discourse in the Novel,” 324-326.

text theoretically convinces the reader to do so in fact. For the reader then, what he/she says about slavery performatively (in the linguistic sense) transforms into what he/she does.

In fact, the doubling of voices is essential to the manner in which the reader experiences this text. The acts of writing and reading in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* become signifiers for the reader's own role within the text. From its opening sentences, the reader is drawn into the novel's narrative by being forced to decode Stowe's written language. The novel begins, "Late in the afternoon of a chilly day in February, two gentlemen were sitting alone over their wine, in a well-furnished dining parlor ... For convenience sake, we have said, hitherto, two *gentlemen*. One of the parties, however, when critically examined, did not seem, strictly speaking, to come under the species ... He was a short, thick-set man, with coarse, commonplace features, and that swaggering air of pretension which marks a low man who is trying to elbow his way upward in the world ... His companion, Mr. Shelby, had the appearance of a gentleman." (41-42) The italicization of "*gentlemen*" functions as a visual indicator to the reader that what these two men perform does not coincide with who they essentially are. The "short, thick-set man," whom the reader later discovers is Haley the slave-trader, does not visually appear to belong to the gentleman "species."

Moreover, the narrative significantly states that Mr. Shelby possesses the "appearance" of a gentleman, rather than the essence of one. His later sale of Uncle Tom to Haley, in fact places him within the same category as the slave-trader: "Mr. Shelby hastily drew the bills of sale towards him, and signed them, like a man that hurries over

some disagreeable business, and then pushed them over with the money. Haley produced, from a well-worn valise, a parchment, which, after looking over it a moment, he handed to Mr. Shelby, who took it with a gesture of suppressed eagerness.” (79-80) By exchanging written documents that solidify the sale of Uncle Tom, both Shelby and Haley (despite Shelby’s misgivings over the “disagreeable business”) engage in the same business. They are both essentially slave-traders. The fact that the reader never views the language in the “parchment” proves significant. The narrative does not distinguish the “coarse” language of Haley from that of Shelby in this document. In this exchange, the two men ultimately speak the same language. This idea is reinforced by the fact that there is initially a great visual distinction between the language of Haley and Shelby. The narrative states explicitly that Haley’s language is “in free and easy defiance of Murray’s Grammar.” (41) The statement is later exemplified through Haley’s actual voice: “Some folks don’t believe there is pious niggers Shelby ... but *I do*. I had a fellow, now, in this yer last lot I took to Orleans – t’was as good as a meetin, now, really to hear that critter pray; and he was quite gentle and quiet like.” (42) Shelby conversely speaks, “Why, the fact is, Haley, Tom is an uncommon fellow; he is certainly worth that sum anywhere. – steady, honest, capable, manages my whole farm like a clock.” (42) Despite the fact that Shelby and Haley speak two different types of language, the selling of Uncle Tom renders their voices indistinguishable in the discourse of slavery. The reader thus grasps the underlying meaning of the text through deciphering what its language reveals.

The manner in which the text structures narrative time additionally reinforces this experience. The text continuously uses its language to foreshadow events, thus

simultaneously enacting them. When Eliza Harris expresses disbelief to her husband George that her master (Mr. Shelby) could be anything but kind to her and their son Harry, George responds, “Yes, but who knows? – he may die – and then [Harry] may be sold to nobody knows who. What pleasure is it that he is handsome, and smart, and bright? I tell you, Eliza, that a sword will pierce through your soul for every good and pleasant thing your child is or has; it will make him worth too much for you to keep.” (63) George’s words thus function not only as a warning to Eliza, but as a linguistic signal to the reader of what is to come for the text’s characters as a result of the cruelties of slavery. Significantly, Uncle Tom’s next master St. Clare dies before he can free Tom, thus narratively enacting George’s words. The figurative “sword” that will “pierce” through Eliza’s “soul” is enacted repeatedly throughout the novel in demonstrations of her mental anguish, as well as literally embodied in the famous scene where Eliza crosses the frozen Ohio River with Harry in her arms: “The huge green fragment of ice on which she alighted pitched and creaked as her weight came on it, but she staid there not a moment ... Her shoes are gone – her stockings are cut from her feet – while blood marked every step.” (118) The narrative thus additionally represents the coldness and “unfeelingness” of those involved in promoting slavery through embodying its metaphors. Because of slavery, ice cuts Eliza’s feet, just as a sword “pierces” through her soul.

Additionally, all of Harry’s positive attributes that George outlines do indeed become the reason for his desirability as a slave, and consequent sale. As Haley declares when he sees Harry, “Why, I’ve got a friend that’s going into this yer branch of the

business – wants to buy up handsome boys to raise for the market It sets off one of yer great places – a real handsome boy to open door, wait, and tend. They fetch a good sum; and this little devil is such a comical musical concern, he’s just the article.” (46)

Significantly, Haley’s admiration of Harry occurs before George’s conversation with Eliza within the narrative. George’s prophetic warning then, serves two purposes. It solidifies for the reader that what the text foreshadows will eventually become true within the world of the novel, as well as create a temporal overlap within the narrative that irrevocably conjoins textual discourse and truth. What the text’s language states will become true, and what is already true will become stated. What the narrative “utters” then, will become action and vice-versa.

We also experience this particular phenomenon in terms of the manner in which the novel asks us to relate to its characters. Immediately after Haley makes a deal with the sinister Tom Loker and his companion Marks to re-capture and sell the runaway slave Eliza Harris and her small son, the narrative halts, declaring “If any of our refined and Christian readers object to the society into which this scene introduces them, let us beg them to begin and conquer their prejudices in time. The catching business, we beg to remind them, is rising to the dignity of a lawful and patriotic profession.” (132) Thus, any pain that the reader might feel from witnessing the story of Eliza’s flight and the men pursuing her, becomes paradoxically prolonged by the suspension of the narrative. The narrative in effect, *forces* us to dwell emotionally on Eliza’s anguish by halting the action of the story. In her discussions of empathy, Saidiya Hartman cites a nineteenth-century abolitionist’s (John Rankin) attempts to identify with the enslaved subject as follows: “In

making the slave's suffering his own, Rankin begins to feel for himself rather than for those whom this exercise in imagination is presumably designed to reach. Moreover, by exploiting the vulnerability of the captive body as a vessel for the uses, thoughts, and feelings of others, the humanity extended to the slave inadvertently confirms the expectations and desires definitive of the relations of chattel slavery."³⁶ By immediately stopping the narrative and addressing the reader directly, the text indeed, makes the "suffering" of Eliza the reader's, emphasized by the fact that the only words the reader in fact views at this section of the narrative theoretically revolve directly around the reader. This particular passage actually only mentions the "refined and Christian readers" in repeatedly "begging" them to listen. As a result, the reader is literally forced to consider him/herself here. We actually no longer view Eliza at this point. The white nineteenth-century American "refined and Christian" reader must appropriate the terror of Eliza, and introspectively examine his/her own pain upon reading this narrative.

However, this moment simultaneously addresses the reader's own complicity in the pain of Eliza, and any uncomfortable feelings he/she might experience at reading the narrative. The "objections" of the reader can be alleviated by "conquering" his/her "prejudices." The "catching business" exists in reality as much as it does in the fictional story of Eliza, Haley, and Tom Loker. Thus, the narrative does not allow the reader to indulge in what Hartman terms "the convergence of violence and pleasure ... that is, the facility of blackness in the other's self-fashioning and the role of pleasure in securing the

³⁶ Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*, 19.

mechanisms of racial subjection.”³⁷ This sudden calling of the reader to him/herself in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* disrupts this fantasy of the fictionality of the narrative, in which the reader is completely separate from, and not equally “subjected” to the suffering that Eliza embodies. Instead, the reader simultaneously becomes the object and the agent of the pain of slavery. The *reader* thus truly becomes simultaneously sympathetic to and responsible for Eliza’s pain.

The novel ultimately renders racial categorization unstable in the vast scope of its movement between characters’ viewpoints. In her essay “Imitation and Gender Insubordination,” Judith Butler describes the performance of self as follows: “To say that I ‘play’ at being [a lesbian] is not to say that I am not one ‘really’; rather, how and where I play at being one is the way in which that ‘being’ gets established, instituted, circulated, and confirmed ...It is through the repeated play of this sexuality that the ‘I’ is insistently reconstituted as a lesbian ‘I’; paradoxically, it is precisely the repetition of that play that establishes as well the instability of the very category that it constitutes. For if the ‘I’ is a site of repetition, that is, if the ‘I’ only achieves the semblance of identity through a certain repetition of itself, then the I is always displaced by the very repetition that sustains it.”³⁸ In other words, the performance of identity does not necessarily reflect a true self, but a “semblance” of one that needs to be widely “established” and “circulated” through repetition, and is thus continuously destabilized. Andrew Parker and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick build on this definition of performativity by critiquing what they

³⁷ Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*, 26.

³⁸ Judith Butler, “Imitation and Gender Insubordination,” ed. Diana Fuss, *Inside/Out: Lesbian Theories, Gay Theories* (New York and London: Routledge, 1991), 18.

view as J.L. Austin's "intent on separating the actor's citational practices from ordinary speech-act performances."³⁹ Instead, Parker and Sedgwick argue, "If a spatialized, postmodernist performative analysis like the present one can demonstrate any one thing, surely it is how contingent, and radically *heterogeneous*, as well as how contestable, must be the relation between any subject and any utterance."⁴⁰ For Butler, Parker, and Sedgwick, the subjectivity of the speaker and his/her relationship to the words he/she speaks is key to understanding performativity.

In *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, the repetition or performance of different points of view or eyes, calls attention to the destabilization of essential racial selves or I's. As Robyn Wiegman points out, "What the eye sees is not a neutral moment of reception but an arbitrary and disciplinary operation, one in which experience is actually produced in the subject."⁴¹ This constructed or "disciplined" viewing and experiencing of subjectivity is highly evident in Stowe's text through the manner in which the reader is pointedly and carefully treated to the viewpoint of virtually every character in this text (black or white, "good," or "evil"), from the desperation of Eliza Harris's flight with her child in her arms, to Haley the slave-trader's urgency in finding them. As a result, the same narrative gets repeated or "performed" in different ways. At the climactic moment where Eliza crosses the Ohio River with child in arms, the reader experiences with Eliza her zeal to reach the other side: "With wild cries and desperate energy she leaped to another and still

³⁹ ed. Parker, Andrew and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Performativity and Performance*, "Introduction: Performativity and Performance" (New York and London: Routledge, 1995), 4.

⁴⁰ Parker and Sedgwick, "Performativity and Performance," 14.

⁴¹ Wiegman, *American Anatomies*, 37.

another cake; stumbling - leaping - slipping - springing upwards again! Her shoes are gone - her stockings cut from her feet - while blood marked every step; but she saw nothing, felt nothing, till dimly, as in a dream, she saw the Ohio side, and a man helping her up the bank.” (118) The narrative prevents the reader from experiencing the potential pain of Eliza’s bloody feet. Instead, the reliance upon the gerundive and the passive voice in this passage emphasizes Eliza’s physical detachment from the action her body is performing. Eliza herself does not “stumble, leap, slip, and “spring.” Rather, the “stumbling, leaping, slipping,” and “springing,” coupled with the dashes in between each word that take the place of the noun subject, emphasize the absence of Eliza’s body within the narrative. Similarly, Eliza’s shoes “are gone,” and the stockings suddenly “cut from her feet.” Thus, the substitution of purely descriptive words in the place of narrative sequence, effectively removes Eliza’s body from the passage, and consequently shapes the reader’s particular experience of the scene. We do not view the point where Eliza’s shoes come off, the ice slicing her feet, or the particular “stumble” and “leap.” Like Eliza, we actually “feel nothing,” and what we do see in the narrative (the visual markers of potential pain in her bleeding feet upon the cold ice) underscores our own physical detachment from it. Through Eliza’s viewpoint, we are not allowed to feel physically what we literally see.

Yet, through Haley and Sam’s (a slave belonging to the Shelby family) verbal rehearsal of this scene, the reader also experiences Eliza’s crossing as a spectator. After Eliza successfully reaches the Ohio bank, the narrative immediately shifts to the witnesses’ perspective on the other side of the shore: “Haley had stood a perfectly

amazed spectator of the scene, till Eliza had disappeared up the bank, when he turned a blank, inquiring look on Sam and Andy ... ‘The gal’s got seven devils in her, I believe!’ said Haley, ‘How like a wildcat she jumped!’ ... ‘Lord bless you, Mas’r, I couldn’t help [laughing] now,’ said Sam, giving way to the long pent-up delight of his soul. ‘She looked so curi’s, a leapin’ and springin’ - ice a crackin’ - and only to hear her, - plump! ker chunk! ker splash! Spring! Lord! how she goes it!’ and Sam and Andy laughed till the tears rolled down their cheeks.” (119-120) Through the eyes/I’s of Haley and Sam, the reader now views the embodiment of Eliza’s crossing that comes from the act of external witnessing. Her “wild cries” of desperation transform into her body “jumping” like a “wildcat” through Haley’s gaze. The disembodied “leaping” and “springing” become narrativized and connected to Eliza’s body specifically through Sam’s viewpoint. Eliza “looks” or physically appears “curi’s” as Sam states.⁴² We now see the ice “crackin’,” and hear the sounds of her body “springing” upon it. Notably, we also experience this scene through visually different narrative discourses, moving from the omniscient narrator’s descriptions of Eliza “stumbling, leaping, and springing,” to Sam’s account (as a character within the novel) of Eliza “a leapin’ and springin’.”

Significantly, the reader simultaneously looks through the slave-trader’s gaze to dehumanize Eliza (in her “wildcat jumping”) and experiences Sam’s pleasure at viewing the escape of a fellow-slave. In *Touching Liberty: Abolition, Feminism, and the Politics of the Body*, Karen Sanchez-Eppler contends,

⁴² Eliza’s embodiment at this point of the narrative is reinforced by the fact that the scene of her crossing is retold through Haley and Sam’s actual physical voices, where the initial scene’s use of an omniscient narrator emphasizes bodily detachment.

The ability of sentimental fiction to liberate the bodies of slaves is moreover, intimately connected to the bodily nature of the genre itself. Sentiment and feeling refer at once to emotion and to physical sensation, and in sentimental fiction these two versions of sentire blend as the eyes of readers take in the printed word and blur it with tears. Reading sentimental fiction is thus, a bodily act, and the success of a story is gauged, in part, by its ability to translate words into heartbeats and sobs. This physicality of the reading experience radically contracts the distance between narrated events and the moment of their reading, as the feelings in the story are made tangibly present in the flesh of the reader. In particular, tears designate a border realm between the story and its reading, since the tears shed by characters initiate an answering moistness in the reader's eye.⁴³

According to Sanchez-Eppler, the abolitionist text's reliance on the tears of the reader (through its detailing of horrific practices that specifically aims to affect the reader's emotions), substitutes the slave body's suffering for that of the reader, as the reader's physical tears call attention to the reader's own suffering instead.

In this famous scene from *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (or arguably the most widely recognized and read abolitionist text) however, the constant repetition of different eyes (or the stereotypical roles of the protective mother, the dehumanizing slave-trader, and the trickster black figure⁴⁴) to perform the same scene, destabilizes the idea of a real "I," emphasized by the novel's general third-person point of view. Since all characters

⁴³ Karen Sanchez-Eppler, *Touching Liberty: Abolition, Feminism, and the Politics of the Body* (London: University of California Press, 1993), 26-27.

⁴⁴ Eric Lott describes "slave-tale tricksters" as "frequently ... champions, heroes, [and] backdoor victors for the weak over the strong." (*Love and Theft*, 22)

ultimately speak through an omniscient narrator, the I/eye of the narrative continuously displaces itself. The reader simultaneously experiences the figurative “tears” of Haley’s frustration, Sam’s potential “tears of joy” at witnessing Eliza’s escape, and yet is significantly blocked from shedding tears *with* Eliza, despite our obviously constructed sympathy *for* her. Eliza’s body pointedly becomes a spectacle only after her crossing has become narratively repeated and performed by multiple witnesses. Additionally, the narrator constantly calls attention to Eliza’s lack of tears, presumably because of the extremity of her predicament. After Eliza has crossed the river successfully, the narrative states, “The woman [Eliza] did not sob nor weep. She had gone to a place where tears are dry; but every one around her was, in some way characteristic of themselves, showing signs of hearty sympathy.” (150) Here, Eliza demonstrates the antithesis of bodily excess. Not only does she not cry, she has been removed to a place where “tears are dry.” The narrative has thus metaphorically removed her body from view. While other characters and the reader may “show signs of hearty sympathy” for Eliza, we cannot substitute our tears (or the physical signifier for suffering in the sentimental genre) for her, because she does not possess them. Consequently, the narrative of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* demonstrates the manner in which any essential identity proves an unstable category. The displacement of the reader’s own body (the tears streaming from his/her “eyes”) within the text, infinitely destabilizes his/her role or self (I).

As a result, whichever character the reader (as spectator of the text) identifies with, ultimately becomes categorically unstable as well. In his discussion of the complexity of minstrelsy, Eric Lott states “The elastic nature of spectator identification

suggests another possibility The blackface image ... constituted black people as the focus of the white political Imaginary, placing them in a dialectic of misrecognition and identification.”⁴⁵ In other words, as Lott points out, “spectator identification” in minstrelsy proves highly “elastic” in the sense that the spectator simultaneously “misrecognizes” him/herself and “identifies” with the character onstage, achieved and emphasized through the fact (well-known to the spectator) that the performer is a white subject in blackface. The reader’s simultaneous separation from and forced involvement with all of the various characters in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, exemplify this dual nature of “spectator identification”⁴⁶ While Uncle Tom is on a boat waiting to be sold at auction, the narrative reads: “Having learned late in life, Tom was but a slow reader, and passed on laboriously from verse to verse. Fortunate for him was it that the book he was intent on was one which slow reading cannot injure ... Let us follow him a moment, as, pointing to each word, and pronouncing each half aloud, he reads, ‘Let - not - your - heart - be - troubled. In - my - Father’s - house - are - many - mansions. I - go - to - prepare - a - place - for - you.’” (229) Here, the visual signifiers of varying degrees of literacy distinguish Tom from the reader. The halting and punctuated words of Tom’s reading visually contrast with the earlier narrative flow of the text. In terms of reading (or the only way the reader can “witness” the text’s narrative at this moment), a blatant “misrecognition” between Tom and the reader does indeed exist. The narrator’s

⁴⁵ Lott, *Love and Theft*, 152.

⁴⁶ I am assuming here that Stowe’s original intended readers were made up of a white audience, largely because her novel is so obviously one written to achieve a specific political end, and white citizens were the people holding virtually all of the political power in the United States in 1852.

insistence that “we follow” Tom as well as her statement that Tom reads the one book that “slow reading cannot injure,” decidedly emphasizes Tom’s “vulnerability” at the white reader’s appropriative expense. The reader literally patronizes Tom’s reading and narrative, and as a result, essentially witnesses a performance of Tom reading in a panopticon-like setting. Like the viewing of the ostensible “characters” in a minstrel play (where the audience can see the characters but the characters cannot see the audience), we can see Tom reading a text but he cannot see us reading his body,⁴⁷

Moreover, the “literate” distinction between Tom and the reader seems to suggest a fundamental difference between the two “selves” that can never be overcome. In explicating his “Trope of the Talking Book,” Henry Louis Gates, Jr. claims “[in slave narratives] black people could become speaking subjects only by inscribing their voices in the written word ... The trope of the Talking Book is the ur-trope of the Anglo-African tradition. Bakhtin’s metaphor of double-voiced discourse ... comes to bear in black texts through the trope of the Talking Book. In the slave narratives ... making the white written text speak with a black voice is the initial mode of inscription of the metaphor of the double-voiced.”⁴⁸ If the reader’s main role to fulfill in conjunction with *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* is in fact, to “read” it, any identification with Tom that is not appropriative proves seemingly impossible. Since Tom as a literary character can only become a “speaking

⁴⁷ While of course, most characters in novels are not consciously aware of their readers, thus rendering them always exploited by readers to a certain extent, Uncle Tom’s particular vulnerability is emphasized here through our glimpse into his attempts to read that are so markedly different from our own. In not just witnessing but partaking in his dissimilar mode of reading (we have to read his reading to glean the information given in this particular passage), we as readers are truly appropriating something that is decidedly not our own.

⁴⁸ Henry Louis Gates, Jr., *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 130-131.

subject” through the “written word,” his inability literally to speak the same language as the reader, renders him voiceless, reinforced by the fact that he speaks through Stowe. While of course every character in the novel ultimately relies upon Stowe’s voice to emerge, Tom’s dependence upon her becomes blatantly visible in this scene. In order to view Tom’s reading, the reader must experience Stowe’s imperative that “we follow him” and her insistence that his “slow reading” does not “injure” the text. On one level, it is Stowe who “inscribes” her “double-voicing” as author and narrator here. She places Tom’s voice in this passage, and rhetorically informs us of the manner in which we should read it. Tom then, does not “speak” at all.

However, this scene simultaneously places the reader in Tom’s position, forcing him/her to identify with him. In order to read the words that the text puts forth, the reader must experience them in the way that Tom does. The reader must visually and thus audibly acknowledge the break between every word that renders the act of reading the passage as slow and belabored a process for the reader as it does for Tom. Thus, the identification with Tom in this particular scene also renders any appropriation and patronization of his subjectivity impossible on one level. Although the reader must experience his reading, the reader can never truly assume and enact a lower degree of literacy than what he/she has already learned and thus irrevocably internalized. To ask a reader to imagine that he/she cannot read a certain word or scene (or even to ask him/her to imagine that this word or scene is difficult) proves a completely impossible task. Paradoxically, one has to in fact, *read* the word in order even to begin to imagine *not* being able to read it. Indeed, one can only truly experience this predicament if it actually

exists, and of course, if one actually possesses difficulty with words or illiteracy, then the encounter is no longer imaginary. Thus, this passage simultaneously halts the reader's or "spectator's" usage of the "white political Imaginary." In the paradoxical "inscription" of Tom's illiteracy in a "written" text, Tom "speaks" to us as a "subject" with whom we can neither identify nor misrecognize. This exhibition of Tom's literacy also always indicates a displaced eye/I (or visually "speaking subject") whom the reader cannot appropriatively identify with and consequently cannot racially essentialize. The act of reading the body of the text performatively replaces the act of reading Tom's body.

Thus, the question of whether *Uncle Tom's Cabin* proves a resistant or complicit text in terms of racial discourse, ultimately too becomes categorically unstable. Most criticism surrounding the novel that does not immediately dismiss it for its racial problematics, tends to view it through the lens of domesticity and the "sentimental novel." Claudia Tate declares, "The mission of Uncle Tom's Cabin and other domestic novels is to value women's work at home as responsible or integral to functioning and moral society to 'morally productive national polity.'"⁴⁹ In *Sentimental Designs: The Cultural Work of American Fiction*, Jane Tompkins attempts to rescue Stowe's work from charges of "literary artlessness" (an accusation frequently made by contemporary critics and scholars towards female-authored sentimental novels) by claiming "*Uncle Tom's Cabin* is not exceptional but representative. It is the summa theologica of nineteenth-century America's religion of domesticity, a brilliant reflection of the

⁴⁹ Claudia Tate, *Domestic Allegories of Political Desire: The Black Heroine's Text at the Turn of the Century* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992). Tate is by no means alone in her reading of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Many academics and readers view Stowe's text as the quintessential domestic novel.

culture's favorite story of itself - the story of salvation through motherly love. Out of the ideological materials at their disposal, the sentimental novelists elaborated a myth that gave women the central position of power and authority in the culture; and of these efforts *Uncle Tom's Cabin* is the most dazzling exemplar.”⁵⁰ Tompkins's position is by no means universal among contemporary scholars, especially when it comes to Stowe's own particular subject position in connection with her specific political project in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Karen Sanchez-Eppler for one, ultimately claims that bodies and “bodiliness” have traditionally been erased in American political discourse. True American citizens then, become those who are not embodied, thus excluding the visually identifiable bodies of African-Americans and women. For Sanchez-Eppler then, antislavery texts (most notably those written by white women) in their attempt to create a “sympathetic identification” for the slave, end up actually exploiting the slave body for political purposes. As Sanchez-Eppler explains,

From the early 1830s through the Civil War, [the] assumptions of a metaphorical and fleshless political identity were disrupted and unmasked through the convergence of two rhetorics of social protest; the abolitionist concern with claiming personhood for the racially distinct and physically owned slave body, and the feminist concern with claiming personhood for the sexually distinct and domestically circumscribed female body ... The bound and silent figure of the slave represents the woman's oppression and so grants the white woman access to political discourse denied the slave, exemplifying the way in which slave labor

⁵⁰ Jane Tompkins, *Sensational Designs*, 125.

produces – both literally and metaphorically – even the most basic of freedom’s privileges.⁵¹

Since the possession of a visually identifiable body excludes white women from citizenry, the centrality of the black body in their texts allows these authors a new access to political discourse in their own bodies’ absence from their novels. These white women authors thus appropriate the slave body to reclaim their own.

On one level, Stowe exercises this practice of exploitation of the slave body precisely through her seeming identification with him/her. During Eliza’s escape, the narrator interjects, “If it were *your* Harry, mother, or your Willie, that were going to be torn from you by a brutal trader, tomorrow morning ... how fast could *you* walk? How many miles could you make in those few brief hours, with the darling at your bosom, - the little sleepy head on your shoulder, - the small soft arms trustingly holding on to your neck?” (105) In forcing the reader to imagine him/herself as the character the story, asides such as these also significantly call the reader’s attention to Stowe as author of abolitionist discourse but not a body within it. She only asks the reader to imagine his/her own body “walking” and feeling a child’s “sleepy head” and “small soft arms” around a “shoulder” and “neck,” and not her own. Stowe then, reclaims her body as her own, by disembodimenting herself as author of political discourse, but (unlike the slave bodies in the novel) is not a visually embodied subject within it.

⁵¹ Sanchez-Eppler, *Touching Liberty*, 1-19. Similarly, Gillian Brown points out the paradox that domesticity held for women and their desires, stating, “The nineteenth century advanced and delimited individualism by identifying selfhood with the feminine but denying it to women. What women wanted was quite literally themselves.” *Domestic Individualism: Imagining Self in Nineteenth-Century America* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, California: University of California Press, 1990), 4-5.

Scholars like Tompkins and Sanchez-Eppler have offered valuable contributions to the study of Stowe's text. However, the "sentimental" characterization and structure of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* does not ultimately emphasize a reactionary or resistant stance towards either race or gender as much it does the unstable nature of these categories. The doubling of names in this text (George Shelby/George Harris, Simeon the Quaker/Simon Legree, Sam/Sambo, Uncle Tom/Tom Loker) demonstrates the insecurity of the "types" these individual characters represent, underscored by the fact that these pairings often specifically mirror each other in terms of characterization and circumstance. Simeon the Quaker represents liberation from slavery in offering his home as a refuge to the fugitive Harris family, while Simon Legree embodies slavery's oppression and cruelty. In Sam and Sambo, the reader encounters two slaves whose actions and feelings are constructed and mediated by the differing dispositions of their masters (the generally kind if misguided Shelbys and the cruel Simon Legree, respectively). When Sam first hears of Eliza's escape, he exclaims, "It's Sam dat's called in for in dese yer times. He's de nigger. See if I don't cotch her, now; Mas'r'll see what Sam can do!" (96) It is only after Sam learns that Mrs. Shelby does not want Eliza to be caught that he allows himself to rejoice in her escape and help her journey progress. Conversely, the narrator explains Sambo's tendencies towards cruelty as follows: "Legree had trained [him] in savageness and brutality as systematically as he had his bull-dogs; and by long practice in hardness and cruelty, brought [his] whole nature to about the same range of capacities." (492) As characters then, Sam and Sambo resemble each other to the extent that their personalities are determined by their masters, narratively reflected in the similarities and differences in

their names. Sam and Sambo essentially possess the same name, each constructed according to his individual situation.

Additionally, George Shelby and George Harris represent types of white masculinity and African-American masculinity respectively, which pointedly turn out to be similar forms. When George Harris leaves his wife and child for a chance to escape, he tells Eliza, “I have been kicked and cuffed and sworn at, and at the best only let alone; and what do I owe? I’ve paid for all my keeping a hundred times over. I won’t bear it. No, I won’t! ... I’m going home quite resigned, you understand, as if all was over. I’ve got some preparations made - and there are those that will help me; and, in the course of a week or so, I shall be among the missing, some day. Pray for me, Eliza; perhaps the Good Lord will hear you.” (65) This bitterness towards slavery as an institution and simultaneous determination to resist it, similarly occurs when George Shelby (the Sheldons’ young son) says goodbye to the recently sold Uncle Tom: “I declare, it’s real mean! I don’t care what they say, any of ‘em! It’s a nasty, mean shame! If I was a man, they shouldn’t do it, - they should not, so! ... Look here, Uncle Tom ... I’ve brought you my dollar! ... button your coat tight over it, and keep it, and remember , every time you see it, that I’ll come down after you, and bring you back ... I’ll see to it, and I’ll tease father’s life out, if he don’t do it.” (171-2) In both passages, the determination to resist slavery is emphasized through the italicization of words such as “won’t” and “so.” Significantly, the fact that neither George Shelby nor George Harris has reached “manhood” under the eyes of the law (Shelby through his age, and Harris through his status as a slave), renders them equally powerless to prevent the injustice that they both

verbally recognize. Although of course, the crucial difference between the two Georges is that George Shelby will eventually achieve manhood and citizenship under the eyes of the law while George Harris will not, the strength of the *American* institution of slavery proves too strong for both of them to rectify fully. George Shelby does not arrive at the Legree plantation in time to save Uncle Tom from death, and George Harris must emigrate to Africa with his family in order to experience true freedom.

Finally, Tom Loker's aggression contrasts with Uncle Tom's obedience and submission. Interestingly and significantly, both of these two characters fail and succeed on some level. Uncle Tom decides not to run away from Legree when he is given the chance to (a resolution that causes his death, and one which many contemporary readers especially, would deem a failed resistance to slavery), yet his insistence that "the Lord's given me a work among these yer poor souls, and I'll stay with 'em and bear my cross with 'em till the end" (562) yields him a "salvation" and thus mode of resistance that from an American antebellum Christian perspective is an extremely successful one. Similarly, Tom Loker fails as a sympathetic character because he is a coarse, cruel fugitive slave hunter whom the reader is encouraged to fear and loathe. Yet he too, becomes "salvaged" by the Christian love of the Quaker household, and his last scene in the text involves him giving Rachel Halliday (the Quaker woman who harbors both Tom and the Harris family) tips for the fugitive family to avoid getting caught.

This scene also significantly takes place while Tom lies wounded in bed. As a character then, Tom Loker becomes most successful (sympathy and salvation-wise) when his aggression and traditionally masculine power has been removed from his body. The

narrative describes Tom Loker's "conversion" as follows: "As we at this place take leave of Tom Loker, we may as well say, that, having lain three weeks at the Quaker dwelling, sick with a rheumatic fever, which set in, in company with his other afflictions, Tom arose from his bed a somewhat sadder and wiser man; and, in place of slave-catching, betook himself to life in one of the new settlements, where his talents developed themselves more happily in trapping bears, wolves, and other inhabitants of the forest, in which he made himself quite a name in the land." (544) Similarly, when Uncle Tom dies, the narrative states, "He began to draw his breath with long, deep inspirations; and his broad chest rose and fell, heavily. The expression of his face was that of a conqueror. 'Who – who, - who shall separate us from the love of Christ?' he said, in a voice that contended with mortal weakness; and with a smile, he fell asleep." (591) The two Toms thus resemble each other in their ability to "rise" both physically and symbolically in a Christ-like manner. Both characters' conquest over their physical afflictions is textually represented through some form of death. Uncle Tom physically dies while Tom Loker "dies" within the realm of the narrative in that he is never seen by the reader again. Significantly however, both characters' "deaths" inspire anti-slavery sentiment and/or activism both within the world of the novel and for the text's readers. Tom Loker stops hunting slaves, while the pathos involved in the depiction of Uncle Tom's death not only ideally creates sympathy within the reader, but also effectively ends Uncle Tom's prolonged experience of the pain of slavery.⁵² The narrative thus paradoxically and

⁵² Saidiya Hartman addresses the varied forms of slave resistance enacted specifically through the body, citing and describing practices such as "work slowdowns, feigned illness, unlicensed travel, the destruction of property, theft, self-mutilation, dissimulation, physical confrontation with owners and overseers" as "redressing the pained body [which] encompasses operating in and against the demands of the system,

pointedly emphasizes the manner in which these two characters' deaths (much like the Christian belief in Jesus Christ's death and consequent rising from the grave to save humanity) create and save lives.

These two wounding scenes thus do not only serve the purpose of emphasizing the strength and power of Christian salvation. They also significantly demonstrate the similar final circumstances of two vastly different characters. Most importantly, the primary difference between these two characters resides in the color of their skin, and their consequent contrasting situations, despite the fact that they share the same name and end up performing a similar role within the narrative. In *The Masochistic Pleasures of Sentimental Literature*, Marianne Noble claims that physical wounds in sentimental literature

tantalize a viewer by seeming to make the inner self accessible to scrutiny ... Stowe's sentimental wounding so powerfully evokes the fantasy of perfect access to the other's "real presence" that its failure to achieve that presence is partially compensated by its ability to make that *desire itself* present to a reader. A wound is a gap, a metaphor for the absence of the other. While the sentimental wound cannot heal that gap, its representation of the desire for "real presence" partially compensates for the inevitable deferral of "real presence."⁵³

negotiating the disciplinary harnessing of the body, and counterinvesting in the body as a site of possibility." (Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*, 51.) In dying then, Uncle Tom literally renders his body an impossible "site of possibility" as a slave. The Christian overtones and ideology attached to this particular scene further emphasize this particular mode of resistance. Tom's soul ascending to Heaven signifies a form of identity and identification for him that is no longer tied to his body.

⁵³ Marianne Noble, *The Masochistic Pleasures of Sentimental Literature* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2000), 137.

According to Noble, because a wound represents a “gap” or “absence of the other,” the particular representation of it in sentimental literature evokes the “fantasy of perfect access” within the reader. The reader is able to feel as though he/she is viewing the “real presence” of the wounded. Since the reader cannot truly ever see this “real presence,” the wound doubly functions as a mask or “compensation” for the “inevitable deferral” of the “real presence.” In mirroring each other, the wounding scenes of Tom Loker and Uncle Tom each fill in the “absent” gap of the other, by additionally making visible to the reader the deferral of the two characters’ “real presences,” rather than merely the representation of their wounds. In other words, in constructing these two scenes so that they closely resemble each other, the narrative forces the reader not merely to feel sympathy for and satisfaction in the salvations of Uncle Tom and Tom Loker as we look closer at their bodies and consequently their seeming psyches, but in fact to *recognize* that these wounding scenes echo each other in terms of their redemptive outcome. In mirroring each other, each scene thus constantly “defers” to the other one, as each image of the “wounded Tom” continuously reflects the other one.

In these pairings of names and characters then, Stowe demonstrates the instability and thus fallibility of racial categories. What one is named is not synonymous with one’s essential being. White citizens, the enslaved, the cruel, the pious, the ignorant, and the enlightened can all share the same name. Names thus also become a visibly deferred mirror image as the reader literally views (through the process of visual reading) their continuous visual reflection of other names in the text. Significantly, in addition, by coupling white and African-American figures through the use of a shared name, *the*

“speaking subject” or the white male citizen (who is in fact, the only subject who “speaks” in nineteenth-century America, in terms of democratic definition and participation, i.e. voting, property ownership, etc.) also literally becomes an unstable, displaced identity in the eyes/I’s of the reader who distinguishes different characters, in part, by their names.

Yet, the fact that Stowe reinscribes these categories at various points during the course of her narrative problematizes this gesture. As Richard Yarborough correctly points out, “Although Stowe unquestionably sympathized with the slaves, her commitment to challenging the claim of black inferiority was frequently undermined by her own endorsement of racial stereotypes.”⁵⁴ Stowe’s text is in fact highly unstable in its political stance. In one of her asides to her readers, Stowe states “In order to appreciate the sufferings of the negroes sold south, it must be remembered that all the instinctive affections of that race are peculiarly strong. Their loyal attachments are very abiding. They are not naturally daring, and enterprising, but home-loving and affectionate.” (164) This profound declaration of the “negro race’s” innate qualities contrasts sharply with the implications of the pairs of names. This statement is also unequivocally Stowe’s voice, not another character constructing a “racist” or stereotypical remark, which additionally seems to undermine her greater project.

However, when one takes into account the fact that these innate qualities Stowe expounds, reflect those that a nineteenth-century American woman should possess, or the “cult of true womanhood,” this passage becomes more politically complex, heightened by

⁵⁴ Yarborough, “Strategies of Black Characterization,” *New Essays*, 47.

the fact that this ideology did not provide a space for African-American men or women. Just whom Stowe is excluding and/or including here becomes a complicated issue, and one that many critics and scholars have taken up with great fervor. Robyn Wiegman critiques this alignment by stating “[Stowe’s] reliance on the faulty analogy of blacks and women is one of the means by which Uncle Tom’s Cabin seems to undo itself, subverting its most overt political agenda by dissuading political alliances among minoritized groups ... Uncle Tom’s Cabin must struggle, quite overtly and unsatisfactorily, to undo the signifiatory structures that attend male bodies in order to feminize and hence humanize the male slave.”⁵⁵ Reconciling and/or explaining the conflation between race and gender in Stowe’s text becomes a tricky problem indeed by contemporary standards, especially given Stowe’s apparent essentialization of both groups.

One must remember however, that Stowe’s own role within her narrative arguably renders her the most unstable “character” within the novel. Her aside to her readers about “the Negro’s” innate qualities proves a politically jarring moment for most contemporary audiences, given her seeming sympathy for the plight of slaves,⁵⁶ but it is significantly also a profound structural shift within the narrative. In other words, these asides represent moments where Stowe inserts herself into a narrative that decidedly never includes her as a character within it. Stowe’s role as narrator thus proves a highly

⁵⁵ Wiegman, *American Anatomies*, 194-197.

⁵⁶ It is necessary here also to recognize as Lora Romero importantly points out, the possibility that “traditions, or even individual texts, could be radical on some issues ... and reactionary on others. Unless one thinks of society as a monolithic whole against which one must arise an equally monolithic opposition, then a progressive stance in one arena does not entail a progressive view in all other arenas.” Lora Romero, *Home Fronts: Domesticity and its Critics in the Antebellum United States*, (New York: Duke University Press, 1997), 1.

unstable one, in terms of the reader's experience of her. Stowe continuously splits her subjectivity within the narrative in terms of her role. Since we cannot rely upon Stowe as a consistent "type" of narrator and writer, the characters we view within her narrative become equally unstable as definitive "types." Stowe after all, pointedly makes us aware that it is she (in all of her inconsistency) who delineates them.

Thus, if one's aim is to read *Uncle Tom's Cabin* with the intent of formulating a clear-cut decision as to whether this text is resistant or not, one will almost inevitably reach an impasse but not one that warrants or justifies dismissal of it. To examine and discuss the problematics of race representation in this novel proves a worthwhile and undoubtedly important task. However, to define what definitively constitutes resistance and what does not within it according to our own contemporary standards, can equally prove a troubling essentialization of race, especially given the fact that the abundant characters in this text "resist" their various positions and circumstances in so many different ways. Uncle Tom's decision to stay within slavery to "save" his fellow slaves contrasts sharply with George Harris's flight to another continent for example. Both characters however, effectively resist slavery to the extent that by the end of the novel, both have ceased to be slaves. One must also take into consideration the fact that *Uncle Tom's Cabin* is in fact, a blatantly resistant text, in its intentional condemnation of a brutally unjust institution based on racial paradigms. Similarly, to defend this text's particular mode(s) of resistance without acknowledging the particular problems it poses in its discourse, is to ignore our own potential complicity as readers and subjects. Instead, the complex and admittedly many times problematic manner in which the

mechanics of this text function in terms of race and slavery for its audience(s) deserves further careful investigation. Indeed, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* offers its readers a text in which categories of race and resistance become unstable, rather than definitively fixed, allowing us to examine them through many different eyes/I's.

Chapter 2: Domestic Boundaries: Resistance, Complicity and Domesticity in Harriet

Jacobs's Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl

Harriet Beecher Stowe's fictional depiction of African-American identity and slavery creates a complex interplay and instability between its form and political message regarding race and slavery. Harriet Jacobs's 1861 slave narrative *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* too constructs a crucial political stance through an aesthetic property (narrative). Because Jacobs's slave status yields her such a profoundly different subject position from Stowe's however, the manner in which Jacobs addresses her audience constructs a fundamentally different move from Stowe. In Jacobs's text, she essentially presents herself as a subject and character to be read. As a result, while both Stowe and Jacobs openly express the same ultimate political goal (the demise of slavery), Jacobs's textual exhortations to the reader to end slavery based upon her own experience create a different aesthetic (and ultimately political) effect from Stowe's frequent beseeching intrusions as specifically an *omniscient* narrator into her fictional narrative. In other words, Stowe does not place her body within her text the way that Jacobs arguably needs to do to accomplish her aims. Consequently, the narrative and political principles of inclusion and exclusion that drive Jacobs's text necessarily differ from that of Stowe's. In Jacobs's slave narrative, we importantly read not only her text, but her subjectivity as well.

The autobiographical genre itself is one where form and cultural ideology necessarily merge in a complex relationship, where one continuously influences the

other. Georges Gusdorf, whom Susan Stanford Friedman deems “the dean of autobiographical studies,”⁵⁷ claims that “autobiography is not possible in a cultural landscape where consciousness of self does not, properly speaking, exist ... [This self-consciousness is] the late product of a specific civilization.”⁵⁸ The very notion of self-consciousness then, or an idea that is a specific cultural product, is what makes autobiography as a literary genre possible, according to Gusdorf. James Olney on the other hand, defines autobiography as primarily an individual experience, stating that “We can understand [autobiography] as the vital impulse – the impulse of life – that is transformed by being lived through the unique medium of the individual and the individual’s special, peculiar psychic configuration; we can understand it as consciousness, pure and simple, consciousness referring to no objects outside itself, to no events and to no other lives.”⁵⁹ For Olney then, autobiography represents a moment of pure individual “consciousness” with no external influences whatsoever.

Many scholars of women’s autobiography however, claim that women’s representation of “self-consciousness” within this genre necessarily extends beyond pure individualism. As Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson explain, “Women’s alterity informs

⁵⁷ Susan Stanford Friedman, “Women’s Autobiographical Selves: Theory and Practice,” *Women, Autobiography, Theory: A Reader*, ed. Sidonie Smith & Julia Watson (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1998), 72.

⁵⁸ Georges Gusdorf, “Conditions and Limits of Autobiography,” *Autobiography: Essays Theoretical and Critical*, ed. and trans. James Olney (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), 29-30.

⁵⁹ James Olney, “Some Versions of Memory/Some Versions of Bios: The Ontology of Autobiography,” *Autobiography: Essays Theoretical and Critical*, ed. James Olney (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), 236.

their establishment of identity as a relational, rather than individuating, process.”⁶⁰ Mary G. Mason further states, “The self-discovery of female identity seems to acknowledge the real presence and recognition of another consciousness, and the disclosure of female self is linked to the identification of some ‘other.’ This recognition of another consciousness – and I emphasize recognition rather than deference – this grounding of identity through relation to the chosen other, seems ... to enable women to write openly about themselves.”⁶¹ Critics like Smith, Watson, and Mason have made the argument that for those marginalized by cultural ideology (in this case, women), consciousness, (and consequently its representation) apart from it, is impossible.⁶² For many African-American women writing autobiography, the act of writing about the self has traditionally been an authenticating gesture that must speak to and about cultural ideology. As Nellie McKay explains, “The black writer did not and could not participate in an ideology of self that separated the self from the black community and the roots of its culture. Consequently, the personal narrative became a historical site on which aesthetics, self-confirmation of humanity, citizenship, and the significance of racial

⁶⁰ Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, “Introduction: Situating Subjectivity in Women’s Autobiographical Practices,” *Women, Autobiography, Theory*, 8.

⁶¹ Mary G. Mason, “The Other Voice: Autobiographies of Women Writers,” *Women, Autobiography, Theory*, 321.

⁶² More recent studies in masculinity have deconstructed this notion of a purely individual identity formation for white men in power as well. Dana D. Nelson for example, in *National Manhood: Capitalist Citizenship and the Imagined Fraternity of White Men* claims that “identification” for white men throughout American history “was directed not equilaterally, then, but *vertically*, toward the more powerful ‘interest’ that overruled ‘individual’ desire – nationally toward abstracted and idealized founding fathers, economically toward founding men.” Nelson ultimately deems this ideal an “impossible identity,” claiming that it is “impossible in the sense that it is an always-agonistic position, making it difficult for any human to fit into a full sense of compatibility with its ideal construction.” Nelson, *National Manhood* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1998), 22-28.

politics shaped African-American literary expression ... [Black autobiographers'] narratives begin from a stated (sometimes disguised) position that establishes and asserts the reality of self through experience."⁶³ For African-American writers then, the act of writing about the self not only is one that defines individual consciousness in relation to the Other, but also avows and affirms that identity.

Slave narratives in particular represent a unique phenomenon within the autobiographical tradition because these authors' portrayal of their experiences and their self hood is so overtly tied to a cultural and then political argument (that of abolishing slavery). Because one of the slave narratives' main functions was to demonstrate the slave's humanity through the written word, the slave narrative author created a self for his/her audience quite literally through language. Like all autobiographical writers then, the authors of slave narratives deliberately present and construct a particular self for the reader to view and experience. For the writer of the slave narrative however, who has the political task of convincing his/her readers to abolish slavery, the authenticity of that experience becomes especially important. For the slave narrative, self-representation and argument are essentially one and the same, as the writer's "authentic" experiences under slavery serve as evidence for slavery's cruelty and injustice.

Consequently, it is the complex interplay between the author and his/her reader that is key to understanding the slave narrative. Dwight McBride describes this relationship as follows:

⁶³ Nellie Y. McKay, "The Narrative Self: Race, Politics, and Culture in Black American Women's Autobiography," *Women, Autobiography, Theory*, 96.

The major debates [in antebellum America] were not only over the nature of slavery as an institution but also over the nature of the slave ... Such an understanding further uncovers the complex relationship between the slave witness and those who would receive his or her testimony. The “reader” is not only constructed *by* the witness, but the imagined reader becomes completely discursive *for* the witness. The reader represents the fray of discourses, so to speak, into which the witness must enter to be heard at all.⁶⁴

In other words, the “imagined reader” of the slave narrative completely drives its form and shape, as the reader comes to represent potentially competing and/or antagonistic discourse itself. The autobiographical creation of “self-consciousness” within a slave narrative is necessarily shaped by the external influence of the reader, and all that he/she may represent culturally and politically.

Unlike Harriet Beecher Stowe then in her novel *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, Harriet Jacobs in her slave narrative *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* must represent or in effect write her self in order to achieve her argument against slavery. In fact, despite the similar goal of the two works, this crucial aesthetic difference between them indeed ultimately represents very different political implications, not the least of which involve Jacobs’s struggles with her identity as an African-American, a slave, *and* a woman.⁶⁵ In

⁶⁴ Dwight A. McBride, *Truth, Abolitionism, and Slave Testimony* (New York and London: New York University Press, 2001), 2.

⁶⁵ In fact, Jacobs actually experienced a fraught personal relationship with Stowe that demonstrated some key differences between the two women. As Hazel Carby explains, “Jacobs rejected a patronizing offer by Harriet Beecher Stowe to incorporate her life story into the writing of *The Key to Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. This incorporation would have meant that her history would have been circumscribed by the bounds of convention, and Jacobs responded that ‘it needed no romance.’ The suggestion that Stowe might write, and

contrast to the overwhelming abolitionist support a fellow slave Frederick Douglass received towards the 1845 publication of his *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, Harriet Jacobs published her 1861 narrative *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* largely through her own efforts.⁶⁶ Thus, although both writers speak their experiences of slavery in their respective narratives, Jacobs' simultaneous status as a slave and a woman enacted a multiple exclusion from the various communities that defined one's personhood in antebellum America. Because she was an African-American woman, she could not belong within the domestic realm ruled by her white female friends. Instead, she was employed as a "domestic worker" from outside the home, rather than created and managed her own. Similarly, her gender prevented her from enjoying the support from the masculine community that Douglass did. Indeed, Jacobs's identity as an African-American woman even prevented her from identifying with and belonging to the

control, the story of Jacobs's life raised issues far greater than those which concerned the artistic and aesthetic merit of her narrative ... Jacobs knew that to gain her own public voice, as a writer, implicated her very existence as a mother and a woman; the three could not be separated." Carby, *Reconstructing Womanhood: The Emergence of the Afro-American Woman Novelist* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 49-50. For Jacobs, the manner in which she constructs and presents her voice is equal to the particular message that her readers receive. Notably, as displayed in this particular conflict, this form and message proves ultimately to be different from Stowe's, even though both women decidedly argued against slavery in their texts.

⁶⁶ As Kari J. Winter explains in *Subjects of Slavery, Agents of Change: Women and Power in Gothic Novels and Slave Narratives, 1790-1865*, "Just as slavery forced Jacobs and Douglass to endure different forms of exploitation, the gender structure of the North provided them with very different opportunities. Jacobs was employed as a domestic worker by her female friends, and she completed her manuscript in 1858 only because of her remarkable perseverance. After the book was finally published in 1861, Jacobs attained a 'limited celebrity' among abolitionists ... Frederick Douglass, in contrast, was strongly encouraged by abolitionists to assume a prominent public position through speaking and writing. In 1841, he was invited to speak at an abolitionist meeting and then was hired as a full-time antislavery lecturer. His best-selling *Narrative* was published in 1845, and he was encouraged to revise and expand it repeatedly during the next half-century." (Athens and London: The University of Georgia Press, 1995), 44-45.

particular community that Douglass himself represented.⁶⁷ Douglass was able to “speak” his experience as a slave in a way that Jacobs could not.⁶⁸ Yet, in her struggle for publication of her own narrative, Jacobs actually created a self that blurred the boundaries between these communities that strictly defined identity according to race and/or gender. She relied upon the money earned from domestic tasks to publish and speak her own narrative in the public forum. In this particular assertion of agency, notions of what constituted masculinity, femininity, whiteness, or blackness could not then be easily and invariably aligned with the categories of public, private, domestic, or wage-earning. Jacobs moved interchangeably within each realm. In *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, Jacobs enacts her resistance against slavery through constructing a similarly fluid form of self hood. In echoing and expressing her desire to adhere to the nineteenth-century American cult of domesticity that dictated and defined white women’s identities, Jacobs emphasizes the common traits she shares with the white female community. Yet, by additionally demonstrating that, due to her own unique categorization as a female slave, she can never fully achieve all of the rules of domesticity, Jacobs simultaneously distances herself from her readers to forge a unique identity that does not fall strictly within any fixed category. As a result, in contrast to Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* whose

⁶⁷ As Winter further points out, “Jacobs and Douglass were well matched in age and abilities, and they authored the most impressive texts in the American slave narrative tradition. They fled to the North around the same time (Jacobs in 1842, Douglass in 1838), and they became acquaintances who shared many friends and many interests” (*Subjects of Slavery*, 44). Thus, the two writers’ differing gender seemed to be the primary reason for their opposing experiences in getting their narratives published.

⁶⁸ Douglass’s relationship with the “supportive” white abolitionists who encouraged, funded, and controlled his publication and public speaking was of course problematic at best, and exploitative at worst, and I am not suggesting that Douglass easily and unquestionably belonged within this community. However, Douglass did enter into a space within this community (however paradoxical it might be) that did not appear to be even remotely available to Jacobs.

fictional focus on racial binaries ultimately calls attention to the instability of these categories, in *Incidents*, Jacobs resists slavery by demonstrating and constructing an experience and identity that deliberately blurs the boundaries between the societally imposed definitions of race and gender. In turn, the act of reading Jacobs's text becomes an equally fluid experience, as the textual boundaries between writing and reading ultimately collapse.

“Writing the Self”

Anxiety over the establishment of boundaries played a large role in nineteenth-century America's conceptions and formulations of national identity. At the time of the publication of Jacobs's narrative in 1861 (the beginning of the Civil War), the nation was figuratively and literally divided economically and politically over slavery. Dwight A. McBride explains,

The period from 1850 to 1861 was the “second period of militant-abolitionism,” evidenced by the fact that opposition to slavery in American literature during this eleven-year period was greater and more effective than ever before in the antislavery movement. The reason for this radical increase in the production of anti-slavery literature in this period was the passage of the Fugitive Slave Act on September 18, 1850, and the subsequent attempts to enforce it, which revealed slavery in one of its worst forms ... While the welfare of the slave remained a constant concern for the authors of anti-slavery literature in the Civil War period

(1861-65), the issue of slavery took second place to a larger concern: the very life of the nation, “so dangerously near extinction.”⁶⁹

Thus, in its dispute over the “life” or identity of the nation, the Civil War truly revolved around the construction of American domesticity. The battle between the Northern (Union) and Southern (Confederate) sides rendered the war itself a “domestic war,” since all of the fighting took place on American soil. Indeed, the main conflict between the two factions stemmed from the dispute over where to draw and define national boundaries. The Southern States’ attempt to secede from the Union potentially posed a threat to and a reworking of the domestic identity of the United States.

The fact that slavery became the focal point for this national dispute proves significant. The conflict surrounding the placement of the slave body positioned the African-American subject in the center of a struggle that paradoxically emphasized his/her marginalization. In *Raising the Dead: Readings of Death and (Black) Subjectivity*, Sharon Holland argues that American black subjectivity is synonymous with death, claiming “The living seek nation status, and the dead serve as the signifiers of that loss, of that impossibility. But what is even more macabre is the colonial powers’ ability to render the subjugated population as ‘dead,’ as invisible, by imposing a fictitious narrative of independence on a people for whom self-determination is a futuristic concept. Ultimately, the ‘primitive’ nature of the community retrieves the dead from the place of the forgotten (the disremembered) and the homeless, bringing them back into the discourse of the nation. The dead and the black subject all serve a double sentence in the

⁶⁹ McBride, *Impossible Witnesses*, 64-65.

national economy and imagination.”⁷⁰ Thus, by ostensibly fighting over where the African-American body resided and moved (free versus enslaved, adherence to the Fugitive Slave Law that required the African-American body to be transported into the South versus abolishment of the law that allowed the African-American body to reside in the North, etc.) the conflict of the Civil War emphasized the slave’s “invisibility” or lack of “nation status” by rendering his or her body extremely visible within the war’s national discourse. The African-American subject became a signifier for the “life of the nation” rather than an agent. Like the dead, the African-American body became a subject of the living citizens’ definition of national identity.

This particular plight of the slave’s subject position resembled conceptions of nineteenth-century American white womanhood on one level. The “cult of true womanhood” in nineteenth-century America (like that of the role of the slave body in relation to American political domesticity) equally relied upon the manner in which the role of the female body constructed a national identity. Jane Tompkins explains, “The notion that women in the home exerted a moral force that shaped the destinies of the [human] race had become central to this country’s vision of itself as a redeemer nation.”⁷¹ In other words, the locally domestic role that women performed within their individual homes directly contributed to the country’s sense of identity. Conceptions of domesticity went hand in hand with the creation of American nationality.

⁷⁰ Sharon Holland, *Raising the Dead: Readings of Death and (Black) Subjectivity* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2000), 25.

⁷¹ Tompkins, *Sensational Designs*, 172.

The contrasting role and performance of masculinity in this era however, on one level placed white women in a similarly marginalized subject position. In her discussion of patriarchy and its role within family structures in nineteenth-century America, Dana D. Nelson states “Husband is to wife as reason is to passion as, finally, government is to nation. The horizontal axis functions by means of analogy to fraternally ordered commerce. Man is to man as interest is to market as, at last, government is to citizens ... In this domain, men’s interests will be abstracted from particular ones of family, class, and region, and linked instead to those of other citizens ‘like’ themselves; what they have in common will outweigh the threat of their differences.”⁷² The singular ability that white men possessed to enact their role as citizens, rendered them the sole performers and thus agents of American nationality.⁷³ On the surface then, like the enslaved subject during the Civil War, the performance of the female body within the domestic realm became central to the discourse surrounding American identity even while women were never able to fulfill the characteristics of citizenship themselves.⁷⁴

Consequently, the desire to align Harriet Jacobs’s experience in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* with the position of white women in nineteenth-century America can prove strong, especially since Jacobs seems to address these similar concerns

⁷² Nelson, *National Manhood*, 45-46.

⁷³ This idea is of course, reinforced by the fact that only white men possessed the right to vote, a Constitutional provision that defined American citizenship and agency.

⁷⁴ In fact, many abolitionist feminists of the period aligned slavery with their own domestic oppression. Karen Sanchez-Eppler cites an 1836 anecdote by Lydia Marie Child, claiming, “In Child’s story the conflation of woman and slave, and of marriage and bondage, results from difficulties in interpreting the human body. The problems of having, representing, or interpreting a body, structure both feminist and abolitionist discourses; indeed the rhetorics of the two reforms meet upon the recognition that for both women and blacks their physical difference from the cultural norms of white masculinity obstructs their claim to personhood.” *Touching Liberty*, 15.

deliberately, by constructing a narrative that mimics the structure and themes of the domestic or sentimental novel. This literary genre, largely written by and for white women, enjoyed great popular success in nineteenth-century America. Its fictional stories of heroines whose various trials serve to initiate and/or reinforce what Barbara Welter terms the “four cardinal virtues of True Womanhood ... piety, purity, submissiveness and domesticity”⁷⁵ functioned as an instructional manual for feminine behavior and roles for its largely female audience.

The structure and language of *Incidents* does follow the instructional nature of the domestic novel on one level. Many scholars point out the similarities between slave narratives and the domestic novel, citing the two genres’ equal attention to the communication of a specific meaning or agenda. Sterling Lecater Bland, Jr. for example, describes the slave narrative as follows: “Some explicitly used Christian theology; some simply used religious language and its inherent values; others used the sentimental novel to authenticate their experiences and convey meaning; yet others sought to create authority for themselves by looking outward and calling into question traditional understandings of whiteness and blackness. Virtually all slave narratives employed masking strategies that were inscribed either in their language or their descriptions of experience.”⁷⁶ Thus, like the “four cardinal virtues” of “True Womanhood” performed and expounded in the domestic novel, the slave narrative too expresses an experience from which an audience must learn. In *Incidents*, Jacobs clearly identifies her audience

⁷⁵ Welter, *Dimity Convictions*, 21.

⁷⁶ Sterling Lecater Bland, Jr., *Voices of the Fugitives: Runaway Slave Stories and Their Fictions of Self-Creation* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 2000), 3.

as white women, stating in her introduction, “I do earnestly desire to arouse the women of the North to a realizing sense of the condition of two millions of women at the South, still in bondage, suffering what I suffered, and most of them far worse. I want to add my testimony to that of abler pens to convince the people of the Free States what slavery really is.”⁷⁷ Like the domestic novel then, Jacobs thus immediately establishes both her audience (white Northern women), and the lesson to be learned from reading her narrative (the evils of slavery).

Even Jacobs’s very narrative itself is framed by the writing of white women, emphasizing the common language Jacobs speaks with them. Lydia Marie Child, the editor and sponsor of *Incidents*, also pens an introduction to the narrative in which she claims, “This peculiar phase of Slavery has generally been kept veiled; but the public ought to be made acquainted with its monstrous features, and I willingly take the responsibility of presenting them with the veil withdrawn ... I do [this] with the hope of arousing conscientious and reflecting women at the North to a sense of their duty in the exertion of moral influence on the question of Slavery, on all possible occasions” (442). Here, Child echoes the language of Jacobs’s introduction. Like Jacobs, Child calls for the “arousal” of specifically Northern women. Significantly, Child takes equal “responsibility” for Jacobs’s “testimony.” Child claims to “present” the narrative just as Jacobs discusses the use of her own “pen.” The language of white women thus writes through Jacobs, and vice-versa. Similarly, Amy Post (a “well-respected” white abolitionist) writes an afterword at the ending of *Incidents*, in which she states “The

⁷⁷ Harriet Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr., *The Classic Slave Narratives* (New York: Signet Classic, 2002), 440. All subsequent citations will refer to this edition.

author of this book is my highly-esteemed friend ... Her story, as written by herself, cannot fail to interest the reader. It is a sad illustration of the condition of this country, which boasts of its civilization, while it sanctions laws and customs which make the experiences of the present more strange than any fictions of the past” (667). Thus, Jacobs’s actual narrative, or her own words, is sandwiched between the testimonies of these two women, reinforcing the idea that Jacobs belongs within the community of white women and their concerns. She can and does literally speak their language.

Jacobs’s manner of addressing her audience additionally resembles a common motif within the domestic novel. The use of sentiment played a large role within the structure of the domestic novel as Jane Tompkins explains in *Sensational Designs*: “Successful female authors told tearful stories about orphan girls whose Christian virtue triumphed against all odds.”⁷⁸ The very title of Jacobs’s narrative suggests a story in the pages to follow of a protagonist who follows a similar journey as that of the domestic heroine. The reader will learn of a “slave girl’s” story, much like the manner in which the domestic novel presents the tale of orphan girls. The infantilization of Jacobs in the title additionally demonstrates her alignment with the domestic heroine, in terms of the “sentimental” response it aims to evoke from her readers. Jacobs significantly begins her narrative with the death of her parents, stating “I was born a slave; but I never knew it till six years of happy childhood had passed away ... Such were the unusually fortunate circumstances of my early childhood. When I was six years old, my mother died; and then, for the first time, I learned, by the talk around me, that I was a slave ... I grieved for

⁷⁸ Tompkins, *Sensational Designs*, 147.

her, and my young mind was troubled with the thought who would now take care of me and my little brother,” (445-447). Here, Jacobs immediately establishes a vulnerability that “sentimentally” appeals to the reader. Like the orphan girls of the domestic novel, Jacobs loses both of her parents at a young age, and is thrust into a harsh world in which she must fend for herself. She does not know “who will take care” of her.

Similarly, Jacobs’s declaration of her discovery that she is a slave at six years old, induces pity and sentiment within her readers, through its emphasis on her commonalities with them. The issues that Saidya Hartman raises about empathy in her condemnation of the manner in which it functions across racial boundaries to the extent that it erases the individual experience of the enslaved or marginalized and causes the empathetic individual only to “feel for himself,”⁷⁹ emerge frequently within this text. In this particular instance, by establishing that she lives six years of her life with absolutely no knowledge or indeed, evidence of her status as a slave, Jacobs reveals her shared subjectivity with her audience. Slavery has been imposed upon her, due to a specific incident (her mother’s death), rather than a stigma that immediately attaches itself to her, by virtue of her birth as an African-American. Jacobs thus suggests that slavery is a condition that is randomly assigned, rather than an innate definition of personhood. As a result, the “sentiment” the white female reader begins to feel for Jacobs, truly becomes empathetic, according to Hartman’s definition. If Jacobs (who speaks the same language and writes the same stories as her white female audience), can suddenly become a slave where she was not one before, slavery can occur to anyone who suffers an equally

⁷⁹ Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*, 19.

unfortunate mishap. Jacobs's story thus becomes the potential narrative of her reader. In "feeling for themselves," the white female audience feels for Jacobs, and vice-versa. The female slave and the white woman possess a similar plight.

Yet, Jacobs complicates this relationship with her audience by simultaneously demonstrating the manner in which her own subjectivity fundamentally differs from that of her white female readers. Although the circumstances of white women and African-American women may have superficially appeared similar, in nineteenth-century America, the "cult of True Womanhood" that domestic fiction expounded, completely excluded African-American women. In *Sensational Designs: The Cultural Work of American Fiction 1790-1860*, Jane Tompkins brought domestic fiction to the forefront of literary criticism as a viable genre worthy of study by arguing "American women simply could not assume a stance of open rebellion against the conditions of their lives for they lacked the material means of escape or opposition. They had to stay put and submit. And so the domestic novelists made that necessity the basis on which to build a power structure of their own. Instead of rejecting the culture's value system outright, they appropriated it for their own use, subjecting the beliefs and customs that had molded them to a series of transformations that allowed them both to fulfill and transcend their appointed roles."⁸⁰ This strategy of employing the dictates of the "cult of true

⁸⁰ Tompkins, *Sensational Designs*, 161. As touched upon in Chapter One, the debate over the function and/or worth of domestic fiction is a long and arduous one that still continues today. In *Sensational Designs*, Tompkins responds, in part, to Ann Douglas's *The Feminization of American Culture*, in which she labels domestic fiction "rancid writing" and deems it decidedly unfeminist in nature. In *Home Fronts: Domesticity and its Critics in the Antebellum United States*, Lora Romero assumes a different approach from both Tompkins and Douglas in her stance that "[My intent] is neither to defend domesticity as a form of cultural expression nor to join the call for an expanded canon; rather, [my] goal is to inquire into the

womanhood” as a means of asserting power and agency, is a potential mode of resistance for white women that literally cannot translate into Jacobs’s experience or narrative. At a crucial point in the narrative, Jacobs declares “And now reader, I come to a period in my unhappy life, which I would gladly forget if I could ... It pains me to tell you of it; but I have promised to tell you the truth, and I will do it honestly, let it cost me what it may ... For years, my master had done his utmost to pollute my mind with foul images, and to destroy the pure principles inculcated by my grandmother, and the good mistress of my childhood. The influences of slavery had had the same effect on me that they had on other young girls; they had made me prematurely knowing, concerning the evil ways of the world. I knew what I did, and I did it with deliberate calculation,” (500). Thus, the sexual purity that Jacobs intends and desires to uphold, due to slavery, becomes absolutely impossible for her to maintain. As Hazel Carby states, “While the portrayal of black women as defiant, refusing to be brutalized by slavery, countered their representation as victims, it also militated against the requirements of the convention of true womanhood.”⁸¹ Because she is a slave, Jacobs must exchange virtue for submission or vice-versa. She must either defy her master, one whom she is expected to obey, or “submit” to a sexual relationship that exists outside the confines of marriage. This

theoretical assumptions about power and resistance underlying contemporary debates about dominant and oppositional cultures” (4).

⁸¹ Carby, *Reconstructing Womanhood*, 38. It should be noted here that Jacobs’s direct addresses to her readers, necessarily carries a profoundly different political gesture from that of Stowe’s. Although both women enact a potential transgression of proper nineteenth-century femininity through “speaking” within the public sphere in their texts, Jacobs must more overtly assert herself within her narrative, through her necessary use of the “authentic” first-person.

paradox renders Jacobs unable to adhere to either feminine code effectively, rendering a resistance such as Tompkins suggests, impossible.

Consequently, as an African-American female slave, Jacobs additionally faces an exclusion from and subjugation to the concerns and experiences of white women. As Kari J. Winter explains, “In relation to white men, white women were substantially disadvantaged in the nineteenth-century literary and political world. However, in relation to black women, white women wielded substantial power, which they used and abused in a variety of ways.”⁸² This advantage that white women possessed in the struggle for voice and agency becomes evident in Jacobs’s narrative as well. Although Child and Post seemingly emphasize their alignment with Jacobs in their respective foreword and afterword, they also in a sense, appropriate Jacobs’s testimony. In “willingly taking responsibility” for the narrative, Child suggests that she is the one who truly writes and presents the narrative. Similarly, although Post credits *Incidents* to Jacobs by stating that her “story” is “written by herself,” the fact that the testimonies of these two women literally surround Jacobs’s narrative, simultaneously undermine the authority and authenticity of Jacobs’s story, as well as emphasize the power of Child and Post. Child and Post encapsulate and subjugate Jacobs’s narrative within their own testimonies, while simultaneously distancing themselves from the direct experience of the writer. Child and Post, in effect, inform us of the manner in which we should read the narrative, by describing for us what it is and what it does immediately before and after we read it. If as Henry Louis Gates, Jr. claims, “Writing, especially after the printing press became so

⁸² Winter, *Subjects of Slavery*, 31.

widespread, was taken to be the visible sign of reason ... What remained consistent was that black people could become speaking subjects only by inscribing their voices in the written word,”⁸³ then, on one level, the voices that possess ultimate visibility in this narrative are Child’s and Post’s, since theirs are what the reader views first and last. Jacobs’s voice is indeed “inscribed” within her “written word,” but is also significantly embedded within two others’.

However, in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, Jacobs presents a self that, in blurring the boundaries between fixed categories of race and gender, constructs an identity that ultimately not only resists slavery, but the subjugation and exclusion of her experience as an African-American woman. The collapsed boundaries between truth and fiction in *Incidents* has led both Jacobs’s contemporary audience and more recent scholarship to question the veracity of her narrative. As Rafia Zafar explains, “Until well into the twentieth century, the reception of *Incidents* attested to the continuing difficulty of Jacobs’, or any black woman writer’s, gaining an audience: faced with the ‘double negative’ of black race and female gender, Jacobs ... had to contend with a skeptical readership that said her work could not be ‘genuine’ because of her emphasis on the domestic, her ‘melodramatic’ style, and her unwillingness to depict herself as an avatar of self-reliance.”⁸⁴ Indeed, Jacobs’s opening sentences in her Preface immediately call into question the roles of truth and fiction in her narrative. The Preface begins “Reader, be assured this narrative is no fiction. I am aware that some of my adventures may seem

⁸³ Gates, *The Signifying Monkey*, 129-130.

⁸⁴ Rafia Zafar, “Introduction: Over-exposed, Under-exposed: Harriet Jacobs and *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*,” ed. Rafia Zafar and Deborah M. Garfield, *Harriet Jacobs and Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl: New Critical Essays* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 4.

incredible; but they are, nevertheless, strictly true. I have not exaggerated the wrongs inflicted by Slavery; on the contrary, my descriptions fall far short of the facts. I have concealed the names of places, and given persons fictitious names” (439). Thus, Jacobs “assures” us of the truth of her narrative, while openly informing us of the fact that she has constructed “fictitious names” in the same breath. She also significantly claims she does not exaggerate the “wrongs” of slavery, indicating that she may indeed have embellished the actual events.

The fact that she writes under the pseudonym Linda Brent also complicates the authenticity of the self she presents to her audience. Significantly, this act of openly assuming another name also marks an important and complex moment of resistance for Jacobs/Brent. In his discussion of the significance of what he terms “unnaming” or “the refusal to be named” for African-American resistance, Kimberly Benston claims, “The act of unnameing is a means of passing from one mode of representation to another, of breaking the rhetoric and ‘plot’ of influence, of distinguishing the self from all else – including Eros, nature and community.”⁸⁵ In pointing out to her readers, that she is substituting the name given to her for another one, Jacobs/Brent thus “unnames” herself by creating another “mode of representation.” In doing so, she “distinguishes” her true name (or one representation of the self) from all other influences by rendering it indiscernible to her audience. Paradoxically and significantly however, this particular form of self-distinction occurs precisely because it is unknown and disguised. In a

⁸⁵ Kimberly W. Benston, “I yam what I yam: The Topos of un(naming) in Afro-American Literature,” *Black Literature and Literary Theory*, ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (New York and London: Routledge, 1984), 153.

similar vein, Jacobs uses some of the same words that Child and Post employ in their foreword and afterword.⁸⁶ For antebellum readers who, as Kari J Winter claims, “wanted to read slave narratives as passive reflections of the ‘facts’ of slavery,”⁸⁷ who is truly speaking, and what actually is being performed in Jacobs/Brent’s narrative becomes pointedly difficult to discern.

“Reading the (Writing) Self”

As a result, the manner in which Jacobs/Brent’s audience reads her narrative becomes of the utmost importance. Many contemporary scholars experience difficulty interpreting *Incidents* in their attempts to categorize it. Karen Sanchez-Eppler argues that “Although the domestic constitutes the conditions under which [Jacobs/Brent] writes, the feminine travails that order her plot, and the locus and the goal of the story she tells, Jacobs’ narrative is nevertheless a document of exclusion from the domestic.”⁸⁸ Sanchez-Eppler, thus reads *Incidents* as a narrative that deliberately works against the cult of domesticity. Joanne M. Braxton on the other hand, views the narrative in terms of its resemblance to autobiography, claiming “*Incidents* evolves from the autobiographical tradition of heroic male slaves and a line of American women’s writing that attacks racial

⁸⁶ In fact, due to these similarities, and Child’s claim of “responsibility for the narrative,” many readers believed that Lydia Marie Child may have written *Incidents* herself.

⁸⁷ Winter, *Subjects of Slavery*, 37.

⁸⁸ Sanchez-Eppler, *Touching Liberty*, 88.

oppression and sexual exploitation.”⁸⁹ Most critics then, in reading *Incidents* as part of or against a specific genre, simultaneously reinforce the separation between author and reader in their interpretation of Jacobs/Brent’s narrative. While the recognition of the text’s resemblance to the conventions of the domestic novel or the slave narrative tradition is undoubtedly important, what is certainly equally significant (if not more so) is the particular role the reader brings to the narrative.

In fact, *Incidents* ultimately defies genre classification by disrupting those boundaries between writer and reader. As Carla Kaplan points out in her discussion of feminist writing, “Narrative exchange can be the means of the very social transformations it seeks to reflect and represent.”⁹⁰ Within her own narrative, Jacobs/Brent enacts this “narrative exchange” through merging the subject positions of herself and the reader. Within the slave narrative tradition, the narrator’s demonstration of his/her literacy was an important strategic factor in resisting slavery. Kari J. Winter explains, “Restrictions against literacy grew more severe in the nineteenth century, as slave holders became increasingly fearful of slave revolts ... Slave narratives, by their mere existence, demonstrated that slaveholders’ power was not absolute and that black people were intelligent human beings. Thus the texts were always, inevitably, subversive.”⁹¹ Indeed, Jacobs/Brent’s own demonstration and overt attention to her ability to read and write,

⁸⁹ Joanne M. Braxton, *Black Women Writing Autobiography: A Tradition within a Tradition* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1989), 23.

⁹⁰ Carla Kaplan, *The Erotics of Talk: Women’s Writing and Feminist Paradigms* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 11.

⁹¹ Winter, *Subjects of Slavery*, 33.

becomes a literal and figurative means for her to denounce slavery. In *Incidents*, when Jacobs/Brent first escapes, she states, “Before night, the following advertisement was posted at every corner, and at every public place for miles round: \$300 REWARD! Ran away from the subscriber, an intelligent, bright, mulatto girl, named Linda, 21 years of age. Five feet four inches high. Dark eyes, and black hair inclined to curl; but it can be made straight. Has a decayed spot on a front tooth. She can read and write, and in all probability will try to get to the Free States,” (549). Thus, by possessing the ability to read her own reward notice, Jacobs/Brent can literally enact her escape more easily. She knows what her pursuers and the general public will be on the lookout for, and she can disguise herself as necessary.⁹² Additionally, Jacobs/Brent’s ability to present this reward notice within her narrative (or reinscribe this writing within her own) demonstrates her common humanity with her reader. Jacobs/Brent can read and write this notice just as well, if not better than her audience can. Who reads and who writes this notice then, become indistinguishable entities. Through her literacy, Jacobs/Brent is thus able to “subvert” her status as a slave through controlling the movement of her body and her narrative. Consequently, her own subjectivity becomes a fluid category, and one that cannot be innately or unproblematically assigned.

Jacobs/Brent’s simultaneous use of the motifs of the cult of domesticity within her slave narrative additionally reinforces this collapse of the boundary between writer and reader, rendering an unproblematic classification of *Incidents* impossible. Where the

⁹² Jacobs/Brent does in fact, later disguise herself as a sailor in a key element of her escape plan, stating “I passed several people whom I knew, but they did not recognize me in my disguise,” (565). Thus, Jacobs/Brent’s ability to read and write not only establishes her common humanity with her readers, but her ability to assume citizenship, by easily disguising herself as a white man.

domestic novel functioned as an instructional manual for white feminine behavior, in Incidents, Jacobs/Brent instructs her similarly white female audience how to react to slavery by firmly placing them within the narrative, rather than speaking to them as passive recipients. Jacobs/Brent's attention to her domestic duties as a slave aligns her closely with her readers, while simultaneously establishing the important manner in which she differs from them. Early in the narrative, Jacobs/Brent claims, "My mistress was so kind to me that I was always glad to do her bidding, and proud to labor for her as much as my young years would permit. I would sit by her side for hours, sewing diligently, with a heart as free from care as that of any free-born white child ... The slave child had no thought for the morrow; but there came that blight, which too surely was on every human being born to be a chattel" (447-448). As the submissiveness and obedience of the young girls in domestic novels exemplify their virtue, Jacobs/Brent's happy willingness to do her own mistress' "bidding" aligns her with the domestic heroine.⁹³ Similarly, Jacobs/Brent's "heart" possesses the same "carefree" emotions as a "free-born white child." Jacobs/Brent thus shares many of the same characteristics as the "free-born white child" who is the domestic heroine.

Yet, this passage is also laced with language that calls attention to the fact that Jacobs/Brent is simultaneously *not* the domestic heroine from whom her audience is accustomed to learning. Jacobs/Brent's mistress, although seemingly benevolent, is

⁹³ One comparison that easily comes to mind is the opening scene in Susan Warner's 1850 domestic novel, *The Wide, Wide World* in which the young heroine's task of making her beloved mother's tea "was Ellen's regular business. She treated it as a very grave affair, and loved it as one of the pleasantest in the course of the day ... She had the greatest satisfaction in seeing that the little her mother could eat was prepared for her in the nicest possible manner." (New York: The Feminist Press at the City University of New York, 1987), 13.

nevertheless a slaveowner. Jacobs/Brent can be as carefree “as” a white child, but she is decidedly not one. The “blight” that is to befall Jacobs/Brent is slavery, a plight that her white female readers will never share. Although Jacobs/Brent speaks the same language as the domestic novel, she does not occupy the same position as its heroine. Thus, to read Incidents solely as an “exclusion” from or inclusion within the cult of domesticity or the slave narrative “tradition” proves impossible. The resemblance to one genre only calls attention to the other, and vice-versa.⁹⁴

As a result, the position of the reader within the framework of *Incidents* becomes equally fluid. In her preface, Jacobs/Brent claims “I have not written my experiences in order to attract attention to myself ... Neither do I care to excite sympathy for my own sufferings” (439-440). Even before we read her narrative then, Jacobs/Brent thus immediately informs us of the manner in which we should read it. Significantly, this prescribed reading involves one in which the reader must work within the narrative rather than passively receive it. Jacobs/Brent does not want to “attract attention to herself,” nor does she desire “sympathy.” In a first-person narrative that is supposed to inform her reader of “incidents” within her “life,” this initial move to deflect attention *away* from herself, rather than place her individual experiences as the center of her discourse, situates the reader in an ambiguous position. If Jacobs/Brent (the narrator of the slave

⁹⁴ In *Self-Discovery and Authority in Afro-American Narrative*, Valerie Smith calls attention to this particular strategy of Jacobs’s, stating, “By pointing out the similarities between her own story and those plots with which her readers would have been familiar, Jacobs could thus expect her readers to identify with her suffering. Moreover, this technique would enable them to appreciate the ways in which slavery converts into liabilities the very qualities of virtue and beauty that women were taught to cultivate ... She acknowledges that however much her story may resemble superficially the story of the sentimental heroine, as a black woman she plays for different stakes; marriage is not the ultimate reward she seeks.” (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987), 37-42.

narrative that is supposed to impart to us the “facts” of her experience as a slave) does not wish us to focus on herself, the role and consequent self that the reader brings to the narrative becomes equally difficult to define.

Instead, Jacobs/Brent constructs a narrative in *Incidents* that equally “attracts attention” to the reader. In the narrative structure of *Incidents*, Jacobs/Brent uses empathy to place *responsibility* on the reader, rather than allow the reader merely to appropriate the narrator’s own pain. Towards the end of her narrative, when Jacobs/Brent has escaped to the North, and still must be constantly on the watch for her former owners, she declares “Reader, if you have never been a slave, you cannot imagine the acute sensation of suffering at my heart, when I read the names of Mr. and Mrs. Dodge, at a hotel in Courtland Street” (658). Superficially, this statement exemplifies Saidiya Hartman’s definition of empathy perfectly. By directly addressing the “acute suffering” she feels to the reader, the pain Jacobs/Brent experiences as a slave becomes that of the reader’s. Jacobs/Brent’s particular experience becomes lost.

However, in this statement, Jacobs/Brent simultaneously emphasizes the fact that the reader has in fact, “never been a slave.” Since Jacobs/Brent overtly states in her preface that she writes for white Northern women, the “if” in her address becomes obviously absurd. Both Jacobs/Brent and her audience know fully that the “reader” she addresses has never experienced slavery. Thus, by placing the reader squarely within the narrative while simultaneously distancing herself from her, Jacobs/Brent forces the reader to condemn slavery by assessing her own true complicity and role within it, rather than appropriate or fully understand the narrator’s experience. After all, Jacobs/Brent

specifically states that if one has not experienced slavery, one “cannot imagine” her pain. The direct address of the reader that emphatically distinguishes the “you” of her audience from the “I” of Jacobs/Brent further emphasizes the separation between the narrator and reader. If the reader “cannot imagine” Jacobs/Brent’s “suffering,” she must, in fact, look inward, and examine herself. The act of reading *Incidents* then, becomes one where the reader must simultaneously “write” the text as well, filling in the spaces and gaps that Jacobs/Brent does not allow us to see or “imagine.”

As a result, Jacobs/Brent demonstrates the manner in which nineteenth-century readings of race can prove equally fallible, especially in the connection between visibility and racial hierarchies. In *American Anatomies*, Robyn Wiegman elaborates on this idea by claiming, “The visible negation of ‘blackness,’ ... prefigures ... racial indeterminacy, demonstrating how the ‘logic’ of race in U.S. culture anchors whiteness in the visible epistemology of black skin.”⁹⁵ Thus, as Wiegman explains, American constructions of whiteness revolve around visibility and negation. One can determine whiteness through what one is not (a visibly raced body). Whiteness then, becomes synonymous with invisibility. Because of his/her visibility as a raced body then, the black subject is denied personhood.⁹⁶ This notion of visibility in terms of race, also significantly emphasizes the corporality of the black body, while rendering the white citizen almost ethereal. If the

⁹⁵ Wiegman, *American Anatomies*, 21.

⁹⁶ This relationship between invisibility, whiteness, and power is rehearsed in Richard Dyer’s *White*. Dyer argues, “As long as race is something only applied to non-white peoples, as long as white people are not racially seen and named, they/we function as a human norm. Other people are raced, we are just people.” (New York: Routledge, 1997), 1.

white citizen is invisible, he is not only not defined solely through his body, but suggests that he may, in fact, not even possess one.

In *Incidents*, Jacobs/Brent disrupts this racial boundary by rendering whiteness and the raced body equally and simultaneously visible and invisible. When Jacobs/Brent informs Dr. Flint (her master who has repeatedly attempted to coerce her into a sexual relationship) of her pregnancy by a white man, the scene reads as follows: “He ordered me to stand up before him. I obeyed. ‘I command you,’ said he, ‘to tell me whether the father of your child is white or black.’ ... I did answer. He sprang upon me like a wolf, and grabbed my arm as if he would have broken it ... He raised his hand to strike me; but it fell again. I don’t know what arrested the blow. He sat down, with lips tightly compressed,” (506-507). Here, the white body exudes visibility. Dr. Flint “springs upon” Jacobs/Brent like “a wolf.” His “lips” are “tightly compressed.” We view decidedly physical manifestations of his rage. Jacobs/Brent’s body, on the other hand, remains strikingly invisible. Her “answer” to Dr. Flint does not even appear in dialogue. Her body is invisible, and even intangible (Dr. Flint cannot strike her). In this scene, Dr. Flint is certainly the body that we view.

Yet, Jacobs/Brent presents more than a simple reversal of racial roles in this scene. She simultaneously demonstrates the manner in which these motifs of visibility and negation blend together, rendering race as a visual determinant of personhood indiscernible. The whiteness of the father of Jacobs/Brent’s child stays Dr. Flint’s hand. However, the fact that a child in antebellum America, as Jacobs/Brent states early in her narrative “follow[ed] the condition of the mother” (486) proves significant. This

nineteenth-century law further reinforced the idea of white invisibility, discounting white male participation in sexual intercourse, as well as focusing on the extreme visibility of the pregnant African-American female body. Within her body then, Jacobs/Brent possesses the invisibility of whiteness (the child in her womb) and the visibility of race (her own status as a slave, and the role her unborn child will soon have to follow).⁹⁷ Thus, whiteness becomes an invisible power on many levels that drives the scene. It will determine the subject position of Jacobs/Brent and her child, but it also prevents Dr. Flint from touching her body as well (an action that is legally granted to him as a slaveowner). Consequently, the visual markers of race begin to merge, rendering power, citizenship, and personhood, roles that are not achieved solely by white men.

Thus, domesticity becomes the means through which Jacobs/Brent constructs the fallibility of strictly established racial and gender boundaries. Her incorporation of the seduction narrative common in the domestic novel in her relationship with Dr. Flint, demonstrates the manner in which the desire for domestic virtue cannot always match real experience. In his discussion of the libertine in domestic fiction, Leonard Tennenhouse argues, “For all the stories in which the lack of a proper education delivers the young heroine into the clutches of a libertine, there are almost as many in which education provides no protection from him at all ... In contrast with British domestic fiction, American seduction stories condemn neither the seducer nor the woman seduced so much as the underlying cause of seduction, which it attributes to the disparity between

⁹⁷ This duality is further complicated by Jacobs/Brent’s own mixed genealogy. Within the first paragraph in the narrative, Jacobs/Brent establishes that her parents were “In complexion ... a light shade of brownish yellow, and were termed mulattoes” (445). Jacobs/Brent thus immediately points to the manner in which visual markers of race were becoming less and less fixed.

desire and economic necessity.”⁹⁸ Thus, Tennenhouse locates the cause of seduction in terms of economics rather than in the heroine’s ability to read her seducer.

In *Incidents*, Jacobs/Brent demonstrates the manner in which slavery (an economic system) causes every man (regardless of his “desire”) to perform the role of the libertine. Tennenhouse describes the libertine figure as one who “generate[s] desire for that which he defiles, desire that can only be gratified by accepting the defiled element into the family whose very identity depended on casting her out.”⁹⁹ This figure that poses a threat to the family’s sense of “identity” easily manifests itself in *Incidents* in the character of Dr. Flint. In a chapter ironically titled “The Trials of Girlhood,” Jacobs/Brent tells us, “I now entered on my fifteenth year - a sad epoch in the life of a slave girl. My master began to whisper foul words in my ear. Young as I was, I could not remain ignorant of their import ... He was a crafty man, and resorted to many means to accomplish his purposes. Sometimes he had stormy, terrific ways, that made his victims tremble; sometimes he assumed a gentleness that he thought must surely subdue. Of the two, I preferred his stormy moods, although they left me trembling. He tried his utmost to corrupt the pure principles my grandmother had instilled” (470). Here then, Dr. Flint poses a threat to Jacobs/Brent’s virtue that is simultaneously prefigured as an inevitable “defilement.” The title of the chapter, as well as the fact that Jacobs/Brent’s “fifteenth year” automatically signifies a “sad epoch in the life of a slave girl,” demonstrate that Dr. Flint’s “foul whispering” indicates almost a rite of passage for the

⁹⁸ Leonard Tennenhouse, “Libertine America” (*differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies*, v. 11.3, 1999/2000), 7-12.

⁹⁹ Tennenhouse, “Libertine America,” 6.

slave girl.¹⁰⁰ The fact that the actual content of Dr. Flint's "whispers" do not appear for the reader, additionally reinforces the fact that Jacobs/Brent's experience is not unique. The "foul words" are "trials" that every slave girl must endure at some point. Jacobs/Brent's identity as a slave can only be maintained by undermining her familial sense of self, or the "corruption" of her grandmother's "principles." Dr. Flint's "craftiness," cruelty, and threat to Jacobs/Brent's sexual purity and virtue blatantly signal that he is a dangerous figure.

Yet, Dr. Flint is not the only dangerous male character or seducer in this narrative. Jacobs/Brent's strategic sexual relationship with a "sympathetic" white "gentleman," complicates the role of the libertine, as well as those of seduction and desire. Jacobs/Brent introduces Mr. Sands by stating "It chanced that a white unmarried gentleman had obtained some knowledge of the circumstances in which I was placed. He knew my grandmother, and often spoke to me in the street. He became interested for me, and asked questions about my master, which I answered in part. He expressed a great deal of sympathy, and a wish to aid me. He consequently sought opportunities to see me, and wrote to me frequently ... By degrees, a more tender feeling crept into my heart ... Of course, I saw whither all this was tending ... It seems less degrading to give one's self, than to submit to compulsion. There is something akin to freedom in having a lover who has no control over you, except that which he gains by kindness and attachment ... I thought [Dr. Flint] would revenge himself by selling me, and I was sure my friend, Mr.

¹⁰⁰ The title of course, also ironically points to the fact that, unlike the domestic heroine, the "trials of girlhood" for the slave will always involve a direct threat to sexual purity that is virtually impossible to overcome.

Sands, would buy me ... Of a man who was not my master I could ask to have my children well supported; and in this case, I felt confident I should obtain the boon” (501-502). Thus, here, Mr. Sands appears to be a foil for Dr. Flint. He is Jacobs/Brent’s “friend.” He expresses “sympathy” and a desire to “aid” Jacobs/Brent. Significantly, he also appears to grant Jacobs/Brent an agency that Dr. Flint does not. Jacobs/Brent seduces Mr. Sands on one level, by recognizing “whither all this was tending,” and exercising control over her own body and offspring. She in fact, chooses with whom she will have a sexual relationship, thus ensuring the “necessity” of freedom for herself and her children.¹⁰¹ Superficially, Mr. Sands appears to be the “good” choice, while Dr. Flint exemplifies the evil libertine whom Jacobs/Brent should avoid at all costs.

Yet, this type of narrative where Jacobs/Brent must choose the “correct” mate, ultimately does not play out this neatly or definitively. As Saidiya Hartman points out, “Seduction erects a family romance – in this case, the elaboration of a racial and sexual fantasy in which domination is transposed into the bonds of mutual affection, subjection idealized as the pathway to equality, and perfect subordination declared the means of ensuring great happiness and harmony.”¹⁰² Indeed, despite their different modes of “seduction,” there are many striking and equally sinister similarities between Dr. Flint and Mr. Sands. Both men employ “gentle” and “kind” tactics with Jacobs/Brent, modes

¹⁰¹ The fact that Jacobs/Brent ultimately gives up the idea of marrying a free black man with whom she is in love, also emphasizes the strategy of her relationship with Mr. Sands. As Jacobs/Brent declares, “My lover was an intelligent and religious man. Even if he could have obtained permission to marry me while I was a slave, the marriage would give him no power to protect me from my master. It would have made him miserable to witness the insults I should have been subjected to. And then, if we had children, I knew they must ‘follow the condition of the mother.’ What a terrible blight that would be on the heart of a free, intelligent, father! For *his* sake, I felt that I ought not to link his fate with my own unhappy destiny,” (486). Thus, the “necessity” of overcoming her “destiny” supersedes the desire of love.

¹⁰² Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*, 89.

of “seduction” that she definitively finds “less preferable.” Where Dr. Flint employs “many means to accomplish his purposes,” Mr. Sands “sought many opportunities” to see Jacobs/Brent. Both men thus possess a decided agenda in their interactions with Jacobs/Brent. After all, while Mr. Sands may appear a preferable choice to Jacobs/Brent, he desires a purely sexual relationship with her, just as Dr. Flint does. What the two men want from Jacobs/Brent is the same, and is equally threatening to her grandmother’s principles.

In fact, Mr. Sands’s continuous inability to act on behalf of Jacobs/Brent and her children, renders him on many levels, even more dangerous than Dr. Flint. During the seven-year period that she hides in her grandmother’s garret, Jacobs/Brent actually physically leaves her hiding place to plead with Mr. Sands to buy and free her children: “Mr. Sands was elected [to the Senate]; an event which occasioned me some anxious thoughts. He had not emancipated my children, and if he should die they would be at the mercy of his heirs ... I supposed he would call before he left, to say something to my grandmother concerning the children, and I resolved what course to take. The day before his departure for Washington I made arrangements toward evening, to get from my hiding-place into the storeroom below. I found myself so stiff and clumsy that it was with great difficulty I could hitch from one resting place to another ... ‘Oh, Linda,’ said he, ‘I knew your voice; but I was afraid to answer, lest my friend should hear me. Why do you come here? Is it possible you risk yourself in this house? They are mad to allow it. I shall expect to hear that you are all ruined’ ... [Jacobs/Brent:] ‘I want nothing for myself; all I ask is, that you will free my children, or authorize some friend to do it before

you go' ... He promised he would do it and also expressed a readiness to make any arrangements whereby I could be purchased" (579-580). Thus, Mr. Sands verbally expresses his "sympathy" with Jacobs/Brent, but does not take any definitive action to stop the "madness" that he sees occurring. He proclaims his amazement at the fact that Jacobs/Brent "risks herself in the house," but offers no means to rescue her from this potential peril.¹⁰³ Yet, Mr. Sands is not definitively portrayed as insincere either. By paraphrasing Mr. Sands, Jacobs/Brent demonstrates her own difficulty in reading his character. He "expresses" his "readiness" to help, but Jacobs/Brent and the reader are both left unsure of whether he will actually do what he promises or not. Mr. Sands thus presents himself as a character that is neither definitively duplicitous, nor a completely trustworthy ally.

In his unreadability then, Mr. Sands ultimately poses the biggest threat to the freedom of Jacobs/Brent and her children, and thus, a large contributor to slavery itself. Despite Dr. Flint's cruelty, Jacobs/Brent can read him in a way that she cannot with Mr. Sands. After her escape to the North, Jacobs/Brent receives a letter that she immediately recognizes as Dr. Flint's disguised writing: "This letter was signed by Emily's brother, who was as yet a mere lad. I knew, by the style, that it was not written by a person of his age, and though the writing was disguised, I had been made too unhappy by it, in former years, not to recognize at once the hand of Dr. Flint ... Did the old fox suppose I was goose enough to go into such a trap? ... I did not return the family of Flints any thanks for their cordial invitation - a remissness for which I was, no doubt, charged with base

¹⁰³ Jacobs/Brent also takes great care to point out that Mr. Sands is a newly elected senator, emphasizing the idea that he certainly has the political and economic power to help her if he so chooses.

ingratitude” (632). Thus, Jacobs/Brent can literally read Dr. Flint’s character. She can recognize his writing, his voice, the letter’s true purpose as a “trap,” and can even predict “without a doubt,” his reaction to her lack of response to his letter. As a result, Jacobs/Brent can protect herself and her children from the insidious threat Dr. Flint poses to their liberty. She does not “return thanks” for the “cordial invitation,” thus ensuring that the Flints do not receive any additional information about her whereabouts. Conversely, Jacobs/Brent must physically put herself in danger by leaving her hiding place to talk to Mr. Sands. She also thoroughly depends on him to buy and free her children. Her inability to predict his behavior gives her no other choice than to rely on his word, or a “fantasy,” as uncertain as it might prove. Thus, by blurring the boundaries between what constitutes seducer/seduced,¹⁰⁴ libertine/hero, and desire/necessity, Jacobs/Brent demonstrates the manner in which slavery renders not only the domestic narrative impossible, but also the fact that the construction of selfhood and subjectivity cannot be categorized in binary terms. The white man who owns no slaves and is “sympathetic” to their plight, but engages in sexual relationships with them, can equally render their bodies as captive as any cruel slaveowner.

The depiction of Mrs. Flint as a seducer of Jacobs/Brent within *Incidents* also pointedly calls attention to the particular role of white women in slavery. Karen Sanchez-Eppler describes white female identification with the female slave’s experience with sexual abuse as follows:

¹⁰⁴ Jacobs/Brent further problematizes this binary by the fact that she is not genuinely “seduced” by either Sands or Flint, according to the terms of the “seduction narrative.” She does not mistakenly fall in love with either man. In fact, the one man she does love (the “intelligent and religious man” who embodies the virtuous qualities she *should* love), due to slavery, cannot even exist as an option for her. See footnote 45.

In the writings of antislavery women the frequent emphasis on the specifically feminine trial of sexual abuse projects the white woman's sexual anxieties onto the sexualized body of the female slave ... The figure of the slave woman, whose inability to keep her body and its uses under her own control is widely and openly recognized, becomes a perfect conduit for the largely and unacknowledged failure of the free woman to own her own body in marriage.¹⁰⁵

In other words, according to Sanchez-Eppler, through "sexualizing" a female slave's body in their texts, white abolitionist women gained a form of control over their own bodies and sexuality that was usually lost under white patriarchal strictures. While the character of Mrs. Flint is decidedly not an abolitionist, the manner in which she responds to Jacobs/Brent's "sexualized" body, demonstrates a definitive displacement of white female sexual anxiety. Jacobs/Brent informs us that after Mrs. Flint discovers that her husband has been propositioning Linda, "She now took me to sleep in a room adjoining her own. There I was an object of her especial care, though not of her especial comfort, for she spent many a sleepless night to watch over me. Sometimes I woke up, and found her bending over me. At other times she whispered in my ear, as though it was her husband who was speaking to me, and listened to hear what I would answer. If she startled me, on such occasions, she would glide stealthily away; and the next morning she would tell me I had been talking in my sleep, and ask who I was talking to. At last, I began to be fearful for my life," (477). Here, Mrs. Flint regains ownership of her own "sexualized" body (an agency that has been lost due to her inability to stop her husband

¹⁰⁵ Sanchez-Eppler, *Touching Liberty*, 22-23.

from having sex with Jacobs/Brent) through effectively substituting herself in his patriarchal role. Like Dr. Flint, Mrs. Flint “whispers” in Linda’s ear, disguising herself as him. Mrs. Flint’s own anxiety regarding the complete lack of control she has over the role of sex within her marriage (or effectively her own body) becomes displaced onto Linda. It is now Mrs. Flint who dictates where Linda’s body will move and reside, and like Mrs. Flint’s inability to protest anything her husband does, Linda is rendered powerless under Mrs. Flint’s word and gaze.

Moreover, Mrs. Flint assumes this power over Linda through mimicking not just her husband, but white patriarchy itself. As Gillian Brown explains, “Welded to the market activities generally available only to white men, possessive individualism obviously reflects a masculine selfhood.”¹⁰⁶ Thus, in individually possessing Linda by controlling the movement of her body, Mrs. Flint is able to assume power that is notably associated with masculinity. In fact, in regards to this particular scene, Hortense Spillers states “In the case of the doctor’s wife, she appears not to have wanted her body at all, but to desire to enter someone else’s, specifically, Linda Brent’s, in an apparently classic instance of sexual ‘jealousy’ and appropriation.”¹⁰⁷ Indeed, under Mrs. Flint’s “especial care,” Jacobs/Brent becomes an object as Mrs. Flint’s “whispers” continuously penetrate Jacobs/Brent’s ear or her body. Significantly, Mrs. Flint attempts to exhibit control over Jacobs/Brent’s words themselves, listening intently to Linda’s potential “answers,”

¹⁰⁶ Brown, *Domestic Individualism*, 2. It should be noted here that Brown argues that American nineteenth-century domesticity seemed to offer a “feminization of selfhood” for women that was ultimately unattainable.

¹⁰⁷ Hortense Spillers, *Black, White, and in Color: Essays on American Literature and Culture*. (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2003), 223.

informing her that she has been “talking in her sleep,” and continuously asking her to whom she was “talking.” It is immediately after this last admission that Jacobs/Brent declares she is “fearful” for her life, a worry that is never expressed (despite her evident horror and disgust) in any of her encounters with Dr. Flint in such blatant terms. In her encounters with Mrs. Flint however, Jacobs/Brent’s very narrative is at stake, as Mrs. Flint attempts to control and construct that as well. In relating this incident then, Jacobs/Brent thus exposes an ugly truth within the narrative of American domesticity under slavery. In the domestic role white women are forced to play under slavery, instead of maintaining the familial and private sphere, what they ultimately give birth to instead, is the perpetuation of slavery.

Thus, by rendering domestic spaces and roles simultaneously liberating and confining in her narrative, Jacobs/Brent resists the idea that any person can be identified and defined through solely one categorization, be it slavery or the “cult of true womanhood.” For Jacobs/Brent, motherhood becomes a source of both strength and oppression.¹⁰⁸ At one point during her hiding period, Jacobs/Brent bemoans, “This lady [Mrs. Sands], who had no children of her own, was so much pleased with Ellen [Jacobs/Brent’s daughter], that she offered to adopt her, and bring her up as she would a daughter ... When grandmother reported this to me, I was tried almost beyond endurance. Was this all I was to gain by what I had suffered for the sake of having my children free? ... I had no trust in thee, O Slavery! Never should I know peace till my children were emancipated with all due formalities of law” (593). Thus, Jacobs/Brent’s “sufferings” are

¹⁰⁸ Lora Romero claims, “The Revolutionary-era idea of Republican motherhood is in some sense the precursor of domesticity.” *Home Fronts*, 14.

rendered more acute because of the existence of her children. They are two more bodies besides her own that Jacobs/Brent has to find a way to liberate. The constant threat of having them taken from her, “tries” Jacobs/Brent “beyond her endurance.” Indeed, the existence of her children becomes another means through which slave owners may oppress her.

Yet, Jacobs/Brent’s children also lend her the determination that she requires to break free from slavery. After Dr. Flint threatens her children during her confinement in the garret, Jacobs/Brent declares, “I heard of the old doctor’s threats, but they no longer had the same power to trouble me ... Whatever slavery might do to me, it could not shackle my children. If I felt a sacrifice, my little ones were saved,” (562). The knowledge that she can “save” her children keeps Jacobs/Brent hidden within the garret that makes her “stiff and clumsy.” The determination to liberate her children becomes a source of strength that keeps Jacobs/Brent concealed within her hiding place (despite her discomfort), and safe from Dr. Flint herself. He no longer holds the “same power” over her. Jacobs/Brent’s performance of motherhood or the “precursor to domesticity” becomes one that neither fully complies with the “cult of true womanhood” nor completely refutes it.

Similarly, Jacobs/Brent’s seven-year occupation in her hiding place demonstrates a performance within a domestic space that simultaneously oppresses and emancipates her. Jacobs/Brent describes her experience in the garret as follows: “The storeroom opened up on the piazza. To this hole I was conveyed as soon as I entered the house. The air was stifling; the darkness total. A bed had been spread on the floor. I could sleep

comfortably on one side; but the slope was so sudden that I could not turn on the other without hitting the roof ... I was eager to look on [my children's] faces; but there was no hole, no crack, through which I could peep. This continued darkness was oppressive. It seemed horrible to sit or lie in a cramped position day after day, without one gleam of light. Yet, I would have chosen this, rather than my lot as a slave, though white people considered it an easy one; and it was so compared with the fate of others" (568). Thus, Jacobs/Brent's physical occupation in a room of a house (the sphere of nineteenth-century femininity) literally suffocates her. The air is "stifling," and her body must continuously exist in a "cramped position." On one level, the space of domesticity becomes one of complete oppression. It literally controls and "cramps" the movement of her body.

However, Jacobs/Brent's occupation of this space simultaneously offers her freedom. Jacobs/Brent states openly that she prefers the "cramped" experience of the garret over her "lot as a slave." Her position in a room that looks over the "piazza," also places Jacobs/Brent in a unique position of power. Jacobs/Brent further states, "Southerners have the habit of stopping and talking in the streets, and I heard many conversations not intended to meet my ears. I heard slave-hunters planning how to catch some poor fugitive. Several times I heard allusions to Dr. Flint, myself, and the history of my children, who, perhaps, were playing near the gate ... Had the least suspicion rested on my grandmother's house, it would have burned to the ground ... Yet there was no place, where slavery existed, that could have afforded me so good a place of concealment" (571). This power of invisibility that Jacobs/Brent possesses further

reinforces her ability to blur the boundaries of race and subjectivity in this scene. In *Discipline and Punish*, Michel Foucault argues that power itself is invisible, claiming “[it is] capable of making all visible ... [it is] a faceless gaze that transform[s] the whole social body into a field of perception: thousands of eyes posted everywhere.”¹⁰⁹ Thus, in her ability to see the people below her, where they in turn cannot see her, Jacobs/Brent enacts a “faceless gaze” that confirms her position of power. She can hear conversations “not intended to meet her ears,” as well as keep herself apprised of Dr. Flint’s plans. Significantly, Jacobs/Brent’s invisibility also enables her to transcend visual markers of race. She can assume an invisible power as well. Thus, by neither fully embracing domesticity, nor completely rejecting it, Jacobs/Brent constructs a self that, in its inability to be categorized, resists subjugation.

By blurring the boundaries between what constitutes individuality and community, Jacobs/Brent additionally resists subjugation of all people besides herself. The community of women that can become a source of strength for the domestic heroine and her reader¹¹⁰ can transform into a means of appropriation and subjugation for African-American women. As Katherine Clay Bassard points out, “In discussing the linkages among history, African-American culture, and community, scholars proceed from assumptions about the interrelationship of race, culture, and community that have

¹⁰⁹ Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (trans. Alan Sheridan, Reprint, New York: Pantheon, 1977), 214.

¹¹⁰ As Jane Tompkins explains, “[Domestic] fiction presents an image of people dominated by external authorities and forces to curb their own desires; but as they learn to transmute rebellious passion into humble conformity to others’ wishes, their powerlessness becomes a source of strength. These novels teach the reader how to live without power while waging a protracted struggle in which the strategies of the weak will finally inherit the earth” (*Sensational Designs*, 165).

gone unexamined. That is, the presence of black culture is seen as evidence of and as an index to the presence of a collective known as 'black' people."¹¹¹ Thus, by asserting her own experience as an African-American woman, Jacobs/Brent runs the risk of her narrative being viewed by her readers as representative of every slave body. As a result, individual personhood becomes lost and negated.

Jacobs/Brent avoids this potential erasure, however, by simultaneously emphasizing the manner in which the members of her community resemble and differ from each other. Most scholars, in fact, make much of figures like Aunt Nancy and Jacobs/Brent's grandmother in their ability to aid and provide examples for Jacobs/Brent. Jacqueline K. Bryant for example, asserts, "It is ironic that [the grandmother], who is free, is not liberated, and Aunt Nancy, who is enslaved, is liberated and clothed in her right mind ... Aunt Nancy has not experienced freedom, but she embraces freedom and wants for Jacobs and her children in life what she will experience only in death - freedom from enslavement. Freedom is something she wants so much that Jacobs' experiencing it will serve vicariously for Aunt Nancy."¹¹² Figures such as Aunt Nancy do assume a great importance in Jacobs/Brent's narrative. Jacobs/Brent describes the death of Aunt Nancy as follows: "My aunt had been stricken with paralysis. She lived but two days [after her illness], and the last day she was speechless ... To me, the death of this kind relative was an inexpressible sorrow. I knew that she had been slowly murdered; and I felt that my troubles had helped to finish the work. After I heard of her illness, I listened

¹¹¹ Katherine Clay Bassard, *Spiritual Interrogations: Culture, Gender, and Commodity in Early African American Women's Writing*, (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1999), 127.

¹¹² Jacqueline K. Bryant, *The Foremother Figure in Early Black Women's Literature*, (New York and London: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1999), 62.

constantly to hear what news was brought from the great house,” (601-602). Thus, on one level, the death of Aunt Nancy holds great significance for the construction of Jacobs/Brent’s narrative and selfhood. It lends Jacobs/Brent an “inexpressible sorrow” and guilt. Significantly, the “paralysis” of Aunt Nancy towards the end of her illness resembles Jacobs/Brent’s own restriction of movement in the garret. Aunt Nancy and her death begin to blend with the construction and presentation of Jacobs/Brent’s own identity.

Yet, the fact that Jacobs/Brent emphasizes that Aunt Nancy is unable to speak, underscores the important truth that Aunt Nancy possesses a story that is not being told. Additionally, Jacobs/Brent experiences similar epiphanies at the death of Mrs. Bruce (her Northern white friend who houses her when she escapes from the South). When Mrs. Bruce dies, Jacobs/Brent declares “In the spring, sad news came to me. Mrs. Bruce was dead. Never again, in this world, should I see her gentle face, or hear her sympathizing voice. I had lost an excellent friend,” (643). As with Aunt Nancy, Jacobs/Brent’s sorrow at Mrs. Bruce’s death is bound up with the manner in which Mrs. Bruce has contributed to Jacobs/Brent’s narrative. She has “sympathized” with Jacobs/Brent’s plight. Significantly, the fact that Jacobs/Brent emphasizes that she will never hear Mrs. Bruce’s “voice” again, demonstrates the latter’s separation from the author. Her “voice” is decidedly different from Jacobs/Brent’s. Jacobs/Brent also significantly “hears the news” of both women’s deaths, rather than directly experiences them, further reinforcing the idea that their stories are not the same as the writer’s.

Consequently, the fact that Jacobs/Brent details the death of these two women in particular, proves significant. Death was an important motif in the domestic novel. As Jane Tompkins explains, “The power of the dead or the dying to redeem the unregenerate is a major theme of nineteenth-century popular fiction and religious literature.”¹¹³ Indeed, the “pure” deaths of both Aunt Nancy and Mrs. Bruce serve an important function for Jacobs/Brent. They both cause her to look introspectively, take stock of what the two women have sacrificed for her, thus sanctifying them in a similar manner. However, these two women are decidedly not the same. Aunt Nancy is a slave, while Mrs. Bruce is a free white woman. Aunt Nancy’s literal death also then, reinforces the figurative death or the negation of personhood for the raced subject, in a way that Mrs. Bruce (by virtue of her white skin) does not experience. Thus, in her first-person narrative (which by nature, excludes a first-hand account of other narratives), Jacobs/Brent simultaneously emphasizes the fact that her narrative (while indicative of the evils of slavery) is not representative of every individual’s story.

As a result then, the meaning the reader ultimately derives from Jacobs/Brent’s narrative becomes twofold. Towards the very end of her narrative, she proclaims, “Reader, my story ends with freedom; not in the usual way, with marriage,” (664) thus pointing to the fact that she has escaped the confines of both slavery and domesticity. She is a free subject, and a free woman. Most importantly, “freedom” becomes a concept that Jacobs/Brent has achieved and defined on her own terms. In a society where individuals are defined and categorized according to supposedly innate truths,

¹¹³ Tompkins, *Sensational Designs*, 128.

Jacobs/Brent's mode of resistance becomes one in which she constructs a self, that in blurring the boundaries between these binaries, potentially transcends subjugation. If one cannot strictly categorize her according to the dictates of what constitutes a true slave, or a true woman, Jacobs/Brent forces her audience to recognize and validate her unique identity.

Part II: Reading the Black Body

Chapter 3: Reconstructing Discourse: Feminine Voice in the Work of Frances

Harper

The nineteenth-century African-American female poet and novelist Frances Harper's particular usage of discourse in her literary work has certainly not been without political controversy, most notably in her 1892 novel *Iola Leroy*.¹¹⁴ Harper's seemingly deliberate choices regarding the *type* of discursive voice her poems utilize, become crucial to understanding and examining the visual motifs surrounding her various representations of African-American identity. During one of Frances Harper's many lectures in the American South during the Reconstruction era, she describes with great indignation the brutal hanging of a seventeen-year-old slave at the brink of the Civil War's end. The girl's vocal expression of excitement regarding the foreseeable Union victory prompted her execution.¹¹⁵ This effective and fundamental silencing of an African-American woman's voice provides a particularly disturbing example of the combination of nineteenth-century American racism and sexism functioning concurrently. Presumably, the young woman's hanging had much to do with her race, and her consequent failure to adhere to her submissive slave status. However, the fact

¹¹⁴ In the introduction to the novel, Hazel Carby points out the novel's inauthentic use of the African-American vernacular. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1987 edition). This will be discussed in more detail later in this chapter.

¹¹⁵ Melba Joyce Boyd recounts this incident in *Discarded Legacy: Politics and Poetics in the Life of Frances E.W. Harper* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1994), 123.

that her actual statement expressed her desire to marry and start a family with a Union soldier may account for the particular brutality of her execution. Her crime became doubly offensive because she also crossed prescribed feminine boundaries by expressing a desire, or in effect, speaking. The need to construct and express a viable feminine voice surfaces continuously in Harper's body of work. Indeed, her decision to relate the incident above to a large body of people demonstrates her concern. While the modern reader who reads Harper for the first time will probably be able to identify the particular issues she treats in her poems immediately (i.e. abolition, temperance, literacy, etc.), her poetic treatment of the feminine voice (while obviously important to her) may not necessarily appear as clear and direct. However, her inhabitation of a world in which sexism additionally strengthened and (in many cases) even prevailed over racism compelled Harper to treat the feminine voice poetically in a particularly strategic manner. She accomplishes this feat by constructing her various political agendas in her poetry in a manner that revolves around and relies upon the feminine voice. Harper's intense involvement in the abolitionist cause before the Civil War, induced her to construct an individual feminine voice in her pre-Civil War poetry by establishing connections and a common humanity with her audience/readers. Conversely, Harper's activism in civil rights and racial uplift during Reconstruction allowed her to shape poetically a distinct African-American female identity through increasingly distancing the feminine voice from her audience/readers. Through these techniques, or in effect, continuously constructing her own discourse, Harper subtly ensures that, no matter what the issue, her audience/readers will hear and absorb a woman's voice and outlook.

Voice and orality themselves played a large role in Frances Harper's poetry and her life. In their discussions of Harper, both Dorothy Sterling and Melba Joyce Boyd devote a considerable amount of time to the poet's frequent lecturing. Both Sterling and Boyd also include firsthand accounts of the mesmerizing effect Harper's voice in particular had upon her audiences. In *We are Your Sisters: Black Women in the Nineteenth Century*, Sterling includes one observer's assessment of Harper as "Eloquent and expressive, with a voice that could be heard in the back rows."¹¹⁶ With this historical information in mind, Fahamisha Brown's assertion that "a 'written orality' is achieved for African-American poetry in the intersection of oral and aural, sound and appearance,"¹¹⁷ seems appropriate with regards to Harper. She embodied a very prominent and strong vocal persona, yet still composed a written body of poetry. At the most basic level, Harper indeed lived as both an oral performer and a literary poet.

In Harper's case, these two lives do indeed intersect through her poetic inclusion of the feminine voice. Maryemma Graham's statement that Harper's peers primarily saw her as a "supremely oral poet,"¹¹⁸ indicates the indivisibility of Harper's vocal persona and literary ventures. The fact that Graham chooses to introduce the poet through the manner in which her contemporaries view her, also demonstrates the extreme importance of audience in Harper's poetry. In fact, of the little scholarly treatment that

¹¹⁶ Dorothy Sterling, *We are Your Sisters: Black Women in the Nineteenth Century* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1984), 160.

¹¹⁷ Fahamisha Brown, *Performing the Word: African-American Poetry as Vernacular Culture* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1994), 41.

¹¹⁸ Maryemma Graham, "Introduction" ed. Maryemma Graham, *Complete Poems of Frances E.W. Harper* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), xxxiii.

surrounds Harper's poetry, most of it does treat her choice of language specifically in terms of its rhetoric for an intended audience. Melba Joyce Boyd's analysis of Harper's abolitionist poetry in *Discarded Legacy: Politics and Poetics in the Life of Frances E. W. Harper*, concludes that these poems exhibit the manner in which racism fundamentally interacts with sexism. Boyd presumes that when Harper "focus[es] on the perspective of the slave woman, [she] exposes the oppressive nature of the white patriarchal slave society."¹¹⁹ Robyn Wiegman in *American Anatomies: Theorizing Race and Gender* also notes the general prominence of gender in what she calls "abolitionist discourse." According to Wiegman, abolitionist works "routinely stressed the gendered aspects of enslavement, marking a similarity or sameness among all social subjects that strategically placed the slave on the side of humanity."¹²⁰ Both scholars note an inextricable dualism between race and gender issues in abolitionist work.

Both Wiegman and Boyd pinpoint important and valid aspects of abolitionist poetry. Harper after all, was both African-American and female. She personally faced both racism and sexism in her daily life. Consequently, her poems from a female slave's point of view actually do accomplish a simultaneous indictment of racism and sexism. Wiegman's point that "gendering" slaves in abolitionist work represents a strategy for changing audience viewpoints toward a slave's fundamental humanity,¹²¹ also appears

¹¹⁹ Boyd, *Discarded Legacy*, 58.

¹²⁰ Wiegman, *American Anatomies*, 11.

¹²¹ In *American Anatomies*, Wiegman discusses at great length the manner in which gender and race intersect in American culture and literature, notably in terms of white feminization of the African-American male body.

correlative with Harper's pre-Civil War poetry. However, through this strategic attempt to establish the slave's common humanity with her audience, Harper's feminine perspective in her pre-Civil War poetry does not just expose a dual racism/sexism inherent in slavery or nineteenth-century American white patriarchal society. The female point of view in Harper's poems also actually constructs a viable and important feminine voice that subtly and inevitably compels her audience/readers'¹²² acknowledgment.

Duality in general plays a large role in Harper's pre-Civil War poetry. The very title of her poem "Eliza Harris" indicates a particularly significant dualism to her 1853 audience. Because of the fairly recent publication of Harriet Beecher Stowe's wildly popular and controversial *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, (its first serial installment came to press in 1851) most audiences/readers of the poem would immediately recognize the name in the title as that of the runaway slave mother in Stowe's novel. Because the novel's main popularity significantly rested with a white literate abolitionist audience, even white non-abolitionists in this era had certainly heard of Stowe's work, and one could venture to say, in many cases might actually have read it.¹²³ The title of "Eliza Harris," then demonstrates a connection with the reading audience, in that the poet shows she has obviously read *Uncle Tom's Cabin* as well. Yet, the title also conveys that, in writing a poem either focusing solely on Eliza Harris, or from the character's perspective, the poet introduces a new voice other than Stowe's to interpret a particular incident and character.

¹²² Because of Harper's dual work in oral performance and literary output, I will refer to the readers of her poetry as audience/reader.

¹²³ See Chapter One for further discussion of the historical reception and readership of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*.

The actual content of the poem also treats a very familiar scene from the novel. Harper poetically reinscribes the scene in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* where Eliza Harris flees a slave plantation with her infant in her arms. While the actual narrative events of the poem contain very little variation from the scene in Stowe's novel, the poem focuses on Eliza's emotions and motivations in great detail. Harper's reinterpretation of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* then, consists of lending further poetic voice to an already established fictional character. The fact that Harper chooses a female character from Stowe's book to poeticize proves significant. After all, the multitude of similarly oppressed characters (both male and female) from *Uncle Tom's Cabin* provides a large number from which Harper has her pick to exemplify the evils of slavery. However, her choice of a female character, who specifically runs the risk of having her infant child taken from her, proves extremely effective for both a white male and female audience. An intricate examination of the young mother's fears regarding her child's safety combined with an infant's innate helplessness (even more so than older children) truly and "strategically place the slave on the side of humanity," in accordance with Wiegman's observation.¹²⁴

In fact, the manner in which the poem identifies and describes the people within it, demonstrates a concerted effort to connect with a white audience through the establishment of human "sameness." Throughout the poem, both Eliza and the infant are frequently troped as white, further increasing white audience members' identification with her. The "innocent face" of the infant is "So pale in its aspect, so fair in its

¹²⁴ The poem was, in fact, extremely effective in moving people's emotions on both sides of the abolitionist issue. Melba Joyce Boyd claims that "the publication of ["Eliza Harris"] ... aggravated an already existing antagonism between the two abolitionist camps." Boyd, *Discarded Legacy*, 60.

grace.”¹²⁵ Similarly, Eliza is “So fragile and lovely, so fearfully pale,/ Like a lily that bends to the breath of the gale” (lines 29-30). Thus, Harper presents her white audience/readers with a heroine whose oppressed status specifically derives from the color of her skin, or the determining factor in what distinguishes those who are slaves from those who are not. Yet, by pointing out the “paleness” of Eliza and the infant, Harper demonstrates the manner in which these two beings possess no real difference from the white audience/readers.¹²⁶

Yet, it is through these attempts to establish a common humanity with the audience/reader, that “Eliza Harris” demonstrates an individual feminine voice. The poem constructs a connection with the audience through inseparably mingling its multiple dualities and antitheses. The poem begins “Like a fawn from the arrow, startled and wild,/ A woman swept by us, bearing a child” (lines 1-2). The first line of this poem compares “a woman” to a “fawn,” or a baby deer, indicating that the woman possesses a childlike, even infantile air in her flight. Yet, the second line of the poem also quickly points out that the woman “bear[s] a child,” demonstrating simultaneously her maternity. Indeed, because the poem so quickly introduces the child the woman carries, the audience/reader can accurately assume the child has some role in the urgency of the woman’s flight. The word “bearing” also suggests both the act of literally carrying the infant, and actual childbirth. The double meanings in these first two lines indicate

¹²⁵ “Eliza Harris” lines 9-10. *Complete Poems of Frances E.W. Harper* ed. Maryemma Graham (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988). All subsequent citations will refer to this edition.

¹²⁶ This strategic move may also be a reference to that upheld belief that a slave’s status was determined by his/her mother, regardless of how “white” or “fair” the child may have appeared. Harper thus points out the manner in which establishing racial difference as a determinant of human hierarchy proves problematic.

immediately that Eliza will not be a character from whom one can draw superficial conclusions. Since the poem significantly reveals Eliza's slave status only after establishing her maternal identity, the white audience/reader must infer that she (an African-American) possesses an equally human amount of complexities. The poem positively identifies the woman as a slave in the second stanza in line seven with "For she is a mother -/ her child is a slave." Because, as Melba Joyce Boyd points out, "American society defines the black race by maternal linkage to slavery,"¹²⁷ a white audience/reader can accurately infer the mother's slave status from that of her child's. Yet, because the poem opens by specifically discussing a woman's relationship to her child with hints of childbirth, it simultaneously and subtly implies the intricate complexities of a woman, as well as a slave.

The poem blends a multitude of narrative voices in order to construct an individual feminine one. It begins with an inclusive voice. Line two describes "a woman [who] swept by us." In Stanza three, line nine, Eliza's face "was a vision to haunt us" (line 9). The use of "us" indicates that the speaker and her audience/readers literally experience the poem together. The fact that Harper writes these opening lines in the past tense also signifies a double meaning. The speaker and her audience/readers share a common experience in that they have both read *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. They all know the story and its outcome. Yet, Harper's poem "Eliza Harris" is importantly not Stowe's novel. It has a different title, an African-American woman (as opposed to a white one) writes it, and it fits within a completely different literary genre. Also, the speaker literally draws the

¹²⁷ Boyd, *Discarded Legacy*, 178.

reader into the poem, and its events. Because Eliza “swept by us,” and possesses “a vision to haunt us,” the reader assumes emotional and moral responsibility for Eliza’s pursuers. Through this usage of the plural first person point of view and the past tense, the audience/reader receives the impression that the events in this poem actually occurred. Now, the audience/reader must experience Eliza’s emotions with her.

The fact that Harper seems perfectly willing to whiten Eliza and her infant in this poem, can initially prove troublesome, since this construction might seemingly diminish their African-American identities. In vocally immersing her white audience/readers into a poem that contains a familiar story written by a white woman, Harper strategically and safely establishes an inseparable connection with them that could ostensibly portray white humanity as the standard to which African-Americans must aspire. However, the poem’s initial statement, “a woman swept by us,” implies the sole agency of Eliza herself in the poem. “We” simply watched as the chase took place. Again, the poem’s usage of the past tense implies that all that takes place in the poem has already been established. The speaker only recounts the actual events. Both the speaker and audience/reader can only see what are Eliza’s true emotions. Consequently, Eliza (the figure of the slave) determines and constructs her own voice and identity. It is instead through Harper’s connection of her own voice to that of the audience/reader, that she yields Eliza a voice of her own. Eliza will ultimately decide when and how her white audience/readers will see her true humanity.

This merging of voice becomes more complex when the poem moves to the first person point of view. Stanza five begins “Oh! how shall I speak of my proud country’s

shame” (line 17). This isolation of Harper’s own voice¹²⁸ proves significant because of her own dual persona as an educated African-American woman who never actually experienced slavery.¹²⁹ Harper’s own vocal insertion into a literary text, thus serves as an intermediary between an oppressed female slave who cannot speak, and a white audience to whom she can speak through literature (both through the poem itself and through reference to a commonly read novel). Since the poem’s initial use of an inclusive “us” to establish voice places such a large emphasis on interaction between the poet and the audience/reader, the sudden switch to the first person point of view forces and emphasizes the audience/reader’s sole dependence on Harper’s voice to work through the poem. The words “I speak,” also of course signify a duality between sound and vision. If reading the poem, the reader sees the words “I speak,” while understanding that the meaning of the words signify sound as well. If actually hearing Harper recite the poem in a lecture forum, the audience receives the double experience of hearing her voice as well as seeing her actual person. This use of the first-person perspective in “Eliza Harris” calls extreme attention to the fact that, in every sense, the audience/reader becomes truly dependent on the poet’s own voice.

Consequently, Harper’s own status as an African-American female renders the beginning of stanza five, “how shall I speak of my proud country’s shame/ Of the stains on her glory, how give them their name?” (lines 17-18), more than just a powerful statement about the unspeakable atrocities of slavery. It becomes an equally formidable

¹²⁸ Because of the extraordinarily oral and performative aspects of Harper’s poetry, I am conflating the speaker’s voice with that of Harper’s. An audience listening to this poem read aloud would no doubt, experience this particular instance in the poem as that of Harper’s particular voice.

¹²⁹ For a comprehensive history of Harper’s life, see Boyd, *Discarded Legacy*.

reminder about Harper's own ability to speak. Even though she asks "how shall I speak?" Harper actually does speak, and thoroughly. Line nineteen further asks "How say that her banner in mockery waves -/ Her star-spangled banner - o'er millions of slaves?" (lines 19-20). Harper thus demonstrates her ability to describe while simultaneously questioning it. While this question may appear rhetorical, the interactive nature of the poem (especially when one takes into account Harper's oral and persuasive capabilities), also renders the idea of a direct questioning of her audience entirely possible. Through connecting with her audience/reader, Harper establishes and emphasizes her own feminine voice as well as an African-American one.

Harper's linkage to her audience/readers in "Eliza Harris" also proves instrumental in the establishment of Eliza's own distinct feminine voice. Harper's voice in the poem serves as an intermediary between the audience/reader's understanding and Eliza's ability to speak. The poem begins in the first-person plural point of view, and ends in the third-person singular perspective. Stanza five and stanza six possess the sole usage of the first-person singular point of view in the entire poem. Stanza six continues with the same line of questioning, but leaves out the "I," instead asking in lines 21-24, "How say that the lawless may torture and chase/ A woman whose crime is the hue of her face?/ How the depths of the forest may echo around,/ With the shrieks of despair, and the bay of the hound?" Stanza seven continues in a strictly third-person narrative: "With her step on the ice, and her arm on her child,/ The danger was fearful, the pathway was wild" (lines 25-26). By stanza ten, the poem's composition consists of the present tense, and ends with it. Thus, Harper's voice or use of "I" becomes the catalyst for the poem's turning point,

where the poetic narrative moves from a familiar story in the past that involves “us,” to a current experience that belongs to a distinct, single individual, or “she.” The last stanza reads, “With the rapture of love and foulness of bliss,/ She plac’d on his brow a mother’s fond kiss:-/ Oh! poverty, danger and death she can brave,/ For the child of her love is no longer a slave!” (lines 45-48). Through its final employment of the present tense, the poetic narrative now truly belongs to Eliza. In describing Eliza’s actions and emotions as they occur, Harper additionally becomes the vehicle for Eliza’s voice.

In doing so, Harper is able to bridge the gap between the audience/reader and Eliza. By stating “She plac’d on his brow a mother’s fond kiss,” (line 46), the poem connects Eliza with a white (or any member of the human race for that matter) audience through empathy. In placing “a” mother’s “fond kiss,” upon her child, Eliza demonstrates her universality through motherhood. Anyone who has any connection with a mother figure, should experience some sort of emotional (or at least comprehensible) linkage to what “a mother’s fond kiss” entails. Again, this wording demonstrates Eliza’s humanity. The fact that she experiences human emotion is juxtaposed with the poem’s use of animal imagery. The poem consistently places Eliza in a hunter/hunted scenario. Her pursuers exhibit bestial qualities, in that their description revolves around the “tramp of the horse and the bay of the hound” (line 11). They mostly possess no concrete description that would classify them as human individuals. The poem often refers to them indirectly and enigmatically as “the danger” (lines 16, 26, and 47). The one description in the poem that solidly links them to a human being emerges in line 42, when Eliza escapes and “The hunter is rifled and foil’d of his prey.” The audience/reader can see quite clearly

throughout the entire poem that Eliza's slave-holding pursuers possess animalistic, monstrous, and significantly stereotypically masculine qualities. Conversely, the poem's continuous emphasis on the depth of Eliza's fears and emotions exhibits her humanity as opposed to the slave-holders' animalistic tendencies. This tactic reverses a commonly held nineteenth-century belief among white Americans (supported by phrenology) that the African-American race possessed ape-like qualities, and were in fact, closer to animals than humans.¹³⁰ In identifying with a slave on an emotional level, the audience/reader not only views her as a human being, but indeed sees in her a humanity that is richer and more convincing than that of her pursuers.

However, because Eliza is a female slave, the audience/reader must simultaneously acknowledge her humanity as a woman. The contrast between the male bestial pursuers and Eliza's love for her son that drives her to enact a successful escape, connects the human qualities of thought and emotion with a female as well as a slave. Additionally, the phrase "a mother's fond kiss," in addition to demonstrating a universal connection with the audience/reader, simultaneously signifies Eliza's individuality. She is "a" particular mother. In becoming the vehicle for the slave's voice to reach her audience/readers, Harper's gendering of the slave ensures that a feminine voice emerges as well.

Slavery's effects on the family structure play a large role in Harper's Pre-Civil War poetry. Lori Merish in *Sentimental Materialism* specifically includes Harper in her assertion that African-American women writers in the nineteenth-century "maintained in

¹³⁰ Robyn Wiegman's *American Anatomies* engages in a fascinating discussion of phrenology in the nineteenth century and how these practices led to the scientific confirmation of racial stereotypes.

their fiction the domestic emphasis characteristic of nineteenth-century ‘woman’s fiction.’” In doing so, these authors combatted racial stereotypes by displaying “sensibility, refinement, and home,” or what people in the era would see as “white femininity.”¹³¹ Merish’s assertions possess merit regarding Harper’s poetry. Harper’s 1854 poem, “The Fugitive’s Wife,” emphasizes the severance of a domestic family structure in its portrayal of slavery. The poem’s speaker underscores the slave family structure, by beginning “It was my sad and weary lot/ To toil in slavery,/ But one thing cheered my lowly cot-/ My husband was with me” (lines 1-4). The poem’s speaker delights in her role as a wife, and in keeping a home (however “lowly”), much as any proper white woman in the nineteenth-century should. The next stanza also includes a domestic scene that foreshadows the husband’s inevitable departure. It reads “One evening, as our children played/ Around our cabin door,/ I noticed on his brow a shade/ I’d never seen before” (lines 5-9). The “shade” on the husband’s “brow” contrasts with the speaker’s initial statement regarding her husband’s sole ability to “cheer” her from “slavery’s toil.” Additionally, the juxtaposition of the children’s play around the “cabin door” with the husband’s “shade,” displays for the audience/reader both that the slaves in the “cabin” possess a patriarchal family structure (a father, mother, and children), and that its destruction will be imminent and emotionally devastating.

The fact that neither the poem nor the speaker ever fully elaborates why the husband leaves proves significant. Although the husband is clearly a fugitive, whether he decides to leave because of a specific incident (particularly cruel treatment, his imminent sale,

¹³¹ Lori Merish, *Sentimental Materialism: Gender, Commodity, Culture, and Nineteenth-Century American Literature* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000), 260.

perhaps even a crime he may have committed) or his weariness from slavery itself remains debatable. Indeed, one can validly read the poem in any of these ways. This lack of clarification indicates that the husband's reasons for flight really do not matter. The institution of slavery is what ultimately and thoroughly causes the family structure's destruction through instigating and forcing the father's abandonment.

The speaker's female voice in this poem (like that of "Eliza Harris") serves a dual purpose. In focusing on the wife's pain in this scenario, the poem shows that marital love exists between slaves, and consequently compels the reader to experience equally the emotional consequences of a father's forced desertion. In her discussion of "sentimental narration," Merish describes Harper's novel *Iola Leroy* as a text that "appropriates the language of sentiment to signify race differently."¹³² This "appropriation" emerges in "The Fugitive's Wife" as well. Stanza four's opening lines, "He strained me to his heaving heart-/ My own beat wild with fear" (lines 13-14), contain an almost histrionically emotional tinge that refutes the common white nineteenth-century stereotype that African-Americans are inherently slow and dull.¹³³

Yet, Harper also uses the "sentimental appropriation of language" in this poem through her complication of gendered sexuality. In *Performing the Word*, Fahamisha Brown states that for many African-American males in African-American folklore, "sexual prowess ... is the basis of identity and affirmation."¹³⁴ However, in this poem, all

¹³² Merish, *Sentimental Materialism*, 230.

¹³³ See footnote 26.

¹³⁴ Brown, *Performing the Word*, 87.

feelings and experiences of sexuality rest with the female speaker. In mentioning that her husband “cheer[s] [her] lowly cot,” the speaker asserts her marriage and her consequent domesticity through their communal bed, or her implied sexual enjoyment of her husband. The poem’s consequent primary focus on the speaker’s distress over losing her husband thus implies the pain of both emotional and sexual separation.¹³⁵ Conversely, the husband’s emotional pain remains devoid of “sexual prowess.” The poem’s speaker relates “He vainly strove to cast aside/ The tears that fell like rain:/ Too frail, indeed, is manly pride,/ To strive with grief and pain” (lines 17-20). This “sentimental” language describing the husband’s pain, not only “signifies race differently” in its portrayal of human emotion, it signifies gender differently as well. “Manly pride” is actually “frail.” Indeed on one level, the wife’s “sexual prowess” lends her poetic “identity and affirmation.” Her voice controls the poem. Since the husband contains no such sexual capabilities or feelings, he does not receive the same identity, and can only speak through his wife’s voice. In fact, the husband never does truly speak in the poem. Stanza three reads “And in his eyes a gloomy night/ Of anguish and despair;/ I gazed upon their troubled light,/ To read the meaning there” (lines 9-12). The speaker derives her own meaning from simply looking upon her husband. When the fugitive tells his wife he must leave, the audience/reader hears his statement through his wife’s mediation. The speaker states “Again he clasped me to his breast,/ And said that we must part” (lines 21-22). In forcing the husband to desert his wife and children, the institution of slavery strips away his identity, and the patriarchal family structure.

¹³⁵ “Cot” could also signify an abbreviation for the word “cottage.” In either case, the speaker uses her own voice to assert her own emotional and physical control over the domestic realm.

However, the female speaker's first-person narration in the poem simultaneously indicates a subversion of traditional patriarchal sexuality. Just as the wife overtly demonstrates that she needs and desires her husband sexually, the fugitive's lack of sexuality and consequent identity indicate that he equally needs her. In fact, the husband completely depends on his wife for his sexual prowess and self-affirmation. Once he leaves her, he cannot accomplish either. Conversely, the speaker (although sexually deprived of her husband as well) speaks directly to the audience. She speaks in the past tense, exhibiting the fact that her husband's flight has already taken place. At the moment the audience/reader experiences the poem, she presumably no longer lives with her husband. Nothing in the poem gives the audience/reader any indication that she sees her husband again. Indeed, the tone of despair in the poem demonstrates otherwise. Additionally, the finality of the last two lines "No longer live a helpless slave,/ The meanest thing on earth" (lines 26-27), shows that her husband may have found a new identity that does not involve a slave existence. As Melba Joyce Boyd declares, "The paradoxical 'The Fugitive's Wife' considers the conflicting response to a freedom tale. A slave woman simultaneously mourns and rejoices her husband's escape from slavery."¹³⁶ The poem thus also provides an implicit justification for male slaves who flee their families. However, since the speaker is not with her husband, and the audience/reader depends on her voice for the poem's narrative, one can only imagine his newfound identity, and the poem certainly does not concretely affirm it. The speaker can retain sexuality without depending on it for her sense of self and poetic voice.

¹³⁶ Boyd, *Discarded Legacy*, 66.

As in “Eliza Harris,” Harper’s own voice in “The Fugitive’s Wife” plays a large role in the construction of the speaker’s. Both poems begin by narrating an incident involving a woman in the past tense. In “The Fugitive’s Wife,” however, the speaker maintains a self-reflexive voice throughout the poem, and does not deviate from the past tense. Yet, again, both the audience/reader and the speaker specifically rely on Harper’s poetic construction as an intermediary in order to connect with each other. Although the speaker poetically narrates her own story, she still acknowledges her own difficulty with speaking. Most of the poem contains very even rhymes and rhythms. However, in the penultimate stanza, the speaker laments, “Again he clasped me to his breast,/ And said that we must part:/ I tried to speak - but, oh! it seemed/ An arrow reached my heart” (lines 21-24). The break in the poem’s rhythm in line 23 reflects the crack in the speaker’s vocal flow. Her emotional pain overwhelms her ability to speak both to her husband and the audience/reader.

Consequently, the last stanza’s multilayered voices and strong rhythm and rhyme appear slightly out of sync with the rest of the poem. The speaker narrates “‘Bear not,’ I cried, ‘unto your grave,/ The yoke you’ve borne from birth;/ No longer live a helpless slave,/ The meanest thing on earth!’” (lines 25-29). The quotation marks surrounding these four lines and the insertion of the words “I cried” indicate that the speaker addresses her husband in this stanza. Yet, the fact that the poem ends with these lines and elicits no response from her husband hints at a variety of possibilities. The speaker may address her husband retroactively. She can also speak to her audience/reader. Since the audience/reader does not know the exact reasons for the fugitive’s flight, the speaker

may also claim responsibility in these lines for instigating her husband's decision to escape. In any case, the speaker paraphrases herself. This multi-layered voice in the last stanza also subtly reminds the reader of Harper's own in the poem. Although Harper certainly does not embody the persona of this speaker, she does compose the poem. Only through her does the speaker actually vocalize. While this idea remains true of many poems and poets, the construction of the last stanza in "The Fugitive's Wife" calls attention to this fact, by isolating and ultimately emphasizing a first-person vocal perspective, or the use of an "I" who directly addresses a "you." This construction blatantly signifies a conversation between poet and audience/reader as much as it does two characters in the poem. Thus, Harper's abolitionist agenda in the pre-Civil War era calls for her to construct sympathy for slaves by connecting their humanity to that of a white audience/readership. Yet, in serving as an intermediary to link the slave to her audience/readers, Harper may use the feminine voice to establish simultaneously a distinct African-American female identity, whose voices during this era were often thoroughly silenced.

Frances Harper's poetry demonstrates the importance of the social function of discourse through the definitive shift that takes place between her antebellum and post-war poems in the type of African-American subject she represents for political purposes. Michel Foucault defines discourse as belonging to three categories: "the general domain of all statements ... an individualizable group of statements, and ... a regulated practice

that accounts for a number of statements.”¹³⁷ For Foucault then, discourse not only encompasses all uttered statements, but any social “practice” that shapes them. As a result, discourse proves neither self-contained nor static. As Michael Bennett points out in *Democratic Discourses: The Radical Abolition Movement and Antebellum American Literature*, “Discourse ... is a socially imbedded and historically developed language connected to a specific social formation.”¹³⁸ The manner in which writers aesthetically employ discourse in their works is inextricably connected to political or “social” structures. Moreover, as Justin Edwards additionally states, “Discourses ... are not monolithic: they frequently include tensions and contradictions that must be taken together to fully understand the functions of particular discursive structures.”¹³⁹ In other words, any given discourse may not necessarily reflect a consistent political or social agenda or view. In addition, since discourse is a “socially imbedded language,” the ways in which different readers approach and understand it within any given historical period or cultural viewpoint may vary.

The concept of the African-American body as discourse had complex implications in the nineteenth-century, and was particularly connected with the idea of visibility. The manner in which antebellum Americans defined race and racial hierarchies was through the notion of what constituted the “visible.” Robyn Wiegman elaborates on her argument

¹³⁷ Michel Foucault, *The Archeology of Knowledge*, Trans., A.M. Sheridan Smith. (London: Tavistock, 1972), 80.

¹³⁸ Michael Bennett, *Democratic Discourses: The Radical Abolition Movement and Antebellum American Literature* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2005), 4.

¹³⁹ Justin D. Edwards, *Gothic Passages: Racial Ambiguity and the American Gothic* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2003), xxiii.

that American culture “anchors whiteness in the visible epistemology of black skin” by stating, “Such an epistemological relationship circumscribes our cultural conception of race, contributing above all to the recurrent and discursively, if not always materially, violent equation between the idea of ‘race’ and the black body.”¹⁴⁰ Since the white body was seen as essentially invisible¹⁴¹, the black body’s hypervisibility rendered him/her a “raced” subject through in effect, his/her embodiment. It is through the connection between visual “difference” and “truth” that social hierarchies based upon race were effectively established. As Dorothy Roberts states,

Only a theory rooted in nature could systematically account for the anomaly of slavery existing in a republic founded on a radical commitment to liberty, equality, and natural rights. Whites invented the hereditary trait of race and endowed it with the concept of racial superiority and inferiority to resolve the contradiction between slavery and liberty. Scientific racism explained domination by one group over another as the natural order of things: Blacks were biologically destined to be slaves, and whites were destined to be their masters.¹⁴²

In other words, by defining “race” as natural, antebellum Americans could reconcile the division of the races into “superior” and “inferior” categories with its democratic ideals. The definition and construction of race then in antebellum America, became a vital element of its social and political discourse.

¹⁴⁰ Wiegman, *American Anatomies*, 21.

¹⁴¹ See Chapters 1 and 2 for more in-depth discussion of the relationship between invisibility and whiteness.

¹⁴² Dorothy Roberts, *Killing the Black Body* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1997), 9.

It is highly significant however, that this discursive definition of race relied so heavily upon the “natural visibility” of the African-American body. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. points out the connection between language and perceived social truth surrounding race, declaring, “Race is the ultimate trope of difference because it is so very arbitrary in its application. The biological criteria used to determine ‘difference’ in sex simply do not hold when applied to ‘race.’ Yet we carelessly use language in such a way as to *will* this sense of *natural* difference into our formulations.”¹⁴³ The socially discursive power of language then, conditions us to see “natural” binaries and even “difference” when there aren’t any objectively. One significant example where this phenomenon became blatantly exposed within antebellum America is of course, laws constructing slave identity. By determining that a person would be a slave if his/her mother was a slave, antebellum Southern America constructed a social hierarchy based upon race that still maintained its “natural” truth regardless of visible skin color.¹⁴⁴ Slaves were “naturally” born to slave mothers, and as a result, society could still visually mark them as such. Significantly though, it was social discourse or language that “willed” or in effect constructed that literal and figurative vision.

Consequently, since many of Harper’s poems were read aloud during her frequent appearances on the lecture circuit throughout the country, Harper’s own body was visible to her audience while she read her poetry to them. In watching her read her poetic

¹⁴³ Henry Louis Gates, Jr. “Editor’s Introduction: Writing ‘Race’ and the Difference it Makes,” *Race, Writing and Difference*, ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1986), 5.

¹⁴⁴ Due to interracial mixing and rape on slave plantations, it was common for slaves to exhibit a “light” skin color that was in many cases, almost indeterminable from that of a white body.

discourse to the, the audience then, effectively read Harper's body in conjunction with it. Harper's body became discourse as well, as it uttered the poetic statements. Harper's own display of her body as she read (in most cases, overtly political) poems to an audience then, represented complex discursive moments, especially within the abolitionist movement. In his own discussion of Frances Harper, Michael Bennett states, "Though not herself a slave, [Harper] realized that her body coded her as one with those who were enslaved."¹⁴⁵ Since her audience would automatically read her body in a particular manner, Harper consciously had to use both her body (whether it was overtly present or not) and language as tools in her poetry to construct her own politically discursive codes.

During the Reconstruction era, Harper's agendas changed dramatically. Her tour of the South, where she lectured and actually lived with ex-slaves, involved an audience quite different from the white Northern abolitionists to whom she lectured before the Civil War. In fact, this audience change may also have proven necessary. After the passage of the Fifteenth Amendment (which gave African-American men the right to vote), many white reformers felt their main battle had been won, and consequently, immediately turned to other issues. Harper found herself one of the few African-American women who supported the passage of the Fifteenth Amendment. As Melba Joyce Boyd observes, "The peculiar dilemma of the black woman, from Harper's point of view, was that she would not acquire direct power from the Fifteenth Amendment, but the probable defeat of the amendment, with the inclusion for woman's suffrage, was a

¹⁴⁵ Bennett, *Democratic Discourses*, 46.

gamble too dangerous to risk.”¹⁴⁶ Political forces in this era also changed drastically the manner in which Harper viewed feminist issues. In *We Are Your Sisters; Black Women in the Nineteenth Century*, Dorothy Sterling documents the fact that African-American and “progressive” white women worked together during the abolitionist movement, many times forming friendships.¹⁴⁷ Indeed, many of Harper’s abolitionist poems that treat motherhood establish a particularly strong connection with a white maternal audience. Yet, after the war, Harper and other African-American women experienced a great deal of difficulty with white feminist groups’ unwillingness to include them in the battles for suffrage, and women’s rights. As Boyd states, in this era, “Most white women were bound to the vortex of their own repression as the focus of white male supremacy.”¹⁴⁸ In fact, Harper herself was so frustrated by white feminists’ refusal to acknowledge African-American women, that, in a speech before the 1866 National Woman’s Rights Convention in New York, she stated, “I tell you that if there is any class of people who need to be lifted out of their airy nothings and selfishness, it is the white women of America.”¹⁴⁹ These multiple political exclusions threatened a quite literal erasure of the African-American woman’s voice.

Harper’s frustration with the dominant political forces at work during the Reconstruction era manifests itself in her post-Civil War poetry through the feminine voice’s increasingly distant and accusatory tone towards her audience/reader. Through

¹⁴⁶ Boyd, *Discarded Legacy*, 129.

¹⁴⁷ Sterling, *We are Your Sisters*, Introduction.

¹⁴⁸ Boyd, *Discarded Legacy*, 128.

¹⁴⁹ Documentation in Boyd, *Discarded Legacy*, 116.

this construction, Harper isolates a female voice that overtly demands attention from its audience/readers, while simultaneously illuminating a strong African-American female identity that stands on its own. Harper's 1874 poem "The Slave Mother, a Tale of the Ohio" proves important in this study because of the manner in which it deviates from Harper's pre-Civil War poem "Eliza Harris." Both poems relate a narrative of a runaway slave mother. However, while "Eliza Harris" is derived from a fictional character, scene, and novel, Harper bases "The Slave Mother" on an actual incident of a runaway slave mother who murdered her children. Boyd calls this occurrence "a famous case which brought attention to the severity of slavery and to what ends a mother would go to save her children from that fate."¹⁵⁰ White American audiences knew both stories and their outcomes well. In poetically treating them, Harper serves as an intermediary between the actual stories and their audience/readers for both of them.

However, the reality of the latter story immediately differentiates the poetic treatment of both. In "The Slave Mother," Harper does not reinterpret a book that a white woman wrote. The title of this poem also immediately differentiates it from "Eliza Harris" in its implied content. From the title of "Eliza Harris," the audience/reader automatically knows the poem will treat slavery through the form of a fictional character. The title "The Slave Mother, a tale of the Ohio" implies a much more realistic and blunt tone. This poem's woman *is* a slave mother. This "tale," unlike the one of Eliza Harris, relates a narrative that actually happened. The "slave mother" in this poem does not exist as a fictional character with whom a white audience/reader can necessarily identify, but a

¹⁵⁰ Boyd, *Discarded Legacy*, 62.

representation of a real person whom he/she must learn about and face. Harper's role as an intermediary then, fundamentally changes from connecting the humanity of two races, to presenting overtly one racial identity that another race must acknowledge.

Both poems' stories share a large number of similarities. Both of them mention the frozen Ohio river specifically as obstacles the mothers must overcome in order to escape. Both focus on the mothers' love for their children as motivations for their flight. In "Eliza Harris," the audience/reader hears/reads, "In agony close to her bosom she press'd/ The life of her heart, the child of her breast" (lines 33-34). Similarly, "The Slave Mother" begins, "I have but four, the treasures of my soul,/ They lay like doves around my heart" (lines 1-2). However, while "Eliza Harris" produces extreme audience sympathy through the innate helplessness of one infant, "The Slave Mother" portrays the scenario of a slave mother who must escape with multiple children. While still of course a sympathetic portrayal, the multiplicity of the children inherently disperses audience empathy, unlike the concentration of the single mother/infant relationship. Additionally, "Eliza Harris" depicts Eliza's love for her infant by stating, "Oh! love from its tenderness gathering might,/ Had strengthen'd her soul for the dangers of light" (lines 35-36). Eliza's love for her infant then, gives her "soul" the strength to escape, a powerful emotion towards her child with which a white maternal audience can easily identify.

Conversely, while "The Slave Mother" does establish the mother's love for her children, it surrounds that affection with a deep foreboding. In stanza four, the speaker laments, "And thou, my babe, my darling one,/ My last, my loved, my precious child,/ Oh! when I think upon thy doom/ My heart grows faint and then throbs wild" (lines 13-

16). Whether reading or listening to the poem, the alliteration of “last” and “loved,” in line fourteen, combined with the alveolar stops of “d” and “t” emphasize the woman’s love for her children by forcing the audience/reader to pause slightly after each word, and consequently acknowledge them. Yet, the mother thinks specifically of her child’s “doom,” signifying that she already accepts she will not be able to do anything to save her “babe.” In an earlier stanza, the mother even grieves, “My playful boys could I forget,/ My home might seem a joyous spot” (lines 9-10). The mother’s strong love for her “boys” renders her incapable of forgetting them. Yet she overtly asserts that she would be more “joyous” if she could erase them from her memory. Unlike “Eliza Harris,” then, this mother’s relationship with her children involves strong feelings of love, while their existence simultaneously causes her great pain. To a white maternal audience who has never experienced the horrors of slavery, a mother’s wish (even through love) that her child had never been born proves a difficult concept to understand.

The complexity of “The Slave Mother’s” emotions reflects and emphasizes the poem’s closer association with reality. “Eliza Harris” emulates *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, in that the act of crossing the Ohio river enables Eliza to escape and save her infant child. The lines “her step on the ice, and her arm on her child,/ The danger was fearful, the pathway was wild;/ But, aided by Heaven, she gained a free shore,/ Where the friends of humanity open’d their door” (lines 29-32), demonstrate that Eliza’s persistence and love for her child motivate her to escape the white bestial oppressors. The mother in “The Slave Mother” possesses no such luck. In her case, “She fled, and with her children all,/ She reached the stream and crossed it o’er,/ Bright visions of deliverance came/ Like

dreams of plenty to the poor” (lines 25-28). The two stanzas contain the same hopeful tone, but lead to vastly different outcomes. In ending “The Slave Mother” with the mother deciding, “If Ohio cannot save,/ I will do a deed for freedom,/ Shalt find each child a grave,” (lines 45-48), Harper makes a powerful statement about her own discovery of the nature of racism and sexism in the Reconstruction era. While Eliza Harris’s ability to save her infant renders the declaration “For she is a mother - her child is a slave-/ And she’ll give him his freedom, or find him a grave!” a single wild thought she constructs in desperation, the slave mother’s actual murder of one of her children demonstrates that slavery ultimately does not entail an Ohio river, that once crossed, ends all racial and sexual oppression. Even when an individual has literally escaped slavery, a figurative one can still exist, (as in the racial and sexual oppression that continued during and beyond the Reconstruction era, despite slavery’s official termination) and “The Slave Mother” does not allow its audience/readers to ignore it.¹⁵¹

In addition, death in fact, was one mode of resistance for the enslaved. Saidiya Hartman discusses the significance of slaves “stealing away” or going to other places such as religious meetings for brief periods of time without written permission, as a way to combat the bodily appropriation inherent in slavery, stating, “Stealing away was synonymous with defiance because it necessarily involved seizing the master’s property and asserting the self in transgression of the law ... [It] defied and subversively appropriated slave owners’ designs for mastery and control – primarily the captive body

¹⁵¹ This poem could also be a reference to and comment on the Fugitive Slave Law of 1854.

as the extension of the master's power and the spatial organization of domination."¹⁵² In other words, any action whereby a slave could re-appropriate any form of control over the movement of his/her body proved an effective resistant tool, since the reduction of the slave to no more than his/her body was fundamental to keeping the structure of slavery intact.

Thus, death, in particular, could become, in some cases, the ultimate resistance to the bodily appropriation of slavery. In *Necro Citizenship: Death, Eroticism, and the Public Sphere in the Nineteenth-Century United States*, Russ Castronovo pinpoints the phenomenon of the female slave killing her child as resistance, claiming "Infanticide not only defeats the slaveholder who views motherhood as the reproduction of capital; it also thwarts history. Forcibly releasing her child from the struggles of existence, the slave mother assures that he or she will never accrue historical weight, instead remaining innocent of experience, memory, and trauma."¹⁵³ In killing her children then, a slave mother not only saves them in particular from the pain of slavery, she also "thwarts history" by lessening the number of bodies that make up slavery and its discourse. Consequently, when the slave mother in Harper's poem finds "freedom" for her children, by lending them a "grave," unlike "Eliza Harris" where the poem emphasizes the universal and common emotions of motherhood, here Harper forces her audience/reader to view the unique maternal perspective and circumstances of the African-American female slave.

¹⁵² Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*, 68-69.

¹⁵³ Russ Castronovo, *Necro Citizenship: Death, Eroticism, and the Public Sphere in the Nineteenth-Century United States* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2001), 37.

The two poems treat the feminine voice in a completely opposing manner. Where “Eliza Harris” begins in the past tense with a first-person plural narrative, “The Slave Mother” begins in the present with a first-person singular point of view. Where “Eliza Harris” ends in the present tense with a third-person singular narrative, “The Slave Mother” ends in the future tense with a first-person plural perspective. The poem begins “I have but four, the treasures of my soul” (line 1) and ends with the lines “Will ye not, us men and Christians, / On the side of freedom stand?” (lines 63-64). Consequently, where Eliza constructs a voice through her connection with the poem’s audience/reader, the slave mother enacts hers through her increasing distance from him/her. Initially, the audience/reader of “The Slave Mother” directly follows the speaker’s voice. She speaks in the present tense, and her emotions and actions occur with the act of reading/listening. Unlike Eliza, the slave mother is self-reflexive. Her baby girl “Looks curious in my anxious eye,” (line 6). This line contrasts sharply with line nine of “Eliza Harris,” where “It was a vision to haunt us, that innocent face.” In Eliza’s case, the audience/reader has already witnessed her actions and emotions, and knows what to expect. With the slave mother, the audience/reader assumes the role of the baby girl, in figuratively gazing at the speaker as her voice concurrently narrates a poetic story. The frequent use of “my” in this poem also emphasizes the slave mother’s possession of the poetic narrative. Just as it is “my baby girl,” “my playful boys,” and “thou, my babe,” it is “my” voice that the audience/reader hears/sees in this poem.

In both “Eliza Harris” and “The Slave Mother,” Harper’s vocal intrusion signifies the turning point of the poem. In the latter poem, Harper assumes the narrative voice with

“Dreams! vain dreams, heroic mother,/ Give all thy hopes and struggles o’er,/ The pursuer is on thy track,/ And the hunter at thy door” (lines 29-31). This stanza contrasts with Harper’s scathing lamentation “Oh! how shall I speak of my proud country’s shame” in line 17 of “Eliza Harris.” Here, Harper indirectly accuses her audience/reader of his/her “shame” through questioning her own ability to speak of the “unspeakable.” In “The Slave Mother,” however, the vocal intrusion directly addresses the poetic speaker, specifically discouraging the mother from making any effort to save her children, since the “pursuer” and “hunter” draw too close. In fact, one can also read this poem’s switch to the second person perspective as a split in the first person narrative voice. The slave mother can also quite possibly address herself. In either scenario, the second-person intrusion in “The Slave Mother” marks the moment where the speaker vocally begins to distance herself from the audience/reader, by connecting and speaking with another voice.

This gradual vocal separation from the audience/reader in “The Slave Mother” reflects and enables the speaker’s increasing distance from her children. Towards the end of the poem, an omniscient third-person point of view narrates, “Then, said the mournful mother,/ If Ohio cannot save,/ I will do a deed for freedom,/ Shalt find each child a grave” (lines 41-44). After the mother’s statement, the poem immediately switches solely to the third-person perspective with “A moment in the sunlight,/ She held a glimmering knife,/ The next moment she had bathed it/ In the crimson fount of life” (lines 49-52). The speaker never actually speaks again in the poem. In describing the murder through another voice besides the mother’s, the poem effectively distances her

from the act, and her own agency in it. Consequently, when the poem ends addressing the reader, “Sends this deed of fearful daring/Through my country’s heart no thrill,/ Do the icy hands of slavery/ Every pure emotion chill?” (lines 57-60), responsibility for the murder lies overtly in the audience/reader’s hands. In this poem, Harper does not ask “How shall I speak?” She directly asks why her audience/readers have not prevented the atrocities she has described.

Again, a use of the feminine voice in “The Slave Mother” proves very significant. The loss of the speaker’s voice ultimately presents itself as an extremely subversive poetic device. The poem’s murder appears particularly appalling because it directly implies that a slave woman’s *ultimate* resistance lies in halting the increase of the slave population. In other words, the act of silencing a population by viewing them only in terms of their race and gender, ultimately drives it to extremities. That population’s only power now rests in the complete destruction of what “defines” them.¹⁵⁴ Consequently, the poem’s speaker constructs the most powerful voice when she loses it. Her absence of voice and Harper’s not-so-gentle reminder at the end of the poem lets the audience/reader know that the loss of an African-American female voice in reality, may prove equally devastating.

In fact, nineteenth-century America held very specific views towards African-American female sexuality, in particular. In *When and Where I Enter; The Impact of Black Women on Race and Sex in America*, Paula Giddings notes that “At a time when

¹⁵⁴ For a thorough documentation of the slave woman’s power struggle through her reproductive capabilities, see Paula Giddings, *When and Where I Enter: The Impact of Black Women on Race and Sex in America* (New York: Quill William Morrow, 1984).

their White peers were riding the wave of moral superiority that sanctioned their activism, Black women were seen as immoral scourges ... Assumed to have ‘low and animalistic urges’ that cast them outside the pale of the movement for moral reform, Black women were seen as having all the inferior qualities of White women without any of their virtues.”¹⁵⁵ With these attitudes surrounding her, Harper composed the series of “Aunt Chloe” poems, beginning in 1872. These poems revolve around, and contain the direct first-person voice of an older African-American woman. Maryemma Graham views Aunt Chloe as “the metaphor for black liberation, the link between the expressed ideal of freedom and the reality of its achievement.”¹⁵⁶ Aunt Chloe’s status as both an older ex-slave past the age of reproductive sexuality as well as that of an African-American woman does assume great significance. Harper’s 1872 poem “Learning to Read” colorfully demonstrates Aunt Chloe’s personality, interests, and achievements without any mention of her sexuality, although her gender becomes very important in the construction of the poem’s tone and ultimate message.

Most importantly, Aunt Chloe narrates the poem (as she does in all of the “Aunt Chloe” poems) in her own voice. In fact, she negotiates and constructs her voice through distinguishing it from others’. The poem begins “Very soon the Yankee teachers/ Came down and set up school;/ But, oh! how the Rebs did hate it,-/ It was agin their rule” (lines 1-4). This beginning immediately displays the negotiation of African-American literacy between two white political ideologies, both of which reside significantly out of Aunt

¹⁵⁵ Giddings, *When and Where I Enter*, 82.

¹⁵⁶ Graham, *Complete Poems*, xlvii.

Chloe's realm of actual and vocal interaction.¹⁵⁷ Stanza two begins, "Our masters always tried to hide/ Book learning from our eyes;/ Knowledge didn't agree with slavery-/ 'Twould make us all too wise" (lines 5-9). This literal reiteration of the slave holders' vocal statement "Knowledge didn't agree with slavery," also indicates Aunt Chloe's fundamental separation from them, in that they attempt to suppress her own voice or potential to be "wise" by thinking and speaking for herself. Instead, Aunt Chloe paraphrases their ideologies into her own vernacular, with "'Twould make us all too wise." She distinguishes herself and her fellow African-Americans from the slave holders in vocally separating from them and retrieving discursive power from them.

The poem's inclusion of Aunt Chloe's memories of individual slaves attempting to teach themselves to read also contributes to the construction of her own voice. The poem includes statements such as "I remember Uncle Caldwell,/ Who took pot liquor fat/ And greased the pages of his book,/ And hid it in his hat" (lines 13-17). The poem's other mention of "Mr. Turner's Ben" (line 21), who "heard the children spell,/ And picked the words right up by heart,/ And learned to read 'em well" marks the progression in Chloe's vocal distinction from the many voices competing around her. Her distinction from individualized former slaves signifies her construction of her own unique voice. Although Chloe is certainly allied with these men in their shared oppression and desire to become literate, she is still able to assert her own individuality by narrating or singularly

¹⁵⁷ The use of dialect here with words like "agin" further separates Aunt Chloe from the "Rebs" and the "Yankee teachers" who in many cases are speaking and/or teaching a different language. As Fahamisha Brown points out, "In the new nation called the United States of America, it was decreed illegal for the enslaved Africans and their antebellum descendants to be taught to read and write. As the slaves began to acquire English-language proficiency, first a "pidgin" and then a creolized form of English emerged as these enslaved Africans of many languages and cultures invented or reinvented a New World African-American language and culture." *Performing the Word*, 78.

“speaking” the unique manner in which she will learn to read and consequently “speak” her own discourse. Every individual example of a person from whom Chloe differentiates herself in this poem is male, indicating her vocal distinction as an African-American woman. Consequently, Aunt Chloe’s ability to separate from the multitude of voices that discourage her from learning to read emphasizes her own agency in her newfound literacy. The other voices who “said there is no use trying,/ Oh! Chloe, you’re too late” (lines 33-34), make no difference to Aunt Chloe. She responds poetically (and metaphorically) to her naysayers, “But as I was rising sixty,/ I had no time to wait./ So I got a pair of glasses,/ And straight to work I went” (lines 35-38). While others say Aunt Chloe’s age renders it “too late” for her to learn to read, Aunt Chloe responds that because of her age, she should start becoming literate immediately. The poem’s lack of quotation marks surrounding the naysayers’ statements indicates their vocal lack of credence, as well as Aunt Chloe’s ability to twist another’s statement, and vocally make it her own.

Harper scholars make much of the clearly different style she uses in the “Aunt Chloe” poems from her others. Melba Joyce Boyd asserts that “Harper’s respect for the intelligence, perseverance, and accomplishments of the freedmen and women encouraged her to craft an alternative to written black dialect that did not compromise their identity or their integrity.”¹⁵⁸ Boyd’s perhaps overly enthusiastic assessment contains some validity. The attempt to classify Harper’s “Aunt Chloe” poems does present a challenge. They

¹⁵⁸ Boyd, *Discarded Legacy*, 150.

certainly do not resemble Paul Lawrence Dunbar's acknowledged "dialect" poetry.¹⁵⁹ The poems actually contain the same a/b rhyme scheme and even beats as her other poems do. A possible explanation for the "Aunt Chloe" poems' association in any form with "black dialect" (besides the more informal voice she uses here than in her other poems) stems from the fact that such a strong individual voice emerges repeatedly in a series of poems.¹⁶⁰ Even Harper's other poems that use the first-person vocal perspective like "The Fugitive's Wife," and "The Slave Mother" (while powerful in their own right) do not possess the same conversational tone that "Learning to Read" does. The poem's opening "Very soon the Yankee soldiers/ Came down and set up school" (lines 1-2), makes the audience/reader feel as if he/she is literally in the middle of a conversation with Aunt Chloe. The words "Very soon" imply that the poem's opening lines involve a continuation of the speaker's story that she has started telling before the poem even begins. In "Learning to Read," the speaker's voice truly constructs the very nature of the poem.

The poem's subject matter plays a significant role in Aunt Chloe's ability to construct a voice. "Learning to Read" interestingly does not end with Aunt Chloe's triumph in her newfound reading capabilities, but her consequent ability to carve out an individual

¹⁵⁹ Fahamisha Brown cites Dunbar's poem "When Dey 'Listed Colored Soldiers" as an example of the manner in which he "replicates in writing [dialect poetry] a culturally specific way of using language." *Performing*, 34.

¹⁶⁰ Dialect poetry in general has a long and complicated critical history, beginning with early critics' complete rejection of it, to later more contemporary artists becoming concerned with its authenticity as a direct reflection of African-American vernacular. Harper, in particular, has been widely criticized in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries for her inauthentic use of black dialect, most prevalently in *Iola Leroy*. Fahamisha Brown points out however, that "early African-American poets were intent upon demonstrating their language competency." *Performing*, 12-13. Harper's use of a vernacular in the "Aunt Chloe" then (even if inauthentic), may demonstrate a hybrid "language competency" of standard English and African-American dialect.

space. The poem ends: “Then I got a little cabin/ A place to call my own-/ And I felt as independent/ As the queen upon her throne” (lines 41-44). Aunt Chloe’s literacy gives her vocal possession and assertion. She can “call” the cabin “my own.” In teaching herself to read, Aunt Chloe does not ultimately depend on the “Yankee teachers,” the masters who want to hide knowledge from her, nor any other individual who sees her age as a deterrent to the power that knowledge clearly brings to her, signified by the poem’s lapses into African-American dialect. Aunt Chloe never fully adopts the white man’s language. She instead uses her newfound literacy to “speak” a thoroughly independent poetic voice.

In fact, the power of literacy gives Aunt Chloe an individual voice in many senses. While Aunt Chloe is obviously a fictional character, her literacy could not have taken place without Harper’s own. In composing “Learning to Read,” Harper gives Aunt Chloe the ability to speak, and makes a powerful statement about the poet’s own literacy. As an educated African-American woman, Harper shows in this poem that literacy lends power and an irrepressible voice.

Because of the large illiteracy rate among African-Americans in the nineteenth-century, both before the Civil War, and immediately afterwards,¹⁶¹ I have primarily focused on the effects Harper’s poetry exercises on her white audiences. This distinction should not detract from the worth and complexity of Harper’s poetry, when one considers that, in these two time periods, power (political and otherwise) rested mainly in white hands. Moreover, on many occasions, Harper’s poetry attempts to elicit a response from

¹⁶¹ Virtually all scholars who work with these time periods discuss and document the prevalence and significance of the African-American illiteracy rate.

white women, another powerless group, although certainly not sharing the same stigma as African-American women. Thus, her poetry's strategic persuasion upon those in authority simultaneously demonstrates the manner in which the oppressed can exhibit power of their own. This idea assumes greater significance if one acknowledges Harper's lectures to African-Americans in the south during Reconstruction. Although Harper scholars do exist, much work remains to be done, especially regarding her poetry. Oftentimes, scholars will dismiss Harper's persuasive poetry (especially in the abolitionist phase of her life) because it possesses such a clear agenda.¹⁶² Consequently, they suggest it must contain no real depth. Yet, strategy does not always indicate superficiality, as Harper has shown both in her life and her works. Harper's consistent usage of the feminine voice in her poetry to express her agendas does indeed demonstrate and subvert the sexism inherent within racism. However, the feminine voice, more basically and importantly, simply makes the African-American woman (and all women for that matter) impossible to ignore, if one wishes to discuss her poems or even simply read or listen to them. It is through them that she displays the manner in which she can work within competing discourses to construct her own discursive power. As a result, Harper's poetry exudes complexity. It will always contain and signify more than one clear and direct function.

¹⁶² Melba Joyce Boyd for example, asserts, "[Houston Baker] condemns Frances Harper ... for advocating the 'uplift' of the 'race,' as if to suggest that peasantry and illiteracy represent true cultural identity and convey authentic imagery." *Discarded Legacy*, 19.

“The Visible Text”

Harper’s 1892 novel *Iola Leroy* was published during a particularly turbulent political era in American history. Most notably, this period (about a decade after the end of Reconstruction, and four years before *Plessy v. Ferguson* which legally upheld segregation, ushering in the Jim Crow era), involved the emergence of shifting and competing American discourses surrounding race and slavery. In Samira Kawash’s discussion of the “color line” in American cultural practice, she identifies its initial conception as stemming from this era, claiming “Expressions for racial transgression, such as ‘passing,’ ‘crossing over,’ or ‘marrying across the line,’ suggest that the individual racial identity of black or white remains demarcated by a symbolic color line that’s conceived in geographical terms echoing the spatial divisions instituted by segregation.”¹⁶³ In other words, the power of the “color line” or racial division and classification, actually resides in its discursive “symbolism,” which was then physically enacted or “echoed” in the form of legal segregation by the American court system.

Indeed, although the end of the Civil War and the passage of the Thirteenth Amendment legally ended slavery, American discourse surrounding race in particular, ushered in a new form of racism, tied specifically to the language of freedom. As Saidiya Hartman points out,

The failures of Reconstruction cannot be recounted solely as a series of legal reversals or troop withdrawals; they also need to be located in the very language

¹⁶³ Samira Kawash, *Dislocating the Color Line: Identity, Hybridity, and Singularity in African-American Literature* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1997), 2.

of persons, rights, and liberties ... The complicity of slavery and freedom or, at the very least, the ways in which they assumed, presupposed, and mirrored one another – freedom finding its dignity and authority in this “prime symbol of corruption” and slavery transforming and extending itself in the limits and subjection of freedom – troubled, if not elided, any absolute and definitive marker between slavery and its aftermath ... As a consequence of emancipation, blacks were incorporated into the narrative of the rights of man and citizen; by virtue of the gift of freedom and wage labor, the formerly enslaved were granted entry into the hallowed halls of humanity, and at the same time, the unyielding and implacable fabrication of blackness as subordination continued under the aegis of formal equality.¹⁶⁴

What Hartman points to here is the manner in which American legal narrative simultaneously disguised and exposed its conflation with cultural narrative during the Reconstruction and Jim Crow eras. African-Americans were narrativized as “free” citizens, yet still made socially subordinate. The famous phrase “separate but equal” in *Plessy v. Ferguson* then, overtly constructed the African-American body as “equal,” but socially deemed them “separate.” Discursive power here, manifests itself through disguised narrative. What African-Americans were grappling with after slavery, was an apparent discrepancy between the manner in which legal and social discourse determined their subjectivity. This seeming split however, was continuously narrativized.

¹⁶⁴ Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*, 6-119.

Harper's novel *Iola Leroy* works within and against cultural narrative through its focus on discourse and visibility. The text seemingly follows the classic conventions of a "tragic mulatta" story, written about frequently during this time period. The heroine discovers her African-American heritage as a young adult after her white father dies, only to be sold into slavery, and the novel follows her consequent perils through the Civil War and its aftermath, to her ultimate triumph where she marries an African-American doctor, and becomes a champion of racial uplift. The singular aspect of this novel, however, resides in the manner in which it is discourse itself that becomes visible, rather than the individual bodies within it. While it does possess a traceable narrative path, much of the novel is taken up with various characters representing and literally "speaking" their different positions on race relations and racial issues. Thus, by completely collapsing individual subject positions with political discourse, this text actually disrupts and exposes the conflation between visibility and cultural narrative. In other words, the individual bodies that we see before us in the text (and what they represent) are deliberately and obviously narrativized, demonstrating the extent to which raced bodies are culturally determined and categorized. Instead, what truly becomes visible in this text is discourse itself.

From the very beginning of *Iola Leroy*, the novel instantly exposes the multi-layered functions of discourse through its particular usage of narrative. M.M. Bakhtin defines "novelistic discourse" as

a diversity of social speech types (sometimes even diversity of languages) and a diversity of individual voices, artistically organized ... These distinctive links and

interrelationships between utterances and languages, this movement of the theme through different languages and speech types, its dispersion into the rivulets of and droplets of social heteroglossia, its dialogization – this is the basic distinguishing feature of the stylistics of the novel.¹⁶⁵

For Bakhtin then, the novel's use of discourse is characterized by a "diversity" of "social speech," or more specifically, the continuous interplay between individual statements or "utterances" and social/cultural "languages."

For the African-American novel (or novels written specifically by African-Americans), the notion of diversity in its discourse is particularly important. As Bernard Bell explains, "The Afro-American novel [is] a hybrid narrative whose distinctive tradition and vitality are derived basically from the sedimented indigenous roots of black American folklore and literary genres of the Western world."¹⁶⁶ Bell then, identifies "hybridity" in African-American novels specifically through its interplay between Western and African discourse. Bell describes the function of postbellum novels in particular as follows: "The first task in moving toward social realism in the Afro-American novel [at the turn on the century] was to clear the ground of the lore of white racism and sow the seeds for a more faithful portrayal of the complexities of black

¹⁶⁵ Bakhtin, "Discourse in the Novel," *The Dialogic Imagination*, 262-3.

¹⁶⁶ Bernard Bell, *The Afro-American Novel and Its Tradition* (Amherst: The University of Massachusetts Press, 1987), xii. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. expands upon this idea in his discussion of the black vernacular in African-American literature in *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism*. Gates most particularly touches upon this phenomenon in his identification of "the metaphor of the double-voiced" or the particular and continuous tension in African-American literature between the oral and the written.

character and culture.”¹⁶⁷ African-American novelists writing in this time period then, struck a delicate balance in their narratives between speaking the language of white discourse that would potentially thwart racism, and simultaneously demonstrating the complex elements of black culture.

Through opening the novel with the coded language of slaves then, *Iola Leroy* demonstrates this particular discursive hybridity characteristic of African-American novels. The text begins with two lines of dialogue discussing butter: “‘Good mornin’ Bob; how’s butter dis mornin’?’ ... ‘Fresh; just as fresh, as fresh can be,’”¹⁶⁸ It is not until a few pages later that this seemingly innocuous discussion is disrupted by the narrator informing us,

During the dark days of the Rebellion, when the bondman was turning his eyes to the American flag, and learning to hail it as an ensign of deliverance, some of the shrewder slaves, coming in contact with their masters and overhearing their conversations, invented a phraseology to convey in the most unsuspected manner news to each other from the battle-field ... In conveying tidings of the war, if they wished to announce a victory of the Union army, they said the butter was fresh, or that the fish and eggs were in good condition. If defeat befell them, then the butter and other produce were rancid or stale,” (9).

Thus, in immediately presenting us with the coded discourse of slavery, followed by its deconstruction, the novel fulfills the two functions that Bell enumerates upon in his text.

¹⁶⁷ Bell, *The Afro-American Novel*, 57.

¹⁶⁸ Frances E.W. Harper, *Iola Leroy or Shadows Uplifted* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1987), 7. All subsequent citations will refer to this edition.

We are given the cultural language of slaves, and overtly made to understand that it represents complexity and a purpose theoretically heretofore unknown by white Americans. Slaves were able to use their particular language to gain and relay news of the war.

However, what is most significant about the narrator explaining this coded language is the manner in which it is ultimately the nature of discourse itself (rather than its linguistic meaning) that becomes truly visible for the reader. Because the narrator has exposed to us the meaning behind these individual utterances, where we might potentially have viewed them as mere statements initially, we are now actually able to see them as social discourse. The text essentially forces us to revisit that particular language. As Bakhtin further describes, “Form and content in discourse are one, once we understand that verbal discourse is a social phenomenon – social throughout its entire range and in each and every of its factors, from the sound image to the furthest reaches of abstract meaning.”¹⁶⁹ What the reader truly views in the opening scene of *Iola Leroy* then, is the manner in which individual statements have combined with sociocultural language, thus ultimately and importantly calling attention to the power of discourse.

We additionally view this phenomenon through the manner in which the novel uses language itself to construct narrative. In his discussions of *Iola Leroy*, Justin Edwards declares, “Harper’s witnessing of Reconstruction and the rise of segregation influenced her to turn to slavery as a crucial metaphor, a comparative model for what she

¹⁶⁹ Bakhtin, “Discourse in the Novel,” 259.

perceived as a repetition of that ‘peculiar institution.’”¹⁷⁰ Indeed, throughout the novel, Harper often uses figures of speech to describe historical events and situations, demonstrating the extent to which these were narrativized. The reader is introduced to the Civil War in particular in the novel as follows: “Every now and then, after furtively looking around, one would drop into the ears of the other some news of the battle then raging between the North and South which, like two great millstones, were grinding slavery to powder” (8). Many Harper scholars would interpret the language in this scene as an example of her use of melodrama and romance that they believe characterize this novel. Bernard Bell, for example claims, “A melodramatic study of the color line, *Iola Leroy* ... combine[s] the sentimentality and rhetoric of romance with the psychological and sociological truth of mimesis.”¹⁷¹ While Harper may indeed be working within these genres in *Iola Leroy*, the usage of an extended simile to introduce and describe the Civil War also importantly calls attention to the particular power of cultural narrative. The information that the North and South were “grinding slavery to powder,” instantly clues the reader in to what the narrator is discussing, without her identifying it directly. As a result, what the reader views instead is an overt narrativization of the Civil War, that we nevertheless are able to identify as historical fact instantly.¹⁷²

¹⁷⁰ Edwards, *Gothic Passages*, 57.

¹⁷¹ Bell, *The Afro-American Novel*, 58.

¹⁷² I am by no means suggesting here that Harper means to indicate the outcome of the Civil War and its abolishment of slavery was negative. However, her use of figurative language here does call attention to the power of social and cultural narrative and discourse. When one also considers the paradoxical definition of freedom for the newly emancipated slaves, the image of the Civil War “grinding slavery to powder” may also be viewed as decidedly ironic.

The novel also calls attention to the discursive power of narrative through its use of irony. When the white Dr. Gresham is informed that the protagonist Iola Leroy, for whom he has romantic feelings, is actually African-American, (a fact that is significantly not visible at all through her physical appearance), he states, “What you tell me changes the whole complexion of things” (58). The use of the word “complexion” to describe Dr. Gresham’s changing view towards Iola as a potential wife is decidedly not subtle in its twofold meaning. Since the color of Iola’s literal “complexion” is essentially the reason behind Dr. Gresham’s initial change of heart (a justification that is even further complicated by the fact that Iola visually appears white), the use of “complexion” in the figurative sense only reinforces this fact, thus demonstrating the manner in which language and cultural narrative intersect to produce racial discourse. In this overtly transparent usage of layered meanings, what we view in effect, is not just the absurdity of Dr. Gresham literally seeing Iola differently, despite the fact that her physical appearance has not changed, nor has it ever actually appeared anything other than white,¹⁷³ but this actual discursive construction taking place before our eyes.

The text’s own narrative structure then, is constructed in such a way that it reveals cultural narrative itself. Despite spanning the Civil War, and Reconstruction, there is actually very little direct physical action in this novel. Instead, the reader is often treated to sections of individual characters narrating their various experiences of slavery and racial relations. As a result, the novel almost reads as though the story is a backdrop for

¹⁷³ It is also significant that Dr. Gresham “sees” Iola differently after hearing of her lineage from another person. Cultural narrative then, is passed along within the narrative of the text to shape Gresham’s views on race.

the inclusion and exposition of multiple views of the “race question” at the turn of the century. Virtually every character represents a current opinion on Reconstruction political movements regarding racial uplift. The character Aunt Linda for example, not only represents a newly freed slave with a particular position on literacy and temperance, she frequently discusses it as well. When Robert and Iola visit her after the war, their discussion is primarily taken up with debates about temperance and literacy. Aunt Linda declares, “I beliebs we might be a people ef it warn’t for dat mizzable drink” (160). Melba Joyce Boyd describes the Temperance movement in late nineteenth-century America as follows: “Temperance was a key issue of Christian abolitionists and radical feminists, and it found favor with Harper’s poetry ... Before the end of the nineteenth century, alcoholism had become one of the most destructive forces in oppressed communities of color in the United States, preying on their desperate conditions.”¹⁷⁴ Thus, in constructing Aunt Linda as a newly freed slave who abhors “drink,” the novel constructs a character who literally speaks to the Temperance issue.

Significantly, Robert and Iola actually have to instruct Aunt Linda about what Temperance actually involves, after she is surprised to learn that her homemade wine would be considered alcohol as well. After Robert and Iola engage in a somewhat lengthy Biblical justification of abolishing alcohol with Iola declaring for example, “the Bible says that the wine at last will bite like a serpent and sting like an adder,” Aunt Linda finally responds, “‘Dat’ so! I beliebs I’ll let dis turn to winegar, an’ not make any more” (185-186). Thus, in the character of Aunt Linda, the text overtly narrativizes the issue of

¹⁷⁴ Boyd, *Discarded Legacy*, 75.

temperance and many of the problems inherent in making newly freed slaves aware of it and willing to subscribe to it. As a result, what we actually see here is not the individual body of Aunt Linda, since the only element we actually see of her is her words, but the discourse of temperance.

What complicates the reader's perception of Aunt Linda is the manner in which her particular language identifies her as a character. Rendering the particular discourse of temperance visible through Aunt Linda would be positive in this sense, since temperance was obviously an issue that Harper personally espoused. In this case then, the one-dimensionality of Aunt Linda as a character, by the text forcing us to identify her with the language of temperance rather than just as a raced body, paradoxically lends her more complexity and depth. However, Aunt Linda's use of dialect also visually marks her as raced and embodied in the text. In fact, Harper's inclusion of dialect in this novel has come across frequent scrutiny by critics, interestingly enough, much more so than in her poetry. Most criticism though stems from Harper's inauthentic usage of the black vernacular. Hazel Carby, for example addresses these claims by stating,

Harper placed in the mouths of her folk characters a poorly written dialect that was intended to indicate their illiteracy. The language Harper invented for them was based on an authorial sense of error and deviation from an assumed norm; it was not attempt to describe the inherent qualities, cadence, and tone of the freedmen's speech ... Although the narrative presence of the folk was seriously weakened by Harper's flawed attempts to render dialect through direct speech,

she was aware of the relationship between social power and the power of language.¹⁷⁵

Thus, Carby makes the interesting claim that Harper never intended to include “authentic” dialect in her novel, but yet still finds its presence of it “weakened” in *Iola Leroy* through its construction in individual statements.

Indeed, if white bodies are inherently invisible within American discourse, the language of *Iola Leroy* mirrors this ideology through its employment of dialect with certain African-American characters like Aunt Linda. The verbal shift from Iola’s statement “biting like a serpent” to Aunt Linda’s declaration, “I beliebs I’ll let dis turn to winegar” makes Aunt Linda in fact highly visible within the narrative of the novel. Her particular language noticeably stands out from that of the main characters’ and the narrator’s. Linguistically then, Aunt Linda is highly embodied within this text, as not just what she talks about, but her actual words themselves, visually mark her. Yet, in speaking these highly distinctive words, Aunt Linda also importantly constructs her own discourse. As Frantz Fanon points out so famously in *Black Skin, White Masks*, “It is implicit that to speak is to exist absolutely for the other ... To speak means to be in a position to use a certain syntax, to grasp the morphology of this or that language, but it means above all to assume a culture, to support the weight of a civilization.”¹⁷⁶ Thus, in speaking a language (or a vernacular) that is decidedly not identical to that of the

¹⁷⁵ Carby, *Reconstructing Womanhood*, 78-81.

¹⁷⁶ Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* trans. Charles Lam Markmann (New York: Grove Press, 1967), 17-18.

dominant “civilization,”¹⁷⁷ Aunt Linda truly constructs her own voice here. Moreover, as Carby and other scholars have pointed out, she is not even necessarily speaking the “authentic” language of her own vernacular. What is exposed in the Aunt Linda scenes then, is the way in which discourse unwittingly constructs subjects, and the simultaneous manner in which it can be manipulated.

The novel’s employment of familiar narrative strains such as the tragic mulatta figure embodied in Iola, simultaneously illuminates and revises this discursive property through incorporating the element of choice. This trope, utilized in conjunction with the “passing” novel, that was especially popular in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, placed at the center of texts a “light-skinned” African-American heroine unknowingly “passing” for white. After the heroine discovers she does in fact possess African-American heritage, most often immediately after she falls in love with or becomes engaged to a white man, usually one of two novelistic scenarios were presented for her: continuing to “pass” or a tragic death, the latter being the almost universal occurrence.¹⁷⁸ Not surprisingly, this narrative has posed considerable problems and questions for scholars of this literature. As M. Guilia Fabi points out in *Passing and the Rise of the African American Novel*,

¹⁷⁷ This differentiation from the reader’s “language” is emphasized through the occurrence of long passages where events are narrated strictly through the vernacular voice. The phonetic spelling of this language causes reading these passages to be a decidedly more arduous task than those that are not written this way, thus underscoring the difference in language between the reader and these characters.

¹⁷⁸ Significantly, the choices for male protagonists of similar circumstances in these texts were not as rigid. Male characters in Charles Chesnutt’s *The House Behind the Cedars* and James Weldon Johnson’s *Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* for example, choose to continue to pass for white, and live.

The pervasive presence of light-skinned and mulatto and mulatta characters must have seemed an obvious confirmation of the power of racial hegemony to shape not only the American social system but also the artistic imagination. It is even less surprising that that this theme, so abused and stereotyped by white writers of tragic mulatto fictions, so difficult to reconcile with twentieth-century militant expressions of race pride, and so threatening of group boundaries, should become almost taboo among critics of African-American literature, who often describe the origins of black fiction by glossing over, dismissing, or devaluing all-but-white characters.¹⁷⁹

Thus, the notion that possessing African-American blood could be such a cause of shame that it actually kills a character, coupled with the fact that readers were only experiencing “all-but-white” characters (in both physicality and circumstance) alone in these novels, has not sat well with contemporary critics, with whom as Fabi states, the celebration of race pride is an important element of African-American resistance.

As a result, scholars vary widely in their interpretation of the manner in which the tragic mulatta figure discursively functioned in these novels. Karen Sanchez-Eppler denounces the use of a “light-skinned hero” in specifically abolitionist fiction by declaring “the light-skinned body is valued ... precisely because of its ability to mask the alien African blackness that the fictional mulatto is nevertheless purported to represent.”¹⁸⁰ For Sanchez-Eppler then, the employment of a “light-skinned” body to

¹⁷⁹ M. Guilia Fabi, *Passing and the Rise of the African American Novel* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2001), 106.

¹⁸⁰ Sanchez-Eppler, *Touching Liberty*, 33.

represent African-American subjectivity, purposefully disguises blackness, thus continuing the racist project of viewing the African-American body as “alien.” Hazel Carby, on the other hand, views the fictional mulatto figure as an important intermediary narrative figure, claiming, “Historically, the mulatto, as narrative figure, has two primary functions: as a vehicle for an exploration of the relationship between the races, and, at the same time, an expression of the relationship between the races. The figure of the mulatto should be understood and analyzed as a narrative device of mediation.”¹⁸¹ Similarly, M. Guilia Fabi argues, “The trope of passing provided African American novelists with a means to pioneer a counterhegemonic discussion of blackness as a historically and ideologically changing construct ... The awareness that personal identities are constructed was the starting point of the passer’s adventures, not the end result.”¹⁸² For scholars like Carby and Fabi, the recognition that these novels were written for both black and white audiences leads them to view the mulatto figure as one that not only can relate to both races, but actually convince them that race is a discursive construct.

On one level, *Iola Leroy* certainly follows the tragic mulatta narrative through its construction of its female protagonist. The text initially and significantly focuses a great deal on Iola’s physical appearance. She is in fact, introduced to the reader through Tom’s (a fellow slave at this point) discussion of her beauty: “My! but she’s putty. Beautiful long hair comes way down her back; putty blue eyes, an’ jis’ ez white ez anybody’s in dis place ... I heerd Marse Tom talkin’ ‘bout her las’ night to his brudder; tellin’ him she war

¹⁸¹ Carby, *Reconstructing Womanhood*, 89.

¹⁸² Fabi, *Passing*, 5.

mighty airish, but he meant to break her in" (38). Thus, we first view Iola through another's admiration of her physical beauty. Notably, much of her attributes that identify her as beautiful to Tom (and consequently to the reader), such as her "long hair" and "blue eyes" signify her as white, and consequently decidedly out of place within the realm of slavery. Iola's "light-skinned body" is what marks and identifies her within the narrative of the novel as a tragic mulatta figure. She appears white, but nevertheless possesses enough African-American blood to place her within slavery.

Iola's romantic encounters with the white Dr. Gresham also resemble an important element of the tragic mulatta narrative. After Iola articulately informs Dr. Gresham of her hopes for racial uplift, the narrator tells us, "Dr. Gresham gazed admiringly upon Iola. A glow of enthusiasm overspread her beautiful, expressive face. There was a rapt and far-off look in her eye, as if she were looking beyond the present pain to a brighter future for the race with which she was identified, and felt the grandeur of a divine commission to labor for its uplifting" (219-220). Thus, Dr. Gresham's theoretical "admiration" of Iola's speech lapses into veneration of her physical appearance here. It is ultimately her "beautiful" and "expressive face" that Dr. Gresham is "gazing admirably" upon, not what she is speaking about. While the reader looks at Iola's actual words, Dr. Gresham gazes upon her body. As a result, what Dr. Gresham sees in Iola is a beautiful woman who appears white, but whose body (in this scene, quite literally, given the topic of her speech) simultaneously speaks of hidden African-American heritage.

One of the more complicated aspects of the tragic mulatta heroine's romance with a white man both within the narrative of the novel of its kind and its impact upon cultural narrative itself, involves of course, what this potentially bespeaks about physical attraction between the races. If any drop of African-American blood is enough to identify someone as such, and is always ultimately transparent (in every tragic mulatta novel, her identity is always revealed to her white suitor at some point), the nature of the white suitor's physical attraction to a "passing" heroine becomes highly complex, since it is always so firmly rooted in her body. In this particular scene from *Iola Leroy*, the text renders this element of the tragic mulatta narrative transparent, by presenting a "romantic" response from Dr. Gresham to Iola after she speaks about racial uplift. What body Dr. Gresham actually "admires" here (white, black, or both), pointedly becomes discursively entangled.

By constructing the novel around the idea that Iola is able to choose her race, Harper additionally points to the paradoxical nature of racial "visibility" residing within blood, or what is truly invisible. It is significant that this choice is constructed specifically through whom Iola decides to marry. After the Civil War, African-American female activists like Harper struggled to refute stereotypes regarding black female sexuality in particular, specifically that of the supposedly inherent lasciviousness of African-American women. As Barbara Christian states, "The black slave women were not identified, as white women were, with the roles of wife and mother, but primarily and

specifically with the roles of mother and worker.”¹⁸³ As a result, the fact that Iola deliberately chooses when and how she will work, as well as not only whom she will marry, but marriage itself, thoroughly undermines any notion of rampant sexuality. In one often cited quote, Iola tells her Uncle Robert, “I have a theory that every woman ought to know how to earn her own living. I believe that a great amount of sin and misery springs from the weakness and inefficiency of women,” (205). Thus, here, Iola refutes the idea that a female African-American body’s sole purpose is manual labor and childbirth. It is “every woman’s” duty to work, not just an African-American’s. Significantly, working is “earning a living,” and not just physical toil. It is also important that Iola directly verbalizes this idea before we actually ever see her attempt to “earn a living” in the novel. What Iola’s speech emphasizes here then is the rationality and reason behind her claims, rather than the physicality of a female body working.¹⁸⁴

The fact that marriage itself becomes an overtly discursive choice additionally subverts stereotypical ideas of African-American female sexuality. When the white Dr. Gresham proposes to Iola earlier in the novel, the narrator relates her reaction as follows: “His companionship was an unexpected pleasure. She had learned to enjoy his presence and to miss him when absent, and when she began to question her heart she found that unconsciously it was entwining around him. ‘Yes,’ she said to herself, ‘I do like him; but I can never marry him. To the man I marry my heart must be as open as the flowers to

¹⁸³ Barbara Christian, *Black Women Novelists: The Development of a Tradition, 1892-1976* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Publishing Group, Inc., 1980).

¹⁸⁴ It is important to note here that when we do view Iola applying for or working at various jobs, she is often turned down or fired when others learn of her African-American identity. The text thus also underscores the manner in which the discursive power of society often ignores or is blind to reason.

the sun. I could not accept his hand and hide from him the secret of my birth,” (111). Iola’s feelings for Dr. Gresham are fairly ambiguous in this scene. She “enjoys” his “presence,” and misses him when he is gone. She also finds that her heart is “entwining around him.” All of these facts seemingly point to the idea that she is indeed beginning to (if she has not already) fall in love with him. Yet, she significantly stops short of desiring to marry him, instead stating to herself that she “likes” him, but can never marry him, because of her racial identity. Iola is thus able to control any potential feelings she may possess for Dr. Gresham, by discursively re-stating to herself what is important to her.

This scene significantly contrasts with the proposal of Dr. Latimer (an African-American doctor who is equally concerned with racial uplift), towards the end of the novel. After he proposes, the narrator tells us:

[Iola] had admired Dr. Gresham and, had there been no barrier in her way, she might have learned to love him; but Dr. Latimer had grown irresistibly upon her heart. There were depths in her nature that Dr. Gresham had never fathomed; aspirations in her soul with which he had never mingled. But as the waves leap up to the strand, so her soul went out to Dr. Latimer. Between their lives were no impeding barriers, no inclination impelling one way and duty compelling another. Kindred hopes and tastes had knit their hearts; grand and noble purposes were lighting up their lives; and they esteemed it a blessed privilege to stand on the threshold of a new era and labor for those who had passed from the old oligarchy of slavery into the new commonwealth of freedom. (271)

Thus, like Iola's experience with her heart "entwining" around Dr. Gresham, here she feels Dr. Latimer "grow irresistibly" on her "heart." The important distinction here is of course Dr. Latimer and Iola's united struggle in "grand and noble purposes" or work towards racial uplift for African-Americans. What this overtly linguistic similarity between the two scenes reveals is twofold. Not only does Iola's marriage choice become elevated beyond physical love, as she ultimately chooses Dr. Latimer because he will work with her for a "noble purpose," but she is actually able to control or put aside any feelings she may possess for the wrong person. In not just choosing marriage, but selecting a husband who will match her *ideologically*, the character of Iola Leroy refutes a stereotypical cultural narrative, by, in effect, constructing and adhering to her own.

Consequently, novelistic discourse in *Iola Leroy*, visibly exposes social discourse through reflecting and revising cultural narratives, like that of the "passing" heroine. Unlike the typical tragic mulatta, Iola does not die, and she actually ends up marrying the mate of her choice. Iola additionally and significantly even willingly throws her lot in with that of her African-American brethren, even though it is quite easy (and as other characters argue repeatedly in the novel, perhaps more beneficial for her) for her to pass as white. She even vocally revises the tragic mulatta narrative by arguing against miscegenation on behalf of the black race. In one of many such examples in the novel, Iola declares, "Every person of unixed blood who succeeds in any department of literature, art, or science is a living argument for the capability which is in the race" (199). Iola then appropriates the white American correlation between success and white

racial purity to transform the equation into one that involves unmixed African-American blood.

The fact however, that Iola herself (the novel's protagonist) is of mixed blood and still decidedly appears white, poses a problem for some contemporary critics, especially since the novel renders Iola progressive in so many other ways. Barbara Christian for example, critiques the racial politics of this novel by pointing out the fact that only those with white blood are able to succeed.¹⁸⁵ Iola's success then as an African-American woman proves not entirely satisfactory, since she not only possesses white blood, but for all intensive purposes, looks completely white as well.

However, by constructing a heroine who is able to choose which race to belong to, precisely because the reliance on visibility alone does not automatically classify her within one particular race, the text emphasizes the manner in which it is discourse itself that determines racial identity, and not what is empirically "visible." Just as her African-American heritage (or what we cannot actually "see" in Iola) has the power to send her into slavery when her father dies, the white blood that Iola possesses is not powerful enough to save her from this fate, even if it is what appears most visible to everyone else in the novel. Thus, what we are actually able to "see" here is not a particular raced body (since Iola can appear either black or white at any given point in the novel, depending on her circumstance), but the competing discourses that construct it. It is not how Iola actually looks that is determining her subjectivity at any given time, but the manner in which others are discursively instructed to view her. The political action that Iola makes

¹⁸⁵ Christian, *Black Women Novelists*, 29.

in choosing to belong to the African-American community then, is not just one that aids in racial uplift, but emphasizes the manner in which racial categorization is narrativized. Iola is able, after all, to construct her own racial subjectivity in a discursive system where the rules seemed heretofore unflinchingly rigid.

By rendering its own narrative visible then, *Iola Leroy* exposes the manner in which cultural discourse is constructed. While of course, all novelistic discourse is inherently visible in the literal sense, *Iola Leroy* frequently calls attention to itself as narrative through its exposition of its story. Even though this novel tells a story that possesses a chronological timeline,¹⁸⁶ the text significantly does not present it in a linear fashion. The novel instead begins at the brink of the Civil War, and tends to bounce back and forth between different time periods. In one such example, Chapter Eight ends with Dr. Gresham proposing to Iola towards the end of the war. The last lines of the chapter involve Gresham beseeching, “And now I ask, will you not permit me to clasp hands with you for life? I do not ask for a hasty reply. Give yourself time to think over what I have proposed,” (60). The next chapter then begins with the following line: “Nearly twenty years before the war, two young men of French and Spanish descent, sat conversing on a large verandah which surrounded an ancient home on the Mississippi River” (61). What follows here, is three chapters telling specifically the story of Eugene and Marie Leroy (Iola’s parents), Iola’s childhood, culminating in the death of her father and sister, the

¹⁸⁶ A condensed version of the chronological events of the story of the novel would read as something along the lines of the following: the story of Iola’s parents’ marriage, Eugene Leroy’s death, the revelation of the Leroy children’s heritage, Iola’s sale into slavery, the Civil War (where Iola meets Dr. Gresham working as a nurse), Reconstruction during which Iola works for racial uplift, Iola’s reunion with her family, and her ultimate marriage to Dr. Latimer. There are various subplots involving other characters in the novel that also fit within this timeline.

revelation of her African-American heritage, and her sale into slavery. The pause that Iola theoretically takes in pondering Dr. Gresham's proposal is then enacted within the narrative of the text as well, as the novel literally stops to tell another story. In overtly forcing the reader to pause as well, rather than allowing us to lose ourselves in a chronological story, the text compels us instead to view the construction and shape of the narrative itself.

Similarly, this narrative interruption accomplishes more than just the creation of a dramatic effect. After all, at this point, the reader already knows that Iola is of mixed heritage (a fact that one might argue Harper could have kept from revealing until the Leroy story if dramatic effect were her primary aim), and the inclusion of the story of her background fills in details, more than it generates surprises. In other words, the reader knows how this particular story is going to end. As a result, elements of it such as Eugene's untimely death before he can whisk his family away to Europe, and his cousin Alfred's betrayal of the family, become, if not definitively knowable, certainly predictable. Thus, because the reader actually aids in shaping the story (by actively filling in gaps as we read, instead of passively letting the narrative wash over us), the discourse of the novel itself is what emerges as a visibly constructed entity.

The novel in fact, relies upon the reader's recognition of its discursive construction to make its point. Significantly, Dr. Gresham and Dr. Latimer prove mirror images of each other. Both are doctors, a profession that deals specifically with the examination and analysis of the body, and both are struck by Iola's beauty, specifically when she speaks. After Dr. Latimer hears Iola speak at a racial uplift meeting, the

narrator tells us that “Her soul seemed to be flashing through the rare loveliness of her face and etherealizing its beauty,” compelling Dr. Latimer to exclaim, “She is angelic!” (257). The distinction between the two doctors then, resides in the manner in which they view Iola’s body. Dr. Gresham ultimately only views her body sexually, by actually encouraging her to stop overworking it for her cause, telling her in his marriage proposal, “Although you possess a wonderful amount of physical endurance, you must not forget that saints have bodies and dwells in tabernacles of clay, just the same as we common mortals ... Let me claim the privilege of making your life bright and happy” (60). Dr. Latimer on the other hand recognizes her worth in her work for racial uplift. He conversely tells her, “I am not an adept in courtly phrases. I am a plain man, who believes in love and truth. In asking you to share my lot, I am not inviting you to a life of ease and luxury, for year after year I may have to struggle to keep the wolf from the door, but your presence would make my home one of the brightest spots on earth, and one of the fairest types of heaven” (271). While Dr. Gresham is primarily concerned with preserving the physical integrity of Iola’s body, Dr. Latimer wants Iola to “share” the “lot” of their cause.

Similarly, the characters of Eugene Leroy and his cousin Alfred Lorraine mirror each other in their opinions and ultimate actions about slavery and the African-American race. As the text tells us, “Lorraine was a rank Secessionist, ready to adopt the most extreme measures of the leaders of the movement, even to the reopening of the slave trade. Leroy thought a dissolution of the Union would involve a fearful expenditure of blood and treasure for which, before the eyes of the world, there could be no

justification” (89). Where Leroy is against slavery, Lorraine argues for Secession. Additionally, when Leroy informs Lorraine that he is going to marry a woman with African-American heritage, Lorraine repeatedly cautions him against it. Like Dr. Gresham and Dr. Latimer however, the distinction between these two men is ultimately more subtle than it appears. Both of their last names begin with the same initial, visually indicating to the reader their similarities. Most importantly, even though Lorraine commits a decidedly evil deed by selling the Leroy family into slavery after Eugene dies, Eugene himself can also be faulted on one level for never taking any action to ensure his family is saved from this fate, though he is reminded repeatedly (especially by his wife Marie) that this is a possibility. In fact, in one scene, after Marie is talking animatedly about “American Civilization,” The narrative reads, “Leroy listened attentively. At times a shadow of annoyance would overspread his face, but it was soon lost in the admiration her earnestness and zeal inspired,” (75). Thus, here we receive a glimmer of Eugene’s limitations. While decidedly sympathetic to the cause, he does not embrace it to the extent that he takes enough action.¹⁸⁷ Thus, in constructing such importantly different characters (i.e. Dr. Gresham/Dr. Latimer and Lorraine/Leroy) in such discursively similar ways, the text calls attention to the manner in which discourse can hide and/or construct sameness and difference.

Likewise, the text’s use of language continuously calls for the reader’s recognition of its construction. Various characters often refer to the seemingly ambiguous “public opinion” when discussing social issues. In one example, Lorraine

¹⁸⁷ One can also see in this scene the potential outcome of Iola’s life if she had decided to marry Dr. Gresham, in Marie’s ideological passion, and Eugene’s subsequent admiration for her body.

advises Leroy to be quiet about his upcoming marriage to Marie, informing him, “Public opinion is too sensitive to tolerate any such discussions” (71). Even though we can probably assume that Lorraine is referring to white upper-class Southern society here, the phrase’s lack of individualization proves significant. This lack of linguistic specificity in fact, abstracts the notion of ideological discourse to the point where it becomes visible as such, as the text forces the reader to think not only about what particular “public opinion” Lorraine is referencing, but about what the phrase itself constitutes. In this case, of course, “public opinion” becomes exposed as a discursive judgment that is something that we all fear, yet cannot attribute to any one person or entity.

This linguistic manipulation also occurs when we learn of Lorraine’s sale of the Leroy family into slavery. The narrative tells us, “Lorraine made a careful investigation of the case, to ascertain whether Marie’s marriage was valid. To his delight he found there was a flaw in the marriage and an informality in the manumission. He then determined to invalidate Marie’s claim, and divide the inheritance among Leroy’s white relations,” (95). What we see here then, is in actuality, an integral element to this story—the means by which Lorraine is able to orchestrate his takeover of the Leroy family’s finances and situations. Significantly though, the “flaw” in the Leroy marriage and the “informality” in the “manumission” are never specified. What the reader sees here then, is quite literally the discourse that renders the Leroy marriage invalid. The text does not give us the actual “flaw” because it ultimately does not matter. What carries importance is the manner in which language is used to construct legality and social perception. In

not giving us specifics in its own language, the text compels the reader to recognize its discursive power.

As a result, the manner in which the text of *Iola Leroy* asks us to read it does not just involve following its story, but recognizing its discursive structure. Many critics (both current and Harper's own contemporaries) have called attention to the fact that elements of the novel appear to have been borrowed from William Wells Brown's 1853 novel *Clotel*.¹⁸⁸ Henry Louis Gates responds to this charge in particular (and other similar ones made against other African-American writers), by stating "Repetition and revision are fundamental to black artistic forms ... Whatever is black about black American literature is to be found in this identifiable black Signifyin(g) difference."¹⁸⁹ For Gates, "repetition and revision" are integral elements of African-American literature and are in fact, what constitute it as such.

In fact, repetition as a trope emerges throughout *Iola Leroy*, and goes beyond the mere "revision" of other known narratives. Indeed, the actual story of *Iola Leroy* repeats and revises itself through various characters and situations throughout the novel. The marriage of Eugene and Marie Leroy (and its heartbreak) forecasts the potential relationship between Iola and Dr. Gresham. Harry (Iola's brother) meets, falls in love

¹⁸⁸ There are also scenes and characters in *Iola Leroy* that resemble *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Some notable examples include Tom's sacrificial death in the Civil War which resembles Uncle Tom's Christ-like death in Stowe's work, as well as Gracie's (Iola's younger sister) death, the overtones of which resemble little Eva's in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. It should also be noted that Harper "borrows" from herself in this novel. Early in the novel, Robert describes Tom Anderson's method of learning to read: "He got a book of his own, tore it up, greased the pages, and hid them in his hat. Then if his master had ever knocked his hat off he would have thought them greasy papers, and not that Tom was carrying his library on his head," (44). This depiction of course directly resembles the Uncle Caldwell character in the Aunt Chloe poem "Learning to Read."

¹⁸⁹ Gates, *The Signifying Monkey*, xxiv.

with, and marries an African-American woman who (like Iola) works for racial uplift. We view many different reunion scenarios throughout the novel (Robert recognizing Iola as his potential niece, Robert reuniting with his mother, Iola reuniting with Harry, etc.) We even see language itself repeated and revised. When Iola learns of her family's fate after her father dies, the narrator states that she writes her brother Harry (who is away at college) a letter to inform him of what has occurred. The text describes his reaction to the letter as follows: "As he read, he turned very pale; then a deep flush overspread his face and an angry light flashed from his eyes. As he read on, his face became still paler; he gasped for breath and fell into a swoon," (120). After Harry faints, Dr. Bascom picks up the letter, and begins to read it aloud, stating, "Just look at it, all tear-blotted and written with a trembling hand:- DEAR BROTHER:- I have dreadful news for you and I hardly know how to tell it ..." (122). Thus, we are treated to the actual contents of this letter multiple times within the narrative. We know the gist of what it says when we are informed that Iola will write Harry, we see Harry's reaction to it, and then we are read the actual language of the letter through Dr. Bascom's voice.

In *The Signifying Monkey*, Henry Louis Gates elaborates on the trope of repetition through his discussion of the relationship between the signified and the signifier. He argues, "To revise the received sign (quotient) literally accounted for in the relation represented by *signified/signifier* at its most apparently denotative level is to critique the nature of (White) meaning itself, to challenge through a literal critique of the sign the meaning of meaning."¹⁹⁰ In other words, in revising a "sign" on its "denotative level" or

¹⁹⁰ Gates, *The Signifying Monkey*, 47.

manipulating the meaning of language, an African-American author critiques and exposes “white meaning” or the relationship between discourse and social structures. In treating us to many different linguistic ways that we experience Iola’s letter, or repeating and revising its language, the text of *Iola Leroy* ultimately exposes the manner in which the relationship between language and meaning is not fixed, but constructed.

Ultimately then, what *Iola Leroy* demonstrates is not just the fact that discourse is constructed, but the manner in which it can be manipulated as well. As Margaret Homans expresses, “The liberatory power of the deconstructive view of language derives from the perception that a gap lies between signifier and signified and between word and referent.”¹⁹¹ In exposing this gap between language and meaning then, the text of *Iola Leroy* is able to resist social structures surrounding race, by reclaiming that discursive power. As a result, the novel ends with guarded optimism: “The race has not had very long to straighten its hands from the hoe, to grasp the pen and wield it as a power for good, and to erect above the ruined auction-block and slave-pen institutions of learning, but There is light beyond the darkness,/ Joy beyond the present pain; ...Yet the shadows bear the promise/ Of a brighter coming day” (282). Literacy for the African-American subject or the ability to “grasp the pen and wield it as a power for good” then, becomes a source of incredibly important resistance that goes beyond the mere comprehension of denotative meaning. As Harper displays in her body of work, through her own attention

¹⁹¹ Margaret Homans, “‘Racial Composition’: Metaphor and the Body of Writing in Race,” *Female Subjects in Black and White: Race, Psychoanalysis, Feminism*, ed. Elizabeth Abel, Barbara Christian, Helene Moglen (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 78.

to and movement within various social discourses, once we are able to see and understand discursive power, we can in turn, shape and revise our cultural language.

Chapter 4: Fingerprinting Racial Identity: Ambiguity and Paradox in *Puddn'head*

Wilson

Where Harper visibly exposes discourse in her work, the political implications of Mark Twain's 1894 novel *Puddn'head Wilson* prove decidedly more muddled because of this text's particular aesthetic construction. The complicated and entangled manner in which race is represented in this "farcical" novel about a slave and white baby who are switched at birth in pre-Civil War America, has made most critics and scholars so uncomfortable that very little is written about this text, especially when compared with the vast scholarship surrounding *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, a novel whose treatment of race equally sparks fierce debate. While the virtues of Twain as a writer have certainly never been without controversy, most notably in famous debates surrounding *Huckleberry Finn*,¹⁹² there seems to be a real difficulty among the scholarly community in determining just what to do with *Puddn'head Wilson* and its representation of raced subjectivity. Andrew Jay Hoffman calls the text a "troublesome book," stating that "Its ambiguities about race and evil discomfort most readers."¹⁹³ As a case in point, Myra Jehlen argues, "The story of *Puddn'head Wilson* is not about interchangeable

¹⁹² Many readers of Twain are divided about the political message sent in the battle scene towards the end of *Huckleberry Finn*, where two feuding families "war" against each other while Jim the slave sits chained in a cabin awaiting return to his masters. Tom and Huck meanwhile, treat Jim's capture as a game. Scholars range from reading this scene as an allegory of the Civil War, to viewing it as the moment where an heretofore great novel begins to unravel. Malcolm Bradbury points out that ever since Van Wyck Brooks published *The Ordeal of Mark Twain* in 1920, that "his assessment that Twain was in some way a disabled or incomplete writer has been general," ("Introduction," *Puddn'head Wilson*, New York: Penguin Books, 1986), 9.

¹⁹³ Andrew Jay Hoffman, *Twain's Heroes, Twain's Worlds*. (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1988), 145.

babies irrationally and unjustly rendered master and slave, but about a black man who has taken a white man's place."¹⁹⁴ In his introduction to the 1986 Penguin edition of the novel, Malcolm Bradbury deems it "a bad book with a good book inside it struggling to get out, and in the end remarkably managing to do so."¹⁹⁵ The 1990 anthology entitled *Mark Twain's Puddn'head Wilson: Race, Conflict, and Culture* completely devotes its essays to discussions of the racial "problematics" surrounding Twain's text.¹⁹⁶ Even in such a varied anthology as this, where scholars offer a multitude of interpretations of the text's racial politics (not all of which is overt condemnation), the editors nevertheless call attention to the novel's "grave structural shortcomings" in their introduction, proclaiming, "There is no real disagreement, after all, that *Puddn'head Wilson* is a 'mess.' On this there is something approaching consensus."¹⁹⁷ It would seem then, that the most "consensus" anyone can reach on *Puddn'head Wilson* beyond denunciation of it, is an uneasy acceptance of certain aspects of the novel.

The racial politics surrounding *Puddn'head Wilson* is indeed daunting, largely because the switched characters within it begin to display behavior that appears to reflect their "innate" racial identity. Most significantly and importantly, Tom Driscoll (the slave baby who is raised as an aristocratic white male) exhibits overwhelmingly negative traits, such as the propensity to lie and steal, while Chambers (the white baby who is raised as a

¹⁹⁴ Myra Jehlen, *Readings at the Edge of Literature*, (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2002), 117.

¹⁹⁵ Bradbury, Introduction to Mark Twain's *Puddn'head Wilson*, 9.

¹⁹⁶ Ed. Susan Gillman and Forrest G. Robinson, *Mark Twain's Puddn'head Wilson: Race, Conflict, and Culture*, (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1990).

¹⁹⁷ Susan Gillman and Forrest G. Robinson, "Introduction," *Race, Conflict, and Culture*, xvi.

slave), proves a much more positive character. What this text is trying to accomplish politically then, becomes truly difficult to discern. The twinning of Tom and Chambers on one level, suggests a problematic commentary on innate racial behavior and characteristics. However, the fact that it is also the particular environment in which each character is raised that equally dictates his behavior, can simultaneously demonstrate the way in which conduct and personality are equally shaped by external influences. The text's story and structure lend what I would consider equal credence to both interpretations, consequently leaving many readers at an impasse and thus creating the general view that the novel is indeed a "mess."

However, what this novel actually reflects is precisely the complexity and in fact "messy" entanglement of American notions of racial identity and the sociopolitical discourse that surrounds it. What Twain does in *Pudd'n'head Wilson* is use narrative discourse to emphasize the force that cultural narrative and language have of blindly convincing us of visual "truths." As the reader flits in and out of various characters' perspectives, the whole notion of whom we identify with in this text becomes completely undermined. This is especially emphasized through the fact that the character whose eyes we look through the most is Tom Driscoll. Tom is not only the text's least likable character, but one whose racial identity consists of an African-American male passing for white, who (up until towards the end of the novel) is not even fully aware that he is doing so. The reader is thus literally unable to determine racial codes of behavior and identity through visual narratives, underscored by the fact that the visual is channeled through the literary form of the novel. Ultimately then, it is actually in the text's aesthetic ambiguity

where political resistance lies, as the precariousness of racial identity expounded in the novel, revolves around the decentering of an essential raced subject. The racial identity the reader identifies him/herself with cannot be fully or completely located, thus disrupting the boundary between the reader's subjectivity and the character's as well. Twain's novel thus ultimately decenters the visual "truth" of narrative itself.

Puddn'head Wilson continuously and overtly calls attention to itself as narrative, thereby decentering its "truth." The novel is prefaced with a section entitled "A Whisper to the Reader," and signed at the end by Mark Twain. The first sentence reads "A person who is ignorant of legal matters is always liable to make mistakes when he tries to photograph a court scene with his pen; and so I was not willing to let the law chapters in this book go to press without first subjecting them to rigid and exhausting revision and correction by a trained barrister – if that is what they are called. These chapters are right now, in every detail, for they were rewritten under the immediate eye of William Hicks ..."¹⁹⁸ Before we even read the actual novel then, we are treated to the musings of a decidedly embodied narrator (one who incidentally remains mostly omniscient in the actual novel) who discusses his process in writing the text. The text thus instantly reminds us of the fact that its contents are indeed narrativized.

Significantly, although this preface seemingly purports to be about assuring us of the legal accuracy in the following chapters, this section also pointedly contains its own narrative. Twain later tells us in the section that William Hicks

¹⁹⁸ Mark Twain, *Puddn'head Wilson*, (New York: Penguin Books, 1986 ed.), 53. All subsequent citations will refer to this edition.

studied law part of a while in south-west Missouri thirty-five years ago and then came over here to Florence for his health and is still helping for exercise and board in Macaroni Vermicelli's horse-feed shed which is up the back alley as you turn around the corner out of the Piazza del Duomo just beyond the house where that stone that Dante used to sit on six hundred years ago is let into the wall when he let on to be watching them build Giotto's campinale and yet always got tired looking as soon as Beatrice passed along on her way to get a chunk of chestnut cake to defend herself with in case of a Ghibelline outbreak before she got to school, at the same old stand where they sell the same old cake to this day and it is just as light and good as it was then, too, and this is not flattery, far from it. He was a little rusty on his law, but he rubbed up for this book, and those two or three legal chapters are right and straight, now. He told me so himself. (53)

What Twain actually establishes here then, is his unreliability as a narrator, by pointing out that Hicks's word is his *only* source for accuracy, and he was in fact previously "a little rusty" on his legal knowledge. The fact that Twain isolates the last line "He told me so himself" after an exceedingly long sentence that describes not only Hicks's journey to Italy, but references another famous narrative by Dante, emphasizes the simultaneously forceful yet precarious link between narrative and perceived truth. Twain theoretically becomes so caught up in the narrative of Hicks and its resemblance to Dante's (again demonstrated through the sentence's extraordinary length) that the fact that Hicks "told [Twain] so himself" becomes all he needs to believe him. This preface then, immediately

destabilizes the narrator of *Puddn'head Wilson* as a purveyor of truth. The narrator's construction of the novel's narrative, has already been, in effect, overly narrativized.¹⁹⁹

Similarly, the text's references to historical events are often overtly constructed as narrative constructions. Priscilla Wald discusses the importance of cultural discourse in the creation of American identity, arguing "Official stories are narratives that surface in the rhetoric of nationalist movements and initiatives – legal, political, and literary ... Official stories constitute Americans. I use the term 'official' because of the authority they command, articulated, as they are, in relation to the rights and privileges of individuals."²⁰⁰ M.M. Bakhtin in fact, views all novelistic discourse as inherently multiplicitous and layered, reflecting both individual and sociocultural expression:

Language [is] not a system of abstract grammatical categories, but another language conceived as ideologically saturated, language as a world view, even as a concrete opinion, insuring a *maximum* of mutual understanding in all spheres of ideological life. Thus a unitary language gives expression to forces working toward concrete verbal and ideological unification and centralization, which develop in vital connection with the processes of sociopolitical and cultural centralization ... The unity of a literary language is not a unity of a single, closed language system, but is rather a highly specific unity of

¹⁹⁹ While of course, we are aware before we begin reading *Puddn'head Wilson* that it is in fact, a work of fiction, what I am trying to get at here is the singular manner in which Twain calls attention to himself as narrator, thereby undercutting the reader's traditional suspension of disbelief. While we as readers understand that we are reading a fictional work, we also accept the "truth" of the world that that text presents us. By pointedly letting us know at the beginning of a fictional work that the "facts" of the text are ambiguous even within the setting of the narrative, the narrator destabilizes the "truth" within the narrative of the novel itself, by calling attention to itself as such.

²⁰⁰ Priscilla Wald, *Constituting Americans: Cultural Anxiety and Narrative Form*, (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1995), 2.

several “languages” that have established contact and mutual recognition with each other.²⁰¹

This relationship between “official” stories and literary language is evidenced in *Puddn’head Wilson* when Mr. Driscoll attempts to extract a confession about stolen money from four of his slaves. He declares, “If at the end of that time you have not confessed, I will not only sell all four of you, *but* – I will sell you DOWN THE RIVER!” (68). The group’s reaction to this proclamation is telling: “It was equivalent to condemning them to hell! No Missouri negro doubted this. Roxy reeled in her tracks and the colour vanished out of her face; the others dropped to their knees as if they had been shot” (68). This passage quite literally highlights the terrible threat of being “sold down the river” (or a term for a slave being sold south of the Mississippi River which usually meant harder labor, and less opportunity to escape or be freed) by capitalizing the phrase. Thus, the ensuing narrative that the phrase “sold down the river” with all of its horrors (which were of course quite real for slaves in antebellum America) entails, becomes exposed as such, underscored by the fact that no individual experience with this event is given here. Instead, it is the generalized *story* of being sold down the river, or the narrativized knowledge that it is equivalent to being “condemned” to hell that surfaces to construct the characters’ reactions and senses of self. Through this particular threat, Mr. Driscoll is able to rearticulate the subject positions of everyone involved in this scene: He is the master, and they are the slaves, a fact that is emphasized when Driscoll’s ploy works. The three who are responsible for the theft confess, and “flung themselves prone,

²⁰¹ Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, 271-295.

in an ecstasy of gratitude, and kissed his feet, declaring that they would never forget his goodness and never cease to pray for him as long as they lived” (68). The dichotomy of master/slave in terms of power/powerlessness has now been restored.²⁰² This scene thus demonstrates that it is an “official” story that is constructing these individuals’ sense of themselves and their relationships to each other.

Significantly, this scene also importantly foreshadows two important later instances in the novel; when Roxy is in fact “sold down the river” by her own son, and when Tom (the switched slave baby who inadvertently “passes” for white) does in fact steal money from his “uncle” (Mr. Driscoll’s brother). Through the utilization of this literary device, the text thus reveals the constructed nature of narrative. Specific events in the novel overtly and pointedly refer back to others. Consequently, the origin of the story of the theft and of being sold down the river is continuously and manifestly fragmented.

The text then, also calls attention to itself as an “official” story through its particular structure. One of the more singular aspects of the novel is the manner in which Twain revises and incorporates his short story “Those Extraordinary Twins” (which is tacked on in its entirety after the novel) into the plot of *Puddn’head Wilson*. Twain himself describes this process in a preface before the story as one almost beyond his control:

I had a sufficiently hard time with [*Puddn’head Wilson*] because it changed itself from a farce to a tragedy while I was going along with it – a most embarrassing circumstance. But what was a great deal worse was, that it was not one story, but two

²⁰² See Chapter 3 for discussions of the relationship between power and stealing for the enslaved body.

stories tangled together; and they obstructed and interrupted each other at every turn and created no end of confusion and annoyance ... At last I saw where the difficulty lay. I had no further trouble. I pulled one of the stories out by the roots, and left the other one – a kind of literary Caesarean operation. (230)

Here, Twain informs us that his novel began to shift its nature and focus of its own accord, and he as author was left to wrangle with the consequences. What Twain appears to be claiming here then, is that it is the narrative of the novel as its own entity that is shaping its characters, and not Twain himself.

Indeed, the “literary Caesarean operation” that Twain claims to have performed in extracting “Those Extraordinary Twins” from *Puddn’head Wilson* manifests itself in very visible ways. The transition in the novel to the introduction of the twins and their story is slightly abrupt. Chapter Five begins discussing the characters of Judge Driscoll and Puddn’head Wilson in further detail to move suddenly to a paragraph (without even a sub-heading) describing the heretofore unmentioned Widow Cooper: “The Widow Cooper – affectionately called ‘aunt Patsy’ by everybody – lived in a snug and comely cottage with her daughter Rowena, who as nineteen, romantic, amiable, and very pretty, but otherwise of no consequence. Rowena had a couple of young brothers – also of no consequence,” (87). This description leads into the twins visiting the Coopers and their subsequent story, which does ultimately become important to the plot of *Puddn’head Wilson*. However, what the reader can clearly see here (especially after reading “Those Extraordinary Twins”) is evidence of Twain’s literary “root-pulling.” Our introduction to Widow Cooper seemingly appears to be a quite awkward transition.

It is tempting to view this construction as a particular example of the novel's structural and aesthetic "messiness." Malcolm Bradbury, for example, a scholar who professes admiration for *Puddn'head Wilson* states, "Because of [the tie-in with "Those Extraordinary Twins"] the book achieves a grotesqueness of tone and vision ... it manages to pull materials unpromisingly conceived and often roughly executed into a vivid surreal relationship."²⁰³ Thus, on one level, it appears as though Twain's desire to separate the two stories, but not fully eradicate elements of one within the other, has left the structure of *Puddn'head Wilson* rather sloppy. However, the main reason that the Widow Cooper transition feels so abrupt is because we are treated to the story of "Those Extraordinary Twins" later. We thus actually see the moments of Twain's extractions within the novel, because we are given the original story for comparison. Additionally, Twain actually makes a point of mentioning them before we read the short story. He thus essentially asks us to look for those transitions and gaps when we're reading the story, and when we re-read the novel. That Twain would go to such pains to point out to the reader evidence of his faulty or sloppy writing just does not seem logical, especially given the fact that he obviously has spent a great deal of time reflecting about his writing process. To make the Widow Cooper transition more smooth for example, would after all, be fairly easily corrected. Moreover, although it is certainly not uncommon for writers to speak of their work and characters as if they had minds of their own, for someone who claims to have little control over his writing, Twain writes surprisingly thoroughly about the shape of it. What we do see here then is Twain calling attention to

²⁰³ Bradbury, *Introduction to Puddn'head Wilson*, 22.

the perceived power of narrative to the extent that it seemingly overrides his ability to weave two stories together effectively at times. In this novel, Twain thus pointedly denaturalizes its narrative structure.

Sociopolitical discourse in the novel functions in a similar manner. The novel was written two years before the 1896 Supreme Court case *Plessy v. Ferguson* which upheld legal segregation with the famous phrase “separate but equal.” During this time period then, legal and social discourse surrounding race appeared unified, but concealed its actual practice through its official language. As Samira Kawash argues, “The subtle transmutation of ‘equal but separate’ to the more familiar locution ‘separate but equal’ exposes the truth of the matter. *Separate* is the prior, more important term, and *but* qualifies the separation, implying that absent that qualifier, such a separateness would in fact be unequal.”²⁰⁴ Thus, *Puddn’head Wilson* emerges during a time when American legal discourse institutionalized racism, but now (as opposed to laws that justified slavery in antebellum America) began to attempt to disguise it.

The novel in fact continuously reflects this discursive entanglement in its treatment of social codes. The novel begins with the story of the origin of Puddn’head Wilson’s name. After Wilson (a lawyer) makes the infamous comment that he wished he owned half of an incessantly barking dog, so he could “kill his half,” the town responds in the following manner: “The incident was told all over the town, and gravely discussed by everybody. Within a week he had lost his first name; Puddn’head took its place. In time he came to be liked, and well liked, too; but by that time, the nickname had got well stuck

²⁰⁴ Kawash, *Dislocating the Color Line*, 98-99.

on, and it stayed. That first day's verdict made him a fool, and he was not able to get it set aside, or even modified" (60). The novel thus pointedly begins with an example of a socially discursive knot. Wilson's logic in his comment makes sense on one level according to American law. If he only kills the half of the dog that he owns, he cannot be completely responsible for the total death of the dog.²⁰⁵ Practically of course though, it is impossible to kill only one half of the dog. This comment thus reveals a disjunction between American legal discourse, and social codes/behavior.²⁰⁶

Significantly though of course, it is the town's reaction to Wilson's comment that displays the most importance here. Notably, it is what Wilson says that determines how he will be viewed socially, and not what he does. It is thus ultimately not his vocation that initially marks him as a character that represents legal discourse, but the fact that he literally speaks it. As a result, what we see here is legal language (spoken by Wilson) intermingling with social language (spoken in the town's branding of Wilson as "Puddn'head"). These two discursive properties reach an uneasy alliance in that Wilson is eventually "well-liked" by the town. However, he still pointedly retains the name of "Puddn'head." The novel thus instantly reveals to the reader an example of the entangled and unstable manner in which legal and social discourse combine to produce and constitute subjects, which is significantly reproduced through the manner in which this scene unfolds within the narrative of the text itself. The linguistic conundrum of the dog

²⁰⁵ This dilemma occurs in a much more serious manner in "Those Extraordinary Twins" when one member of a set of conjoined twins commits a murder. The town is faced with the dilemma of how to sentence one twin to death without killing the other.

²⁰⁶ I do not mean to imply here that social codes/behavior and practicality are parallel terms, nor that legal discourse is synonymous with logic. The comparison I am making here is between what occurs in the world of American law versus the world of American society.

comment gives way to the paradoxical construction of Puddn'head Wilson as a character. He is arguably the most logical character in the novel, yet he is viewed as a fool by the town, and to some extent the reader. After all, "Puddn'head" Wilson is how the narrator consistently refers to him, and is really the only name by which we know him. The reader's response to Puddn'head Wilson as a character is thus always inherently muddled. In telling us the origin of his name however, the nature and process of that entanglement is revealed.

Similarly, the novel continuously reveals the paradoxicality of sociopolitical discourses surrounding race. The novel significantly first introduces us to Roxy through her language, as Puddn'head Wilson hears voices from his office, one of them Roxy's: "If you b'longed to me I'd sell you down de river fo' you git too fur gone. Fust time I runs acrost yo' marster, I's gwine to tell him so," (63). The reader thus automatically assumes Roxy is African-American, through various linguistic codes that this passage imparts. Roxy tells her counterpart "If you b'longed to me," thus underscoring the fact that Roxy does not possess the power of ownership. However, the most striking clue to Roxy's racial identity involves the visible difference of her type of language. The meaning of the actual utterances that Roxy makes is pointedly somewhat vague. After all, if Roxy had not made these statements in this particular vernacular, her racial status might not have appeared so obvious. Instead, it is because her language looks so markedly different from the rest of the narrative, that we are led to assume a racial identity for her.²⁰⁷

²⁰⁷ See Chapter 3 for discussions on the American discursive connection between race and visibility.

The narrative instantly shatters our conception of Roxy though, through its ensuing physical description of her. After this exchange, the narrator tells us,

From Roxy's manner of speech a stranger would have expected her to be black, but she was not. Only one sixteenth of her was black, and that sixteenth did not show ... Her complexion was very fair, with the rosy glow of vigorous health in the cheeks, her face was full of character and expression, her eyes were brown and liquid, and she had a heavy suit of fine soft hair which was also brown, but the fact was not apparent because her head was bound about with a checkered handkerchief and the hair was concealed under it. (63-4)

Although Roxy looks white with her "fair complexion" and "fine soft hair," it is ultimately the "one-sixteenth" that, in a racialized discourse, defines her, emphasized by the fact that we view Roxy's language before we view her body. It is the language surrounding her that constructs her, and the type of social language she herself will speak. The narrator's reiteration of the reader's assumption that "a stranger would have expected her to be black" also proves significant. This statement is actually pretty unnecessary, since most readers would have made this assumption anyway. The revelation that she looks white would no doubt have proved surprising without this initial sentence. Yet, in including this declaration, the narrative highlights the intensely discursive role in subject formation, through its own linguistic reiteration of the gap between what we expect, and what is actually "true." Even though it is not Roxy's actual body that "speaks" her African-American status, the power of the language surrounding the construction of that body actually glosses over that gap. We will now forever see Roxy's body as a black one,

even though it does not visibly appear like one. The text's reiteration of that initial disparity exposes it as such.

In fact, the novel frequently exposes and works within discursive gaps to construct its plot. The use of humor and irony in this text oftentimes seems to contribute to readers' puzzled and/or negative reactions to it. Forrest G. Robinson for example, calls attention to "the discontinuity between the dark central chapters and the strangely upbeat conclusion."²⁰⁸ In a scathing denunciation, John H. Schaar proclaims, "[The novel] is tasteless at best, morally coarse at worst, and makes a sprawl of the book besides, as the jokes get stretched past the breaking point."²⁰⁹ Many scholars seem unable to reconcile the text's inclusion of humor with its treatment of race.

This reaction proves understandable on one level. The issues in this novel (miscegenation, slavery, racial identity) are serious indeed, and there are definitive tragic elements in it. The fates of both Chambers and Tom at the end of the novel for example, (Chambers is never really able to grapple with the fact that he is actually white, and Tom ironically gets sold down the river for murdering his "uncle") are decidedly unsettling. The ending of the novel reads, "Everybody granted that if 'Tom' were white and free it would be unquestionably right to punish him – it would be no loss to anybody; but to shut up a valuable slave for life – that was quite another matter. As soon as the Governor understood the case, he pardoned Tom at once, and the creditors sold him down the river," (226). Thus, the question that inevitably arises is the manner in which we should

²⁰⁸ Forrest G. Robinson, "The Sense of Disorder in *Puddn'head Wilson*," *Puddn'head Wilson: Race, Conflict, and Culture*, 24.

²⁰⁹ John H. Schaar, "Some of the Ways of Freedom in *Puddn'head Wilson*," *Puddn'head Wilson: Race, Conflict, and Culture*, 213.

view this novel in terms of race. In other words, the use of irony in this last passage about Tom's "pardon" from death entailing a sale into slavery can be read as a commentary on the evils of slavery, in the sense that Tom might indeed be facing a worse punishment than death. The fact that Tom shows himself to be such a consistently unlikable character throughout the novel though, simultaneously seemingly tempers the political implications of this statement. The text may be telling us that Tom gets what he deserves, thereby seemingly promoting the idea that some people may in fact be better suited to be slaves. This of course becomes a political problem since Tom is in fact, actually African-American. On one level then, the text may ultimately be telling us that African-Americans innately belong within slavery.

However, the text uses humor and irony to expose and disrupt the reader's reliance on sociopolitical discourse to shape our views. Bruce Michelson describes "literary wit" as a unique type of "literary discourse," claiming

This kind of wit ... [is] a transformed way of seeing and telling rather than as relief from seriousness, or as digression, or as some other kind of dilution or subversion of intense response ... Moreover, literary wit can be complex and even dangerous, precisely because it can challenge and disrupt paradigms, habits of thought running so deep as to go largely unrecognized even by cultural critics – including habits of thought *about* literary texts, literary modes, and other classifications of discourse.²¹⁰

In other words, textual humor or "literary wit" involves more than just lighthearted moments for the reader or "relief from seriousness," but is actually a different mode of

²¹⁰ Bruce Michelson, *Literary Wit*, (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2000), 2-3.

telling its story that many times disrupts traditional ways of seeing and thinking. In a similar vein, Myra Jehlen defines irony as “a refusal to overlook contradiction” and a paradox as a “suspended irony.”²¹¹ What literary wit and/or irony does then, is expose the gap between two contradictory ideas, by refusing to ignore it, or essentially working within it. If we think of irony in this way, the fact that we cannot definitively discern the political implications of the novel’s last passage may be precisely the point. As the relationship between Tom and Chambers’s “true” subject positions and their circumstances continuously become muddled, the discursive “contradictions” between the binary concepts of slavery/freedom, white/black, justice/injustice are completely disrupted. As a result, what ultimately ruptures here is discursive power. We as readers cannot rely definitively on our sociopolitical discourse to give us the “answer” surrounding Tom and Chambers.

Significantly, we ultimately cannot rely on the novel’s narrative discourse either. The text in fact, uses humor and irony continuously to construct its plot. After Tom sells Roxy (his mother) into slavery only to find out that she has escaped and returned to him, he says to himself,

I’m lost, no matter what turns things take! This man has said to me that he thinks there was something suspicious about that sale. He said he had a letter from a passenger on the *Grand Mogul* saying that Roxy came here on the boat and that everybody on board knew all about the case; so he says that her coming here instead of flying to a free state looks bad for me, and that if I don’t find her for

²¹¹ Jehlen, *Readings at the Edge*, 4.

him, and that pretty soon, he will make trouble for me. I never believed that story; I couldn't believe she would be so dead to all motherly instincts as to come here, knowing the risk she would run of getting me into irremediable trouble. (186)

Tom is thus caught in a paradox here. He has illegally sold a free slave (made doubly criminal by the fact that he is by all rights a slave himself). Yet, he has been accused of a business swindle that he in fact did not commit, since he fully intended to sell Roxy "legitimately." In other words, the crime that he does commit (and is ultimately in the eyes of the law of course, a far worse one) ironically goes unnoticed, while he is in real danger of getting in trouble for the one of which he is innocent. The comic absurdity of this paradox, coupled of course with the ludicrousness of Tom's bemoaning of his mother's lack of "maternal instincts" (since Tom appears to have no such familial feeling in selling his mother into slavery), functions as a demonstration of the manner in which sociopolitical discourse has constructed dichotomies. Through the paradox of Tom being simultaneously guilty and innocent of legal and moral (Tom is certainly guilty of a lack of feeling for his mother, but innocent of cheating in a business transaction in this case), what we are in fact reading is the space between two contradictory concepts, emphasized through the particular manner in which Tom's language is constructed here. Just as Tom is neither completely innocent nor completely guilty, he seems to address simultaneously himself, the reader, and/or Roxy (who is sitting next to him in the room). Consequently, Hershel Parker's famous statement that *Puddn'head Wilson* is an "unreadable" text²¹²

²¹² Hershel Parker, *Flawed Texts and Verbal Icons: Literary Authority as American Fiction*, (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1984), 142.

proves pointedly true in terms of discursive authority. Many times throughout the novel, we are not in fact reading or understanding binary concepts, but instead experience their disruption through reading the spaces in between them.

What the novel is in fact saying about race proves to be the central dilemma when reading this text. For many readers, the problem involves the novel's perceived promotion of racial essentialism. Susan Gillman for example, argues, "Blackness is conceived in this story as hidden taint, with the conventions of the search for origins and the revelation of kinship that are central to much race literature resulting here in fearful exposure, identity destroying rather than affirming."²¹³ Superficially, Gillman is absolutely correct. The text frequently seemingly pinpoints Tom Driscoll's decidedly negative behavior as a result of his innate African-American heritage. After Tom displays a particular act of cowardice, Roxy passionately tells him, "It's de nigger in you, dat's what it is. Thirty-one parts o' you is white, en on'y one part nigger, en dat po' little one part is yo' *soul*," (157). Seemingly then, the novel leaves its readers with the idea that Tom exhibits such bad behavior, because he indeed possesses the "hidden taint" of blackness, emphasized in Roxy's speech through the italicization of the word "*soul*." The visual indeterminacy of race established in the beginning of the novel when Roxy is able to switch the two babies so easily becomes undermined through Tom's innate racial identity. It is his black "*soul*" that now is made literally visible.

However, the innateness of identity is actually the most consistently unstable concept in *Puddn'head Wilson*. The text emphasizes this through the manner in which it constructs

²¹³ Susan Gillman, *Blood Talk: American Race Melodrama and the Culture of the Occult*, (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2003), 126-7.

the reader's relationship to the characters within it. Just whom the protagonist of this novel is, is continuously called into question, as we constantly move in and out of different characters' perspectives. The novel is after all, entitled *Puddn'head Wilson*, and yet we spend most of our reading time within Tom Driscoll's (who is of course not actually the real Tom Driscoll) viewpoint. Significantly, "Tom" is not a protagonist whom we are encouraged to embrace or sympathize with in any way. We almost virtually never experience the point of view of Chambers (the real Tom Driscoll who has been "switched" into slavery), and in fact hardly ever see him at all, after the two boys read adulthood.²¹⁴ Indeed, the narrator makes a point of emphasizing the lack of Chambers's story within the narrative, telling us at the end of the novel, "The real heir suddenly found himself rich and free, but in a most embarrassing situation. He could neither read nor write, and his speech was the basest dialect of the negro quarter ... But we cannot follow his curious fate further – that would be a long story" (225). If we are indeed to dislike Tom, and sympathize with the unjustness of what occurs to the "real" or white "heir," (which the novel seems to want us to do), not to follow at least equally Chambers's narrative trajectory seems puzzling. The text appears to block us from experiencing a prolonged connection with him as a character.

For a text that seems to comment so heavily on identity then, it is significantly telling that distinguishing the roles of the characters within it (in terms of the readers' response to them) proves so difficult. This becomes especially important when we consider the

²¹⁴ There is even the argument to be made that Roxy might be the true protagonist of this novel. She is the catalyst for most of the main events within the narrative, and is either directly or indirectly involved in virtually all of the major plot points.

connection between protagonists in nineteenth-century American literature in particular, and American identity. In his famous work *The American Adam: Innocence, Tragedy, and Tradition in Nineteenth Century*, R.W.B. Lewis discusses the emergence of a uniquely American myth in the nineteenth century that was embodied in its literature, claiming that the new American hero was “an individual emancipated from history, happily bereft of ancestry, untouched and undefiled by the usual inheritances of family and race; an individual standing alone, self-reliant, and self-propelling, ready to confront whatever awaited him with the aid of his own unique and inherent resources.”²¹⁵ Significantly, this “emancipated” hero would always be a white one, since the African-American subject always carries the burden of the history of slavery. Thus, the text of *Puddn’head Wilson* initially presents us (both through the title of the novel itself and the fact that the book opens and ends with Wilson) with a character who seems to embody all of the characteristics of the “American hero.” Puddn’head Wilson is significantly the only character in the novel who does not appear to be burdened by the “usual inheritances of family and race,” and his singular involvement in his legal practice and the science of fingerprinting render him highly individualistic and indeed “self-reliant.”

Yet, in switching our perspective from Puddn’head Wilson for the majority of the book, the text destabilizes historical discourse by exposing it as mythically constructed. The character of Puddn’head Wilson is literally not “emancipated from history” within the narrative of the novel. His story is thoroughly bound up with the stories of others. It should also of course be noted that the town immediately burdens Puddn’head with a

²¹⁵ R.W.B. Lewis, *The American Adam: Innocence, Tragedy, and Tradition in the Nineteenth Century*, (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1955), 5.

name that follows him throughout the novel, until he is able to prove himself differently. His identity is thus (for better or worse) tied up with the manner in which others view him. Similarly, Tom's black ancestry that follows him throughout the novel is part of what seemingly marks him as anti-heroic. He is "defiled" by his "ancestry," evidenced through his behavior. Chambers, possessing no such defilement in his blood, proves literally emancipated from the story of the narrative. He is free of the potentially "long story" that surrounds him. It is important to recognize however, that Chambers's sense of identity is also thoroughly tied to the slave status that has been thrust upon him. Indeed, his final appearance in the novel involves him unable to reconcile his "true" blood with the environment in which he was raised, demonstrating the manner in which both he and Tom have been overtly constructed as characters and subjects. Tom after all, through all of the narrative detail that surrounds him, basically experiences the same fundamental problem.

The twinning of Tom and Chambers in this novel then, ultimately signifies more than just the legal and moral chaos that ensues when two characters "pass" for the "wrong" race. As Werner Sollors points out in his extensive analysis of the concept of racial passing,

In a generally mobile society, the world of "passing" suggests, against first appearances, an unchangeable hold of at least one origin and "community." One may therefore say that the term "passing" is a misnomer because it is used to describe those people who are *not* presumed to be able to pass legitimately from one class to another, but who are believed to remain identified by a part of their ancestry throughout their

own lives and that – no matter whom they marry – they bequeath this identification to their descendants.²¹⁶

In other words, passing proves paradoxical in that it is inherently impossible to accomplish successfully, since theoretically innate racial traits will always manifest themselves. Again, on the surface, this idea is precisely what *Puddn'head Wilson* appears to represent in the mirror images of Tom and Chambers. The scene where Roxy switches the babies reads as follows: “She stepped over and glanced at the other infant; she flung a glance back at her own; then one more at the heir of the house. Now a strange light dawned in her eyes, and in a moment she was lost in thought ... She undressed Thomas a Becket, stripping him of everything, and put the tow-linen shirt on him. She put his coral necklace on her own child’s neck. Then she placed the children side by side, and after earnest inspection she muttered – ‘Now who would b’lieve clo’es could do de like o’ dat? Dog my cats if it ain’t all *I* kin do to tell t’ other fum which, let alone his pappy’” (71). Visually then, the two babies are easily able to pass for one another. Roxy herself cannot even tell them apart after she dresses them in each other’s clothes.

The “true” nature of Tom (who is of course the real Chambers) though, appears to emerge almost immediately. At the beginning of the next chapter, the narrator tells us, “‘Tom’ was a bad baby, from the very beginning of his usurpation. He would cry for nothing; he would burst into storms of devilish temper without notice, and let go scream after scream ...” (75). The fact that Tom instantly displays such bad behavior after he has been switched (when neither baby has exhibited any type of especially good or bad

²¹⁶ Werner Sollors, *Neither Black nor White yet Both: Thematic Explorations of Interracial Literature*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997), 250.

behavior before the switch), potentially indicates a truly disturbing possibility: Tom (Chambers) does not innately fit within his “white” role. The disastrous events that occur in this novel thus seem to be a direct result of this “usurpation.” Although the two babies can wear the other’s literal clothes, they cannot figuratively fit within them.

However, in the pairing of Tom and Chambers, the novel actually refutes the idea of an innate racial identity through using the trope of passing to dislocate discursive origins. It is significant that we see Roxy look intently at each baby multiple times. As Samira Kawash states, “Racial visibility is a part of, not prior to, the social production of racial meanings.”²¹⁷ What we view in the switching scene is the obvious construction of racial identity, as Roxy determines for Tom and Chambers how they will view themselves as subjects. Yet, in watching Roxy “glance” at each baby multiple times until a “strange light” appears in her own eyes, we begin to lose the originary truth of this creation. Roxy has to look actively and thoroughly to determine that she can and will switch the babies, as well as put new clothes on them to accomplish the project fully. In other words, this scene emphasizes the active work that Roxy undertakes to “view” the babies in a new way, rather than the way they passively or naturally appear. The fact that Roxy’s discovery is configured through a light in her eyes, proves significant. The manner in which she views the two babies has literally changed. Thus, this scene thoroughly undermines any “prior” or innate reliance on visibility in the discursive determination of racial identity, by dislocating it as such.

²¹⁷ Kawash, *Dislocating the Color Line*, 141-2.

As a result, the novel demonstrates the manner in which the notion of innate racial identity proves equally discursively constructed, reflected in the narrative's incorporation of that crucial switch. After Roxy switches the babies, the narrator states, "This history must henceforth accommodate itself to the change which Roxana has consummated, and call the real 'Chambers' and the usurping little slave 'Thomas a Becket' – shortening this latter name to 'Tom,' for daily use, as the people about him did" (75). We thus at first view an explanation about the fact that the narrative will now reflect the switched bodies within it, by indeed swapping their names. This explanation is then followed quickly by quotation marks surrounding the names, indicating that these are not indeed the two characters' real names. By the next page however, the quotation marks surrounding "Tom" and "Chambers" have been dropped, thus emphasizing the manner in which the name (through its repetition) has now truly become associated with the person .

Consequently, the novel's own commentary on the behavior that both Tom and Chambers exhibit proves pointedly indistinguishable. Only a few pages after the narrative name exchange, the narrator tells us about an incident when Tom and Chambers are boys that involves the pretense of drowning as a joke: "Tom had never tried this joke as yet, but was supposed to be trying it now, so the boys held warily back; but Chambers believed his master was in earnest, therefore he swam out, and arrived in time, unfortunately, and saved his life" (80). Just whom this incident is "unfortunate" for proves decidedly complicated. As readers, we have come to know Tom and Chambers by their names, even though we know their names are not their "real" identity. If "Tom" is not really Tom, then the question of which character truly exhibits which behavior

actually continuously arises throughout the narrative, underscored through the eventual drop of quotation marks surrounding the two characters' names. Thus, the novel's own narrative discourse dislocates its own originary "truth" to demonstrate the manner in which discourse shapes our views of identity. Through the exchange of names, we now literally see the "real" Chambers as Tom, even as we know the inaccuracy of that conflation.

We can see this originary dislocation further through the manner in which the identities of Tom and Chambers begin to collapse onto one another within the space of the narrative. In a pivotal scene (one of the few where we actually see Chambers speak after the two boys have reached adulthood), Chambers tells his "mother" about Tom's gambling debts, stating, "Ole marster found it out, 'ca'se he had to pay two hundred dollahs for Marse Tom's gamblin' debts, en dat's true, mammy, jes as dead certain as you's bawn" (103). Thus here, in discussing "Marse Tom's" gambling debts, Chambers simultaneously and paradoxically refers to himself and another person. Chambers actually is the real "Marse Tom" but of course possesses no actual gambling debts. This linguistic paradox reveals the manner in which the true mirroring of Tom and Chambers within this narrative involves one of discursive construction. Shari Benstock paraphrases Jacques Lacan's definition of the "mirror stage" in selfhood development as follows:

The "mirror stage" of psychic development that initiates the child into the social community and brings it under the law of the Symbolic (the law of language as constituted through society) serves up a false image of the child's unified "self." This unity is imposed from the outside (in the mirror reflection) ... the "mirror" stage must,

therefore, be understood as a metaphor for the vision of harmony of a subject essentially in discord ... it is called the unconscious or that which derives from an experience of “self” as fragmented, partial, segmented, and different.²¹⁸

In other words, the moment when a child looks into a mirror and sees his/her reflection, he/she represses the newfound knowledge that his/her self is actually a split self (the image in the mirror is simultaneously one’s self and not one’s self). This repression of the self as “fragmented” and “different” now belongs to the realm of the unconscious. As Chambers and Tom reflect one another in this scene (their names reflect each other at the same time that they do not), the “true” identity of each character becomes lost or repressed. Significantly, this repression takes place not through the manner in which the two characters visually appear, but by how they are narratively constructed. In nominatively reflecting each other, they are in effect continuously “looking” at each other discursively, thus repressing and dislocating the originary identity of both characters.

One must additionally remember when taking into consideration what Malcolm Bradbury terms the “unresolved question of whether Tom is bad because of the treatment he receives or because ‘bad’ Negro blood comes out in him”²¹⁹ the significant fact that it is only the characters in this novel who construct commentaries surrounding Tom’s innate racial identity. In other words, it is Roxy who tells Tom that the “nigger” part in him is his “soul,” not the narrator or text itself.²²⁰ Even in moments when characters do

²¹⁸ Shari Benstock, “Authorizing the Autobiographical,” *Women, Autobiography, Theory*, 146.

²¹⁹ Bradbury, Introduction to *Puddn’head Wilson*, 45.

²²⁰ I am conflating narrator and text here (although I recognize that they are not necessarily always parallel terms) because as readers, our experience of the text is so often shaped and constructed by the narrator.

not actually speak about this problem, the text represents the issue in such a way that it underscores its discursive construction. After Tom discovers his true heritage, the narrator tells us, “If he met a friend, he found that the habit of a lifetime had in some mysterious way vanished – his arm hung limp, instead of involuntarily extending the hand for a shake. It was the ‘nigger’ in him asserting its humility, and he blushed and was abashed,” (118). This passage might appear to involve a textual commentary about the emergence of Tom’s innate identity. His “lifetime habits” have suddenly and pointedly “mysteriously” disappeared. Similarly, the narrator states unequivocally that it is the “nigger” in Tom that is “asserting” itself. However, the so-called “nigger” behavior that asserts itself in Tom significantly occurs only after he is told of his racial identity. The word “nigger” is also importantly placed in quotes in this passage, indicating the degree to which this word and identity are discursively constructed. Thus, in placing ideas surrounding the origin of Tom’s identity in other characters’ mouths (or in effect the social world that surrounds Tom), the novel exposes the discursive creation of selfhood. Tom’s knowledge of himself is strictly dictated through what others tell him, and through the manner in which others see him.

The innate truth of everything that we see in this novel then, is always inherently destabilized by its pointed reliance on discursive authority. Disguise plays a large role in the text, as characters within it are consistently fooled by visible bodies, from the town’s

Similarly, I am separating the narrator’s voice from that of the characters here, because they are pointedly constructed as such in this text. As seen earlier in the narrator’s explanation of the name switch, and the commentary that Tom’s life was “unfortunately” saved, the narrator interjects his/her voice every so often throughout this novel. Since this voice is notably opinionated about certain events within the novel, it is significant that the narrator him/herself never actually constructs an overt commentary about the origin of Tom’s behavior. This omission proves especially notable, given the facts that not only do other characters speculate about Tom, but the root of his identity seems to be arguably the central problem of the novel.

inability to distinguish Tom from Chambers to the murder scene (where Tom kills his “uncle” after an attempted theft goes wrong) where the town believes the visiting European twins Angelo and Luigi have committed the crime because they happen to be standing there when everyone arrives. Significantly, Tom’s “disguise” when committing the murder, enacts a pointed commentary on the town’s blindness. In preparation for the theft, Tom “blackened his face with burnt cork and put the cork in his pocket,” (194). To disguise himself when robbing his uncle, Tom essentially wears the “mask” of his “real” identity. Significantly though, it is this “real” identity, (or what theoretically and problematically seems so manifestly obvious in terms of his behavior) that renders him visually indistinguishable. In his discussion of nineteenth-century minstrelsy, Eric Lott describes the blackface mask in the following manner: “Where representation once unproblematically seemed to image forth its referent, we must now think of, say, the blackface mask as less a *repetition* of power relations than a *signifier* for them – a distorted mirror, reflecting displacements and condensations and discontinuities between which and the social field there exists lags, unevennesses, multiple determinations.”²²¹ Thus, the effective disguising of Tom as indeed the idea of what his self visually represents, demonstrates the “distorted mirror” of discursive power. There is no innate connection between Tom’s visual representation and the stable referent of his identity. Because the town discursively recognizes Tom as white, they will not view him as black, even when they are faced with a highly visible contradiction. Discourse literally shapes the town’s vision.

²²¹ Lott, *Love and Theft*, 8.

Significantly, the text also enacts disguises for the reader, demonstrating the manner in which we too have relied on the novel's discourse to construct our vision of its characters and themes. Towards the middle of the novel, the reader is treated to an initially puzzling scene involving Puddn'head Wilson's witnessing of a strange sight from his window:

It was a young woman – a young woman where properly no young woman belonged; for she was in Judge Driscoll's house, and in the bedroom, over the Judge's private study or sitting-room ... The girl had on a neat and trim summer dress, patterned in broad stripes of pink and white, and her bonnet was equipped with a pink veil. She was practicing steps, gaits, and attitudes, apparently; she was doing the thing gracefully, and was very much absorbed in her work ... He was now waiting for the twins, and still puzzling over the problem of who that girl might be, and how she happened to be in that young fellow's room at daybreak in the morning. (98-9)

In placing us in Puddn'head's perspective, the text thus provides an equal mystery for us, emphasized by the fact that the last sentence of this passage ends a chapter. Like Puddn'head, we have no idea whom this woman is in Judge Driscoll's house. The next chapter's initial sentence proves significant: "It is necessary now to hunt up Roxy" (100). Thus, the positioning of the sentences at the ending and beginning of these adjacent chapters almost leads the reader to believe that the mysterious woman Puddn'head sees from his window is indeed Roxy. Immediately after Puddn'head sees her, it becomes "necessary" for the narrator to "hunt up" Roxy, and follow her storyline. It is not until a good twenty pages later that we learn that the "woman" is Tom in disguise for one of his

many robberies. The text's own trickery of the reader thus pointedly exposes the manner in which our reliance upon the narrative discourse of the novel has constructed the way we see characters and events.

Consequently, this widely perceived "unresolved" question concerning innate racial identity surrounding *Puddn'head Wilson* is what is pointedly discursively entangled, ultimately emphasized in the novel's final scene involving Tom Driscoll's murder trial. Eric Sundquist interprets this scene as an allegory for the *Plessy V. Ferguson* decision, arguing "Tom's identity belongs neither to his whiteness nor to his blackness; and the novel, like the law of the land in Jim Crow America, leaves him unprotected, stranded between dual worlds of jurisdiction neither of which is responsible for his acts or for his rights."²²² The Percy Driscoll estate's arguments on behalf of their "ownership" of Tom at his trial illustrates this ambiguity: "If Tom had been delivered up to them in the first place, they would have sold him and he could not have murdered Judge Driscoll, therefore it was not he that had really committed the murder, the guilt lay with the erroneous inventory" (225-226). Here then, because of his dual racial identity, Tom is caught in a legally discursive space that doesn't quite know what to do with him. Since society can neither fully try him as a slave, nor as a white man, the text thus pointedly reveals and condemns the construction of racial identity through binary terms (as well as the way in which race becomes the sole identification of individuals) that is inherent in segregation.

²²² Eric Sundquist, "Mark Twain and Homer Plessy," ed. Gillman and Robinson, *Race, Conflict, and Culture*, 71.

Yet, it is also the particular nature of the revelation of Tom's "true" self that proves equally key to understanding the manner in which this novel functions discursively. The pivotal moment in the trial scene in *Puddn'head Wilson* involves of course Wilson's identification of Tom as the murderer through his ability to distinguish Tom's fingerprints at the murder scene. Wilson's lengthy explanation of fingerprints before this revelation proves significant: "Every human being carries with him from his cradle to his grave certain physical marks which do not change their character, and by which he can always be identified – and that without shade of doubt or question. These marks are his signature, his physiological autograph, so to speak, and this autograph cannot be counterfeited, nor can he disguise it or hide it away, nor can it become illegible by the wear and the mutations of time" (216). In explaining the nature of fingerprints then, Wilson introduces a foolproof way of identifying an individual, and significantly rendering that unique identity visible.

Significantly though, this visibility, while of course emphatically and definitively identifying the true racial identities of Tom and Chambers, does not do so through skin color, or what appears to be manifestly visible to others. In *American Anatomies*, Robyn Wiegman discusses the ways in which socially discursive codes shape the manner in which we see race as "real," claiming "Specific racial categories are rendered 'real' (and therefore justifiable) though the naturalizing discourses of the body, those discourses that locate difference in a pre-cultural realm where corporeal significations supposedly speak a truth which the body inherently means."²²³ In other words, social and legal discourse

²²³ Wiegman, *American Anatomies*, 4.

surrounding identity and subjectivity can literally dictate our “vision” of bodies. When racial difference is discursively located through bodily markers, categories of racial identification appear natural or visibly obvious. Thus, when Puddn’head Wilson displays the fingerprints of various people in the town in the courtroom, to lead to his eventual accusation of Tom, announcing “This is the signature of Mr. Justice Robinson ... This of Constable Blake ... This, of the sheriff ... We will return to the infant photographs of *A* and *B* ... From seven months onward until now, *A* has still been a usurper, and in my finger-records he bears *B*’s name ... Valet de Chambre, negro and slave – falsely called Thomas a Becket Driscoll – make upon the window the finger-prints that will hang you!” (219-222), what we see here, is the quite literal construction of innate identity through the body. Wilson’s verbal naming of each person along with his/her visibly displayed fingerprints, exposes more than just the culprit of an individual murder case. The scene also notably reveals the process by which discourse indeed visually “naturalizes” our sense of racial difference and identity through the body.

It is significant then that what ultimately gets exposed as Tom’s true crime (and the subsequent punishment that follows) does not so much revolve around the illegal act that he commits, but rather whom he really is, an identification that is consistently difficult to pinpoint. This scene thus functions as a multilayered discursive exposure then. The townspeople now have a clear visual comprehension of Tom’s “true” identity in that they can make a visible connection between it and his fingerprints. Additionally, the reader views the manner in which legal and cultural discourse becomes entangled with visual “truths” to produce this understanding.

Our discomfort with the identity politics of Puddn'head Wilson may then, be precisely the point. In viewing its exposure of the entanglement of discursive construction, we as readers have consequently become completely decentered ourselves in terms of a clear-cut interpretation of its origin and meaning. The novel arguably must end with Tom being sent away, because the ambiguity of his subject position has left the characters unsure how to perceive him, and consequently unclear about his societal role/function. When the text ends with Tom pointedly being sent away from our eyes, he thus additionally enters a politically discursive gap, where we as readers are not sure if we are supposed to applaud, condemn, or merely laugh at what happens to Tom. Ultimately then, the final irony of this novel, is that we as readers fall into the same trap the town does. We rely too much on novelistic discourse to determine our views of Tom, or a discourse that is pointedly and continuously exposed by the text as “truthfully” unreliable. Indeed, the political race question surrounding Tom is in fact significantly and pointedly unanswerable. Tom and Chambers are both so repeatedly discursively overdetermined as characters that it becomes impossible for us to construct definitive political answers about them. By forcing us to view this discursive construction at work though, the text exposes and thus allows us to see and therefore hopefully expand our heretofore rigid categorizations of identity.

Part III: Overcoming the Stereotype

Chapter 5: (Un)popular Demons: Raced Subjectivity in Carl Van Vechten's *Nigger Heaven*

Despite its immense popularity at the time it was written, Carl Van Vechten's 1926 Harlem Renaissance novel *Nigger Heaven* is a text that is rarely taught or discussed anymore within academic circles. The complex merging of aesthetics and ideology that surround this text is what arguably makes it simultaneously controversial and largely invisible within the academic canon. Just the title alone raises both aesthetic and political questions that are not just confined to the academic community. When I was reading this novel for my Ph.D qualifying exams for example, as I did for most of my required examination readings, I would often take the book with me to public places that required waiting time (doctors appointments, car washes, haircuts, etc.). After more than a few stares, the sociopolitical implications of my own public reading of a novel with a title such as this with the resulting cultural reading of my own subject position and identity (as a white woman) became very evident. I was not just simply reading a book. The book was in effect also "reading" me as a subject. Those around me inferred and thus constructed me as a particular type of political subject by reading the title of the book and "reading" my raced subjectivity.

What it means to read this novel then, is thus highly complicated and inextricably connected with the manner in which we "read" and understand racial identity.

Significantly, the public's reaction to the title of the book when it was first published in 1926 was equally controversial. Kathleen Pfeiffer claims, "Many of *Nigger Heaven*'s early readers responded most emphatically to the troubling title."²²⁴ Many influential African-American writers and thinkers, including W.E.B. Du Bois, Langston Hughes, and James Weldon Johnson were all profoundly disturbed (in some cases even angered) by the title. Langston Hughes for example, writes in his autobiography, "The word *nigger* to colored people of high and low degree is like a red rag to a bull ... Used rightly or wrongly, ironically or seriously, of necessity for the sake of realism, or impishly for the sake of comedy, it doesn't matter."²²⁵ Complicating the controversy surrounding the title is Carl Van Vechten's own identity as a white wealthy male who was profoundly interested in African-American art and artists, and a frequent patron of them during the Harlem Renaissance. Additionally, according to Van Vechten himself, the term "Nigger Heaven" refers to "an American slang expression for the topmost gallery of a theatre, so called because in certain of the United States, Negroes are arbitrarily forced to sit in these cheap seats ... The geographical position of Harlem, the Negro quarter of New York, corresponds to the location of the gallery in a theatre."²²⁶ Thus, whether Van Vechten is exploiting, appropriating, or helping to uplift the African-American race remains the fundamental question surrounding this novel.

²²⁴ Kathleen Pfeiffer, "Introduction," *Nigger Heaven*. (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2000), xvii.

²²⁵ Quoted in Pfeiffer's "Introduction" to *Nigger Heaven*, xvii.

²²⁶ Quoted in Pfeiffer, "Introduction" to *Nigger Heaven*, x.

The debate about *Nigger Heaven* also extends to its subject matter. Perhaps the largest charge against Van Vechten's work revolves around his use of stereotypes (namely African-American primitivism) to portray African-American characters. As Leon Coleman points out, "To Van Vechten, the uninhibited emotional behavior that he observed in cabarets was an asset in the Negro's character. It was a fundamental response to life that had eluded the jaded, white sophisticates, whose futile efforts at amusement he had ironically observed in his previous novels ... As he had often stated, Van Vechten felt that this primitive Negro vitality, artistically interpreted, could be a revitalizing influence in American music, literature, and art."²²⁷ Other scholars are not so generous towards Van Vechten's intentions. James De Jongh, for example, claims, "Van Vechten had reduced his own carefully observed and varied depiction of black Harlem to the narrow scope of a stereotype by insisting, in the final chapters of *Nigger Heaven*, on Harlem's atavistic and bizarre primitivism."²²⁸ In virtually all scholarly examinations and judgments of *Nigger Heaven*, Van Vechten's particular intentions and identity come under scrutiny in a manner that is virtually inseparable from the content and form of the novel itself.

My goal in my discussion of this text is neither to defend nor vilify the manner in which Van Vechten represents his African-American characters, but rather to examine these complex constructions more closely. A text that causes this much ideological controversy over its aesthetic portrayal of raced subjectivity, indeed warrants further

²²⁷ Leon Coleman, *Carl Van Vechten and the Harlem Renaissance*, (New York and London: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1998), 115-116.

²²⁸ James De Jongh, *Vicious Modernism: Black Harlem and the Literary Imagination*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

examination of the manner in which these characterizations are functioning, rather than just a judgment of its political merit (whether it be good or bad). In fact, the novel continuously seems to denaturalize the subjectivity of every character it portrays, through both the constant switching among various characters' perspectives, and the manner in which it uses stereotypical figures and narratives to shatter our notions of what they are. For example, Mary Love (an African-American female character) is ashamed and disconcerted that she does not possess the "primitive" desires that the "rest" of the African-American community seems to have and display. Additionally, the stereotypical image of the "Negro" pimp that opens this novel is juxtaposed and ultimately conflated with the image of the "Negro" artist, demonstrating on one level that not all African-Americans experience stereotypical lives such as these. Yet, they seem to be simultaneously bound up with these images. Aspects of the novel such as these are undoubtedly politically problematic, but it is this difficulty that also renders them very complicated. This text reveals and therefore exposes through its narrative structure and characterization (whether intentionally or not) the process by which we construct categories of racial identity and subjectivity.

The Harlem Renaissance represents a specific period in history when both an aesthetic and ideological shift took place in terms of the representation and comprehension of African-American identity. Generally viewed as taking place through the decade of the 1920s (although its exact chronology is still debated among scholars), a large African-American migration from the south in the early 20th-century to Harlem

ushered in an artistic and political movement that often used the city itself as a theme. As James De Jongh explains,

In its racial transformation, Harlem had become the embodiment of an idea, for by its very existence Harlem posed a challenge to contemporary limits and cultural terms within which personal being for both blacks and whites were imagined and defined ... Harlem's appeal to writers lay not in its distinctive details of setting but in its power as a sign; consequently, the impulse of the first literary generations employing the motif was to regard black Harlem as a trope, a received cultural artifact for a writer's imaginative re-making.²²⁹

Thus, Harlem Renaissance artists utilized the geographical space of the city itself as an ideological motif in their work.

Significantly, the new aesthetic representation of black Harlem in Harlem Renaissance literature additionally signaled a new political sensibility²³⁰, often associated with the term the "New Negro." In *Black Culture and the Harlem Renaissance*, Cary D. Wintz explains this emergence:

Some maintained that the essence of the New Negro was his commitment to the idea of self-help, while others argued that the New Negro was ready to protest against discrimination or any abridgment of his civil rights ... What all agreed on

²²⁹ De Jongh, *Vicious Modernism*

²³⁰ It is important to recognize here the important connection between the artistic movement of the Harlem Renaissance and its ideology. As Cary D. Wintz argues, "While the Harlem Renaissance was not a political movement, its participants were affected by the political world around them, and reacted in varying ways to their political environment." (*Black Culture and the Harlem Renaissance*, New York: Rice University Press, 1988), 190.

was the belief that large numbers of black Americans had become proud of their race, self-reliant, and assimilated to American middle-class values, and that they were demanding their rights as American citizens ... This synthesis would then find literary expression in the Harlem Renaissance.²³¹

Indeed, African-American political movements during this era were actually highly varied during this era, and as such, much of Harlem Renaissance literature responds to, incorporates, rejects, or embraces a wide ideological range. Booker T. Washington's notion of education and racial uplift, W.E.B. Du Bois's vision of the "Talented Tenth" (or the notion that the most talented and intelligent members of the African-American community should lead the masses in protest and by example) and Marcus Garvey's Pan-Africanism all represented political ideologies during the Harlem Renaissance.²³²

As a result, the manner in which the ideological functions of Harlem Renaissance art and literature have been viewed is equally diverse. David Levering Lewis for example, claims that the movement was "a response, first, to the increasingly raw racism of the times, second, to the frightening Black Zionism of the Garveyites, and finally, to the remote, but no less frightening appeal of Marxism."²³³ George Hutchinson points out the manner in which the Harlem Renaissance as a movement has even been criticized for its lack of progressiveness: "If the Harlem Renaissance is often faulted for stressing black

²³¹ Cary D. Wintz. *Black Culture*, 31. Alain Locke's important 1925 anthology of Harlem Renaissance art titled "The New Negro" solidified the widespread public use of the term.

²³² Du Bois's embracing of Socialism in 1911 also helped usher in a Marxist movement during this time period.

²³³ David Levering Lewis, *When Harlem was in Vogue*, (New York: Penguin Books, 1997), xxviii.

‘exoticism,’ it has also been attacked from the opposite angle – as an essentially assimilationist movement.”²³⁴ Within the African-American community then, the political stances represented in Harlem Renaissance literature are by no means uniformly similar.

The political implications and motives of white authors writing in response to the Harlem Renaissance and white patrons of it (and Carl Van Vechten fell into both of these categories), then, prove similarly complex and varied. While most African-Americans during this time period viewed white patrons in particular, with caution at best, sometimes verging onto outright resentment, the implications of the influence of white patronage upon the Harlem Renaissance prove quite complicated indeed. David Levering Lewis describes white patronage of the Harlem Renaissance as follows: “The motives of WASP philanthropy were an amalgam of inherited abolitionism, Christian charity and guilt, social manipulation, political eccentricity, and a certain amount of persiflage.”²³⁵ George Hutchinson assumes a more direct stance upon white contribution to the Harlem Renaissance by claiming,

The Harlem Renaissance succeeded in different ways and to an extent greater than is generally recognized – but its accomplishments owe much to both its interracial character and its related intraracial diversity ... Black writers, by and large, were not tricksters, guerilla warriors, assimilationists, or dupes in their dealings with white intellectuals. It is time to recognize that a deeply institutionalized, and very

²³⁴ George Hutchinson, *The Harlem Renaissance in Black and White*, (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1997), 21.

²³⁵ Lewis, *When Harlem was in Vogue*, 99.

American cynicism about interracial relationships has obscured our understanding of the nature and achievements of the Harlem Renaissance.²³⁶

Thus, the nature of white involvement with the Harlem Renaissance proves to be a complex mixture of appropriation, self-interest, and patronage that proves categorically and ideologically difficult.²³⁷

The reception and influence of Carl Van Vechten's text proves equally tricky. Cary D. Wintz cites the profound impact of Van Vechten's writing upon the Harlem Renaissance, stating, "Carl Van Vechten, who was instrumental in forging ties between Greenwich Village and Harlem, also, more than any other single individual, created the Negro vogue."²³⁸ Yet, the novel simultaneously met a very controversial reception among its contemporary readers. As David Levering Lewis points out, "It was considered bad form among Afro-Americans to be caught reading *Nigger Heaven*, and virtually everyone in Harlem discovered never-before-expressed misgivings about Carl Van Vechten or remembered some telltale incident of his racial insecurity."²³⁹ Despite the overt qualms of African-Americans however, the novel was actually read widely by both white and African-American readers. Upon publication, the book sold out with sixteen thousand copies, and it achieved nine printings in the four months after its

²³⁶ Hutchinson, *The Harlem Renaissance in Black and White*, 16.

²³⁷ My intention here is neither to define ultimately the motives of white patrons and writers, nor to defend them. Rather, I am trying to demonstrate the complexity and difficulty of their categorization.

²³⁸ Wintz, *Black Culture*, 94. It is important to note that this assertion in of itself is a debatable one.

²³⁹ Lewis, *When Harlem was in Vogue*, 181.

publication.²⁴⁰ Judging by the reactions of many African-American literati, exemplified in W.E.B. Du Bois's angry review of the novel which stated "Carl Van Vechten's *Nigger Heaven* is a blow in the face [to African-Americans],"²⁴¹ many African-Americans (even if offended by it) indeed read the novel as well. Thus, the text of *Nigger Heaven* presents a controversial and complicated contribution to the Harlem Renaissance and the manner in which raced subjectivity was represented and understood.

On Stereotype

The actual narrative structure of the novel demonstrates the complexity of race in the Harlem Renaissance through the manner in which it fragments perspectives and reader expectations. The novel in fact, begins with a stereotypically familiar figure:

Anatole Longfellow, alias the Scarlet Creeper, strutted aimfully down the east side of Seventh Avenue. He wore a tight-fitting suit of shepherd's plaid which thoroughly revealed his lithe, sinewy figure to all who gazed upon him, and all gazed. A great diamond, or some less valuable stone which aped a diamond, glistened in his fuschia cravat ... His black hair was sleek under his straw hat, set at a jaunty angle. When he saluted a friend – and his acquaintanceship seemed to be wide – two rows of pearly teeth gleamed from his seal-brown countenance.²⁴²

²⁴⁰ Pfeiffer, "Introduction" to *Nigger Heaven*, xiii.

²⁴¹ Qtd. in Pfeiffer, "Introduction" to *Nigger Heaven*, xiii.

²⁴² Carl Van Vechten, *Nigger Heaven*, (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2000 edition), 3. All subsequent citations will refer to this edition.

Thus, through the combination of the Scarlet Creeper's appearance and the particular way in which he interacts with other characters, the reader immediately interprets this character as a representation of a stereotypical African-American "pimp" figure. This instant establishment of a stereotype process extremely important in terms of the manner in which we are to experience the novel. Mary Anne Ferguson defines a literary stereotype as a term that "is commonly used pejoratively to apply to underdeveloped or 'flat' characters or caricatures recognizable in outline. A flat character may serve as a contrast or foil to a more rounded one; character types used in comedy and satire make readers who recognize them feel superior and hence in a position to laugh."²⁴³ Werner Sollors adds in his definition of a literary stereotype, "Lacking individuality and psychological depth, such 'types' are quickly and recognizably sketched and given only a few memorable traits; hence such figures may be especially suited for minor parts."²⁴⁴ The Scarlet Creeper is thus easily recognizable as a stereotypical figure to the reader, doubly signaled and emphasized by the fact that he is just as immediately and equally identifiable to other characters within the novel (through his "wide acquaintanceship"). He is also instantly presented as a flat character who lacks "individuality and psychological depth." The narrative focuses intensely on a small number of identifiable traits such as his clothes and his body to characterize him, rather than his individualized thoughts or personality.

²⁴³ Mary Anne Ferguson, "Identifying the Stereotypes," *Images of Women in Literature*, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1973), 6.

²⁴⁴ Sollors, *Neither Black nor White Yet Both*, 228.

Significantly, these traits are highly visible ones that additionally signal the Scarlet Creeper's representation of a specific stereotypical racialized figure. As Richard Dyer explains, "The invisibility of whiteness as a racial position in white (which is to say dominant) discourse is of a piece of its ubiquity ... Whiteness generally colonises the stereotypical definition of all social categories other than those of race ... White people in their whiteness, however, are imaged as individual and/or endlessly diverse, complex, and changing."²⁴⁵ In other words, because whiteness is perceived as normal and therefore invisible, part of the stereotypical definition of the raced other revolves around his/her extreme visibility. As a result, the reader understands the Scarlet Creeper as a stereotypical figure in part, because he is so markedly visible. His clothes "thoroughly reveal" his "lithe sinewy figure." His teeth "gleam" from his "seal-brown countenance." He is in fact, so visually discernible, that "all gaze" upon him. It is significant that the Scarlet Creeper never speaks in this passage. It is in fact, his body or his visual appearance that speaks and instantly defines him. Consequently, since the Scarlet Creeper opens the novel and we follow him for a good 16 pages, we thus rely on a flat African-American character as a protagonist, who does not initially prove to be a foil for any other character. What the novel appears to be saying about African-American identity then, proves problematic indeed. The inevitable question of whether the Scarlet Creeper is meant to be a universal representation of African-American subjectivity inevitably arises.

²⁴⁵ Dyer, *White*, 3-12.

However, this representation is simultaneously destabilized through the narrative's multiple perspectives. After describing a series of the Scarlet Creeper's adventures in which he goes to a bar, dances and flirts with many women, and we are introduced to his nemesis Randolph Pettijohn, the prologue ends with the line "The Creeper sipped his gin meditatively," (16) and then immediately moves to "Book One: Mary" where we switch to the perspective of Mary Love. We virtually never see the Scarlet Creeper again until towards the end of the novel when we are in Byron Kassen's section of the novel and thus his perspective. When Byron views him for the first time, the narrative reads, "As the Creeper eased past the dancers – so slinking and catlike was his gait that walking would scarcely describe it – they edged away from him, although there was a whispered recognition from nearly every couple in the hall. It was apparent that his entrance had caused a sensation and it was also quite evident that he was very contented with the reception," (213). Thus, here we literally see the Scarlet Creeper through different eyes (Byron's). Significantly, this particular view of the Scarlet Creeper focuses much more on the manner in which others react to him, rather than how he visually appears. Where the beginning of the novel describes at great length his clothes and body, this particular passage instead underscores the "sensation" his entrance causes, and his personal satisfaction with it. The origin of the stereotype becomes lost, depending upon whose eyes we're looking through, demonstrating its constructedness. A consistently flat character throughout the novel (the Scarlet Creeper's story and personality are never as fully developed as other characters') is still not viewed

universally according to different subject positions' viewpoints. Racialized stereotypical narratives thus become exposed as such.

Consequently, the agent and recipient of the construction of the stereotype and its characterization become lost as well. No quotation marks surround any character's dialogue throughout the entire novel. Thus, examples of the Scarlet Creeper's speech early in the novel such as "Ah sartainly beg yo' pahdon" (4) visually resemble the language of every other character (no matter how dramatically different he/she may be). Mary Love's assertion to her friend Adora that "I haven't a notion what kind of success I want" (29) for example, is vastly linguistically different in type from the Scarlet Creeper's verbal interactions with others. However, since neither character possesses quotation marks around his/her language, their discourse also visually appears similar.²⁴⁶ While of course, we are most of the time able to attribute language to individual characters, many times through the novel's cues (i.e. "Mary responded" or "The Scarlet Creeper said"), the lack of grammatical individuality attached to all of the novel's characters creates a visual universality among them.

As a result, the nature of the stereotypical construction becomes destabilized. If the literary stereotype relies upon superficiality, or what we can instantly see, on one level, this visual similarity between different characters can prove politically problematic. After all, if all characters' voices ultimately begin to look similar, no matter how different in nature they may be, this potentially represents an indeed, stereotypical creation of

²⁴⁶ Although theoretically, the use of quotation marks to surround dialogue also indicates a visual sameness among characters, since quotation marks grammatically signify individuality and many times the individual designation of who's speaking at any given time, the complete lack of quotation marks here visually strips characters of this important individual distinction.

universality amongst all African-American people based upon visual superficiality, that does not recognize individuality or depth. Yet, what this linguistic resemblance simultaneously highlights is the *language* of the stereotype, rather than the figure. In other words, since we cannot overtly and visually attach a character's speech to the character him/herself through common grammatical cues, what we actually view here is a linguistic representation of the stereotype, rather than its "natural" attachment to a particular person, thereby diminishing our focus on the stereotypical subject and instead underscoring its discursive process. If, as M.M. Bakhtin says, "novelistic discourse" represents a "diversity of social speech types,"²⁴⁷ *Nigger Heaven's* intense focus on and simultaneous linguistic dispersement of stereotypical figures such as the Scarlet Creeper, demonstrates (intentionally or not) the manner in which those "types" are indeed constructed and not naturalized.

Stereotypical representation in this novel also takes place through the inclusion of familiar cultural narratives. The novel's perceived depiction of African-American primitivism has been met with much discomfort by many critics. Chidi Ikonne argues, for example, "The emergence of Negro self-confidence in literature and art in the 1920s took place mainly because of the crisis in confidence regarding European and American 'civilization.' The white man ... had, in a desperate volte-face, discovered in the Negro what he thought was the opposite of the product of his own civilization – the 'primitive'"

²⁴⁷ Bakhtin, "Discourse in the Novel," *The Dialogic Imagination*, 262-3. See Chapter 3 for a more detailed explanation and analysis of Bakhtin's theory regarding "novelistic discourse."

being, charmingly clothed with unbridled instincts.”²⁴⁸ Examples of this type of “unbridled” instinctual behavior on the part of African-American characters in *Nigger Heaven* occur most notably and overtly in its numerous scenes that depict Harlemites dancing. One typical scene reads

On all sides of the swaying couple, bodies in picturesque costumes rocked, black bodies, brown bodies, high yellows, a kaleidoscope of colour transfigured by the amber searchlight ... The band snored and snorted and whistled and laughed like a hyena ... Hugged closely together, the bodies rocked and swayed, rocked and swayed. Sometimes a rolling-eyed couple, caught in the whirlpool of aching sound, would scarcely move from one spot. (14-15)

Here, we can definitely see primitivism represented in the sense that the characters in this scene have been completely reduced to their bodies. The scene specifically and significantly refers to the people dancing as in fact, “the bodies,” rather than by individual name or even overtly as human beings. Animalistic overtones run throughout the scene, such as the comparison of the music to a hyena. The almost involuntary reactions of the people to the “hyena” music, exemplified through the manner in which they are “caught in the whirlpool of aching sound,” decidedly appear to signal behavior that is indeed instinctual and atavistic rather than socialized or civilized. Moreover, the scene takes great pains to attribute this primitive behavior specifically to African-Americans. The “kaleidoscope of colour” of African-American bodies is emphasized

²⁴⁸ Chidi Ikonne, *From Du Bois to Van Vechten: The Early New Negro Literature, 1903-1926* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1981), 3.

repeatedly through the detailed description of “black bodies, brown bodies, and high yellows.” The scene thus overtly connects primitivism to African-Americans.

The representation of sex in this scene also poses a political difficulty, most notably in its conflation with dancing. David Levering Lewis discusses the cultural importance of dancing during the Harlem Renaissance: “Dancing was the Devil’s work in prewar America. Proper contact with a partner was even regulated by law in most places ... By 1914, everybody did it and laughed about old-fashioned ordinances. People who believed that the new dancing was connected with the slow, dreaded rise of black culture now found themselves on the defensive.”²⁴⁹ Thus, by underscoring the physicality of dancing, this particular scene from *Nigger Heaven* simultaneously brings to the forefront white fears regarding, and potentially appropriative fascination with “Harlem dancing.” In this instance, the scene significantly utilizes sex as a symbolic representation of African-American Harlemites dancing. The “bodies” dancing “rock and sway,” and are “hugged closely together.” The intermittent “rolling-eyed couple” who becomes “caught in the whirlpool of aching sound” is reminiscent of an orgasmic experience. Because public discussion and representation of sex also represents an American taboo, the association of Harlem dancing with sex then, solidifies to the reader its danger and social marginalization. At first glance then, a scene such as this may represent African-American subjectivity in a problematic manner.

This particular representation however, is also simultaneously highly and overtly discursive. In other words, as much as this scene appears to depict African-Americans as

²⁴⁹ Lewis, *When Harlem was in Vogue*, 32-33.

primitive, highly sexual beings, it also does so, on a blatantly symbolic or metaphorical level. The couples do not actually have sex, nor do they actually do anything specific that could be configured as primitive or animalistic. In terms of actual activity within the scene, the couples do not do anything other than dance. The comparison of the music to a hyena is also significantly constructed as a simile, rather than a metaphor, thereby linguistically calling attention to the fact that it is a comparison rather than a direct or real reflection. Virtually all literature of course operates on symbolic levels to represent themes, and the fact that *Nigger Heaven* utilizes these devices certainly should not exonerate the text from all potentially problematic depictions of race it contains. However, for this particular novel, whose critics often point to its use of stereotyping, it is also important to recognize that what is in fact instantly recognizable as a “type” in scenes such as this one, is the language used to describe these characters, rather than the characters themselves and their actions. In other words, in this carefully detailed description of African-Americans dancing, what we actually see here is the manner through which language constructs and dictates our vision of subjects.

Consequently, the language surrounding each individual character within the novel reveals the constructed nature of their subjectivity. In his introductory sentences to *Blues, Ideology, and Afro-American Literature*, Houston A. Baker Jr. claims “[Earlier] I envisioned the ‘speaking subject’ creating language (a code) to be deciphered by the present-day commentator. In my current study, I envision language (the code) ‘speaking’

the subject. The subject is ‘decentered’”²⁵⁰ In other words, if language or discourse is what defines or “speaks” the subject, the original or true subjectivity becomes inherently fragmented or hidden from view. The exaggeratedly discursive construction of characters in *Nigger Heaven* exposes this potential subjective loss. Much has been made among Van Vechten critics for example, of Mary Love’s (an educated and refined African-American female character within the novel) desire for “primitive” emotions. Cary D. Wintz for example, argues, “In Van Vechten’s view Mary Love’s problem was the same problem that confronted all people of the twentieth century. Civilization must be humanized; there must be a blending of the primitive with the technologically advanced civilization of the West. In this process, America had much to learn from the Negro,”²⁵¹ Thus, Wintz (like many other Van Vechten scholars) attempts to grapple with the problem of racial ideology represented in characters like Mary Love, in his case actually defending the novel.

Yet, it is in fact *because* the representation of raced subjectivity is so much at stake in this novel, that a close examination of the language (or in fact, what signals and constructs this portrayal) becomes so necessary. In other words, in order to determine what or whom, speaks through and for Mary, *how* Mary speaks proves just as important as *what* she says. Indeed, it is important to recognize that the scenes depicting Mary’s “primitive” desires are pointedly highly discursive. In a particularly revealing passage,

²⁵⁰ Houston A. Baker, Jr., *Blues, Ideology, and Afro-American Literature: A Vernacular Theory* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1984), 1.

²⁵¹ Wintz, *Black Culture*, 99.

Mary reflects on the discrepancy between her desires and her theoretically fundamental self:

Savages! Savages at heart! And she had lost or forfeited her birthright, this primitive birthright which was so valuable and important an asset, a birthright that all the civilized races were struggling to get back to ... To be sure, she, too, felt this African beat – it completely aroused her emotionally, but she was conscious of feeling it. This love of drums, of exciting rhythms, this naïve delight in glowing colour – the colour that exists only in cloudless, tropical climes – this warm, sexual emotion, all these were hers only through a mental understanding ...

Why, Mary asked herself, is this denied to me? (89-90)

Thus, rather than show Mary actually undergoing a specific struggle that occurs within the linear movement of the plot²⁵² the text instead places Mary in a strictly philosophical one. As a result, what is innate within Mary, and what is learned becomes significantly difficult to discern. All of her knowledge and understanding of her “primitive birthright” of the “African beat” and “exciting rhythms” exist as discursive ideas (or for many readers, indeed a problematic stereotype) for her, rather than a personal experience. The fact then, that Mary desires this particular representation of subjectivity on a theoretical level, but does not feel as though she can attain it physically, points to the manner in which discourse has thoroughly shaped her awareness of whom she can and should be. Furthermore, the fact that the text places this dilemma in a discursive struggle within the

²⁵² Placing Mary within a particular situation such as a confrontation with another character or specific event in the novel would arguably render the struggle she goes through even less complicated, and thus more ideologically problematic. In an instance such as this, the demarcation between Mary’s desires and her “innate” self would be much more sharply defined.

plot doubly underscores and reveals the power of discursive language, by in fact decentering (in the sense that Mary's actual subjectivity becomes hidden from view) the subject in question. Instead of viewing Mary as a subject, we view the discourse constructing it.

It must also be pointed out that the stereotypical African primitive narrative proves to be not the only one for which Mary yearns. After Adora's party, where she first meets Byron Kasson, Mary reflects upon what she wants in love:

She had an instinctive horror of promiscuity, of being handled, even touched, by a man who did not mean a good deal to her ... A casual kiss in the dark was a repellant idea to Mary. What she wanted was a kiss in the light – with the right man, and the right man hitherto had never appeared. Now, thinking of Byron Kasson, she trembled as she gradually became aware of what sort of acknowledgment she was dragging out of her innermost soul. (54)

While in a later scene, Mary will wish to feel and think primarily through her body, here she longs for a love that transcends physicality. Significantly, both of these seemingly antithetical desires are familiar stereotypical narratives, one of which resembles a melodramatic motif.²⁵³ Susan Gillman describes race melodramas that were mostly written during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries as follows: "The melodramatic will to revelation drives the race melodramas ... The moral occult, too, enacts the drive toward expressivity, referencing a psychoanalytic dynamic in the domain of the unconscious, with the analogy to melodrama in the will to speak the unspeakable,

²⁵³ See Chapters 1 and 3 for more in-depth discussion of melodramatic narratives.

the melodramatic aesthetic as a form of embodied, talking cure. Melodramatic utterance represents a victory over repression.”²⁵⁴ As the narrator speaks Mary’s desires for romantic love, while simultaneously mentioning Byron, we as readers view an important textual revelation: that Byron may in fact, be the man with whom Mary is falling in love.

While the important “revelations” that take place in the race melodramas Gillman discusses, take place primarily through the exposure of hitherto concealed racial identities,²⁵⁵ the revelation that takes place in this particular scene in *Nigger Heaven* proves just as important. It is in fact Mary’s relationship with Byron that will become the key plotline throughout the rest of the novel. What proves the most significant, is the fact that it is through Mary’s struggles with Byron that we view Mary’s initial competing desires (emerging as discursive thoughts at the beginning of the novel) battle in action. Consequently, because we see Mary’s thoughts first, as we watch Mary grapple with these two familiar narratives throughout the course of the novel in her relationship with Byron, the anticipated resolution to this conflict, actually becomes what “type” of subject Mary will ultimately be. By building its own narrative primarily around familiar ones then, the text of *Nigger Heaven* thus destabilizes its own, by rendering those external narratives the most visible. As a result, what ultimately becomes exposed is the process by which cultural narrative dictates our vision.

As a result, as much as any given stereotype emerges in *Nigger Heaven*, it also becomes immediately destabilized. At a party that Mary attends, the novel introduces us

²⁵⁴ Gillman, *Blood Talk*, 16.

²⁵⁵ See Chapter Three for more in-depth discussion of the “passing” novel and race melodramas.

to an educated and vocally gifted African-American character, Webb Leverett. Webb's initial choice to sing a classic English song (beginning with the lines "Hark! Hark the lark at heaven's gate sings"), significantly provokes disappointment from his audience: "Webb sang in rather an uncertain tenor voice. His tones often stuck in his throat. He did not know very well how to control them, Mary noted," (74). Thus, "white" cultural discourse literally does not naturally fit within Webb's body. This language "sticks in his throat." He does not know how to control this type of discourse. When he is asked to sing a spiritual however, the effect proves quite different: "Mary noted at once how the feeling in this music dominated him, transfigured his voice, caused one to forget the serious faults of his singing" (75). Thus, after Webb begins to sing what is coded as African-American music, his body appears more naturally in synch with his language. As Henry Louis Gates, Jr. points out in his discussion of the manner in which language structures seemingly "natural" hierarchies, "Language is not only the medium of this often insidious tendency; it is its *sign* ... Language use signifies the difference between cultures and their possession of power, spelling out the distance between subordinate and superordinate, between bondsman and lord in terms of their 'race'..."²⁵⁶ Upon first glance then, through Webb's seemingly naturalized varying comfort levels with types of "raced" speech, the novel appears to portray Webb as an African-American figure who pretends to be someone he is innately not. His innate body reveals his inability to master white language effectively, thus exposing his assumption of a white identity that can never truly be his.

²⁵⁶ Gates, "Introduction," *Race, Writing and Difference*, 6.

However, the fact that Webb significantly does not sing the spiritual in African-American dialect, renders the political message of this scene decidedly more complex. The last verse of the song Webb sings reads as follows: “Going to mourn and never tire/ Mourn and never tire,/ Mourn and never tire,/ There’s a great Camp-meeting in the Promised Land” (75). Mary additionally notes, “Even without the dialect, the song sounded sincere” (75). Thus, Webb appears to be in his identity niche when he is singing an African-American song, but he has significantly not adopted identifiable African-American discourse within it. A definitive and easily recognizable or categorical identity surrounding Webb then through his use of discourse, actually becomes pointedly and significantly ambiguous. What does become clear though, is the power that language has in this scene to define and categorize Webb’s body, emphasized through the inclusion of the words of the songs, and Mary’s redundant notation that Webb is not singing in dialect. After all, the reader can in fact, see that Webb does not use dialect in his song.²⁵⁷ If then, what continuously gets reinforced in this scene is not how well Webb sings, but how well his use of language matches his body and identity, the inclusion of an African-American without African-American discourse that indeed appears “natural,” renders an innate racial identity or characterization decidedly unstable.

²⁵⁷ I am assuming a reader during the Harlem Renaissance here, who, given the surge in fascination with African-American culture during this time period, would probably notice instantly the lack of dialect in Webb’s spiritual.

On Passing and Racialism

The destabilization of character portrayal occurs consistently throughout the novel. Another potentially troubling aspect of this text is its seemingly stereotypical conflation of race with gender. Robyn Wiegman interprets Americans' historical "faulty and politically disabling analogy between 'blacks and women'"²⁵⁸ as follows:

Such attempts to deny the black male the primary sign of power in patriarchal culture demonstrate the fact that the black male is precisely *not* a woman. If his lack must be corporeally *achieved*, his threat to white masculine power arises from the frightening possibility of a masculine sameness and not simply from a fear of racial difference. This potential masculine sameness governs the black male's contradictory position in the cultural symbolic and underlies the various representational attempts to align him with the feminine.²⁵⁹

In other words, it is actually through American patriarchal culture's configuration of African-American men with women that white masculine anxiety over the potential loss of power is revealed.²⁶⁰ According to Weigman, the continuous effort to place African-American males in a powerless position exposes the fact that they may indeed represent a threat to white masculine power through their actual inherent "sameness." This anxious representation occurs frequently in *Nigger Heaven's* portrayal of its predominant African-American male characters, most instantaneously and obviously in the depiction

²⁵⁸ Weigman, *American Anatomies*, 2.

²⁵⁹ Wiegman, *American Anatomies*, 14.

²⁶⁰ See Dana D. Nelson's *National Manhood* for a more thorough discussion of white masculine anxiety and community.

of Anatole Longfellow. The opening scenes of the novel describe Anatole's daily activities as follows: "It was Anatole's custom to indulge in a manicure at [a] parlour every afternoon around five. As a wide circle of admiring women was cognizant of this habit, five was the rush hour at Mrs. Guckeen's establishment," (5). Here, we see the simultaneous alignment of Anatole with women as well as the underlying threat he potentially poses to competing masculinity ideals. He is completely surrounded by women in this scene (from the female admirers to the female owner of the parlour), even taking part in a stereotypically "feminine" beauty regime, thus on one level demonstrating his affiliation with women, and consequently placing him in an equally powerless social and political position.

Yet, Anatole's ability to command the attention and admiration of these women simultaneously places him in a powerful position precisely through his perceived masculinity. Significantly, this masculinity proves highly complex and fraught with anxiety. Immediately after Anatole leaves the parlour, the narrative reflects, "Was there another sheik in Harlem who possessed one-tenth his attraction for the female sex?" (6). The fact that this seeming statement about Anatole's prowess with females is literally phrased in a question simultaneously emphasizes Anatole's masculine identity as much as it insidiously undercuts it. By asking if indeed there is "another in Harlem" who possesses "one-tenth" of Anatole's success with the "female sex," instead of stating it, the text not only implies that there may indeed be "another" besides Anatole, but reflects the intense cultural anxiety that surrounds the assertion. The potential threat of an assertion about Anatole's masculine identity becomes destabilized through an indirect

questioning of its legitimacy. Thus, through this statement within a question (and vice-versa), what becomes exposed to the reader is the anxiety over sameness and difference that constructs race and gender stereotypes.²⁶¹

This uneasy reflection of black masculinity is more fleshed out in the characterization of Byron Kasson. After Byron suffers a particularly bitter rejection of his manuscript (a critique of which that is significantly similar to one Mary makes earlier in the novel), Byron thinks to himself, “He had promised to telephone [Mary]. He’d be damned if he would keep that promise. He’d be glad to rot in hell if he ever wanted to see her silly Madonna face again, always so superior. She sneered, that’s what she did, she sneered. He was through,” (229). Here, Byron asserts himself through affirming his sense of regained masculinity. As Phillip Brian Harper argues,

Since the dominant view holds prideful self-respect as the very essence of healthy African-American identity, it also considers such identity to be fundamentally weakened wherever masculinity appears to be compromised ... [This fact’s] primary effect is that all debates over and claims to “authentic” African-American identity are largely animated by a profound anxiety about the status specifically of African-American *masculinity*.²⁶²

²⁶¹ It is important to note here that an assumption of a stereotypically white masculine ideal is being made here as well, most notably in the conflation of masculinity with heterosexuality.

²⁶² Phillip Brian Harper, *Are we Not Men? Masculine Anxiety and the Problem of African-American Identity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), x. While Harper is specifically discussing here contemporary notions of African-American identity, the connection that he establishes between authenticity and masculinity equally proves relevant for the time in which *Nigger Heaven* was written.

Thus, in reappropriating the superiority and consequent power Byron perceives Mary to have over him, he establishes his authentic self. By claiming control of the relationship, Byron asserts a masculine and therefore powerful self, emphasized through the continuous repetition of “He” in this passage, rather than “I.” Byron’s assertion of self is completely bound up with his sense of masculinity.

The complexity of this African-American self-identification becomes evident in Byron’s relationship (which takes place almost immediately after this incident) with Lasca Sartoris, a rich, independent African-American woman who uses Byron for sex, until she grows tired of him.²⁶³ After Lasca leaves him, Byron reacts as follows: “Returning to his room, he knelt before his bed, burying his head in the covers. Mary, he sobbed, dear little Mary, I do love you, but I can’t go back to you until I’ve proved how much I hate *her*,” (276). Byron’s loss of Lasca then, represents more than just the painful demise of a relationship. It becomes instead the determination of his sense of self. In *The Melancholy of Race*, Anne Anlin Cheng discusses the psychological effects of “racial minoritization” upon the raced subject, declaring,

For a child coming to racial discrimination, affective formation and distinction (how one tells the difference between love and hate) become so entangled and twisted that love and hate both come to be “fabricated” and “fraudulent” ... The social lesson of racial minoritization reinforces itself through the imaginative loss

²⁶³ This of course proves very ironic, since Byron ostensibly leaves Mary to assert his own power and independence.

of a never-possible perfection, whose loss [one] must come to identify as a rejection of [oneself].²⁶⁴

In other words, those who are racially othered, begin to have difficulty viewing the distinction between love and hate, in that they both appear falsely constructed. Additionally, being minoritized signals an imagined (and constructed) loss of an impossible ideal, which in turn causes self-rejection.

Byron's grief over losing both Lasca and Mary appears at first to have absolutely nothing to do with race. Neither whiteness nor blackness is mentioned anywhere in this passage. However, what Byron is ultimately struggling with here is his anxiety surrounding his subject position. Byron does not just recognize a mistake he made, and resolve to return to Mary, whom he declares he loves. He must "prove" how much he hates Lasca before he can do so. Since he in fact speaks to no one but himself in this scene, the recipient of the "proof" of hatred that he refers to inherently signifies himself. In order to love Mary, he must hate Lasca, and vice-versa. His entangled comprehension of the two ideas become even more evident when one considers how equally virulent Byron feels towards Mary a short time earlier, when he perceives her as a threat to his assertion of self. Thus, the loss and consequent struggle being reflected here is the ideal of what Byron thinks he should be. By determining when he will return to Mary and his proof of hatred of Lasca, Byron attempts to restore the power and control over women that is typical of the American masculine ideal. Since this masculine ideal is inherently a white one, the specter of whiteness haunts this scene, most specifically and obviously in

²⁶⁴ Anne Anlin Cheng, *The Melancholy of Race: Psychoanalysis, Assimilation, and Hidden Grief* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 17.

its absence and intangibility. Significantly, Byron asserts this self-actualization in a very stereotypically passive fashion. He is “sobbing” and has his head buried beneath two pillows. This textual alignment of Byron with the stereotypically feminine (excess emotion and domestic items), thus simultaneously reveals the manner in which Byron can inherently never fulfill this ideal, as well as emphasize its constructedness. The entire novel is after all, a narrative by its very nature. Cultural narrative then becomes recognizably and significantly represented within a literary one, signaling the simultaneous power and constructed nature of both.

The question surrounding race and racism in this text then, proves decidedly complicated. The fact that whiteness is so invisible within it can prove both troubling and significant. On one level, the lack of any concrete interaction with overt racism can appear as though the novel’s treatment of the “race problem” completely ignores the element of white dominant paradigms. Issues of race are addressed frequently in the text, but they are mainly merely discussed among African-American characters, and oftentimes demonstrate the divisiveness within the African-American community itself. In an early example in the novel, Mary Love, when at a party, “noted what she had often observed before in the expression of dependent Negroes in the homes of rich members of her race, a certain sullen mien. We don’t like to wait on each other, she reflected bitterly” (28). The bitterness thus being exhibited here superficially reflects resentment and division among the African-American community according to class, and not necessarily one of racial oppression.

This phenomenon also occurs in the novel's treatment of passing. Valerie Smith describes classic passing texts as follows: "The narrative trajectories of classic passing texts are typically predetermined ... For instance, they presuppose that characters who pass for white are betrayers of the black race, and they depend, almost inevitably, upon the association of blackness with self-denial and suffering, and of whiteness with selfishness and material comfort."²⁶⁵ *Nigger Heaven* initially seems to reflect these political implications of passing in the minor character of Dick Sill. Dick announces his decision to pass for white at a party at which Byron is in attendance: "Before Dick Sill had removed his overcoat, he blazed forth his news, almost in a tone of defiance. I'm going white! he announced ... They make us do it, Byron, he insisted, still in an aggressive tone which sounded apologetic. They make us. We don't want to. I don't want to, but they make us" (182-183). Dick's "aggressive" and "defiant" stance about his decision to pass before he even meets with any disapproval reflects his knowledge that he will somehow be judged harshly by the African-American community for doing so. His justification or the idea that "they make us do it," additionally reflects the notion that in order for Dick to have any success in life, he must somehow be white.

Yet, it is significant that we only see these implications discussed, and not fleshed out in any narrative events within the novel. We do not follow Dick as a character through the trajectory of the novel, and thus never really see his struggles with passing or perhaps even more importantly, the actual oppressive circumstances which, as he states earlier, force him to do so. In fact, Byron later meets Dick at a Harlem nightclub with a

²⁶⁵ Valerie Smith, *Not Just Race, Not Just Gender: Black Feminist Readings* (New York and London: Routledge, 1998), 36.

group of white people, and the two engage in a telling conversation: “[Byron] hesitated before he inquired, Are you white or coloured tonight? Buckra, of course. And so are my friends, but they’ll be delighted to meet you. They’ve heard about the New Negro! Dick Grinned,” (208). Not only does Dick appear to pass with ease, his white friends (while obviously not accepting of African-Americans as peers and community members, hence Dick’s need to pass in the first place), are still willing to immerse themselves within a predominantly African-American space, and appear friendly.²⁶⁶ On one level then, to verbally acknowledge a race problem, and then never in fact, demonstrate any overt racial oppression, can prove very troubling indeed when reading this novel. By not showing us racism in action, it makes sense on one level to infer that the novel may in fact, condone its contemporary race relations. It certainly does not take the time to demonstrate its condemnation of it, after all.

However, what the novel does reflect (whether intentionally or not), is the insidiousness of racism that was occurring at the time. Ironically, although there was a surge of interest in the African-American community during the Harlem Renaissance, there was of course still massive social segregation among the races, evidenced by the fact that the artistic movement was named after a particular geographic space where African-Americans lived. This space was of course, by nature, distinct from the white

²⁶⁶ Contrast this, for example, with the manner in which assuming racial identity becomes the crux of the novel for Iola, and results in horrifying struggles for her in *Iola Leroy*. Valerie Smith may interpret this as a result of gender. She claims, “Passing male characters can either be re-educated and returned to the bosom of home and community to uplift the race, or they can remain in the white world and be constructed with some measure of condescension, ambivalence, or even approval. Passing women characters on the other hand, are either re-educated and returned to the bosom of home and community, or they receive some extreme form of punishment such as death or the sacrifice of a loved one,” (Smith, *Not Just Race*, 39). While Dick’s gender may play a role in his passing ease in *Nigger Heaven*, it is nonetheless extremely politically telling that we do not overtly see the oppression that causes or results from his decision.

community. Thus, this space represented an ideology that was infinitely more difficult to cross than any literal geographic line. The novel in fact demonstrates this when Byron and Mary are walking home to Harlem after Mary has been passed over for a promotion yet again for a white girl:

[Mary states:] At first no one would see me. Not a single member of the board would grant me an appointment ... Now, to be perfectly frank, they're lovely to me, but they don't promote me. They promote the white girls ... The streets were crowded with pedestrians, white and coloured, scurrying home from work. As they approached One hundred and twenty-fifth Street, the blacks began to predominate. Almost immediately after they had passed that thoroughfare they met only Negroes. They had crossed the line. (148-149)

Although Mary can bodily cross the Harlem line, work with white people, and even meet those who are "lovely" to her, she cannot move beyond the ideological wall that continuously rises up to meet her. As Anne Anlin Cheng further states in her discussion of racial melancholia,

Racial melancholia describes the dynamics that constitute [the races'] mutual definition through exclusion ... On the one side, white American identity and its authority is secured through the melancholic introjection of racial others that it can neither fully relinquish nor accommodate and whose ghostly presence nonetheless guarantees its centrality. On the other side, the racial other (the so-called melancholic object) also suffers from racial melancholia whereby his or her racial identity is imaginatively reinforced through the introjection of a lost, never-

possible perfection, an inarticulable loss that comes to inform the individual's sense of his or her own subjectivity.²⁶⁷

In other words, what Cheng points to is the manner in which racism and racial identity operate on a hidden or sub-conscious level. In order to establish itself as dominant, white American identity relies upon racial others for its definition even as it cannot consciously or completely acknowledge or include them. Conversely, the imagined loss of an ideal constructs the racial other's sense of self. Thus, the spatial line that Mary and Byron cross physically, ultimately represents an ideological line that is infinitely uncrossable. The desegregated population of New York City is haunted by the bodily presence of African-American pedestrians, but does not fully "accommodate" them as equals. This of course contrasts heavily with the fluidity in which Dick's white friends cross the line between Harlem and New York. Their physical presence and ideological power are keenly sensed and established everywhere they go, additionally emphasized through Dick's undefined yet instantly recognizable reference to "they" when he speaks of his decision to pass for white. "They," while not specifically pinpointing any particular white individual, possess the universal and constant power (even in their immediate absence) to create the loss of an ideal that shapes Dick's construction of his sense of subjectivity.

Thus, it is actually quite fitting that examples of overt racism are missing from the text. The novel subtly and repeatedly contrasts the slipperiness of white identity with the fixed subjectivity of African-Americans, highlighted most obviously and interestingly in

²⁶⁷ Cheng, *The Melancholy of Race*, xi.

the figure of Van Vechten himself. Many readers of *Nigger Heaven* point to the character of Gareth Johns (a white patron and novelist) as an alter ego of Van Vechten himself. In a particularly telling scene, he is depicted as declaring wistfully, "Do you know ... I think I'd like to write a Negro novel," (104). This desire is of course exactly what Van Vechten manages to do in the construction of *Nigger Heaven* itself. It is also important to recognize however, that another potential alter ego of Van Vechten resides in the character of Byron Kasson. The depiction of Byron's constant struggle to become a writer necessarily recalls Van Vechten's writing itself. This becomes especially evident through the manner in which Russett Durwood (an editor who rejects Byron's manuscript) asks him, "Why in hell don't you write about something you know about?" and exhorts him to "Let your characters live and breathe! Give 'em air. Let 'em react to life and talk and act naturally," (222-224). One cannot help but think of Van Vechten when reading these lines, especially given the frequent charges made against him of constructing stereotypes about a community to which he does not legitimately belong. To read these pleas for realism makes the reader inherently question Van Vechten and his text. *Nigger Heaven* is decidedly not usually perceived as a realist novel.

Whether or not Van Vechten attempts to construct a realist text about African-Americans and fails, or intends to make a political statement about white appropriation of African-American artists (and most critics and scholars spend a great deal of time arguing for the former), is almost really beside the point here. To call attention to himself through Byron is indeed potentially appropriative and problematic, but what all of these references to himself within the text do, is call attention to the invisible fluidity of white

male subjectivity, in that Van Vechten is the literal, yet largely absent constructor of all subjects within the novel (who significantly happen to be mostly African-American). The novel thus (wittingly or unwittingly), reflects the particular power structure of racial identification and oppression, ultimately emphasized in the novel's ending scene. After Byron shoots and kills Randolph Pettijohn, the novel's ending lines read, "[Byron] was curiously conscious that a white hand was reaching for the gun. He looked up to face a coat of blue buttoned with brass," (284). Instead of telling us that Byron encounters a policeman, the narrative calls attention just to the "white hand," and the "coat of blue buttoned with brass." What we see here is not a particular individual then, but a symbol of the inextricable combination of whiteness (the white hand) and power (the policeman's uniform). The fact that Byron is "curiously conscious" of this figure, additionally signifies that he does not so much see him, as he is instead keenly aware of him. It is significant then that the novel ends with this particular image. We may not literally see whiteness very much in this novel, but as the text ultimately makes clear, it is constantly hovering, constructing subjects to maintain its existence.

To ignore or dismiss *Nigger Heaven* simply because it makes us uncomfortable would be a real mistake. Indeed, it is because the text induces feelings of political and social discomfort that it is worthy of careful reading and examination, especially given its widespread popularity at the time it was written. Certainly currently, reading this novel truly becomes a public experience as its mere title alone tends to speak complex volumes about the connection between the act of reading (both books and bodies) and the formation and comprehension of varying subject positions. Consequently, to read a novel

such as this further helps to reveal the nature and construction of raced subjectivity, allowing us to examine it more, whether the ultimate judgment prove positive or negative.

Chapter 6: “(De)Categorizing Janie Crawford: Self-Making, Voice, and Narrative in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*

Much like *Nigger Heaven*, the varying popularity and reception of Zora Neale Hurston’s 1937 novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God* have consistently revolved around the text’s particular portrayal of raced subjectivity. Unlike Van Vechten’s text however, within the past thirty years, Hurston’s text has enjoyed a widespread popularity within both mainstream literary culture and college course syllabi. This is due largely to Alice Walker’s retrieval of the long-out-of print novel in 1970. Prior to Walker’s interest in Hurston, many readers rejected the novel when it was first published because of the political implications of its potential sentimental or folk tradition. Richard Wright, a contemporary of Hurston’s, was overtly critical of *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. As Mary Helen Washington explains,

Writing for the leftist magazine *New Masses*, Wright excoriated *Their Eyes* as a novel that did for literature what the minstrel shows did for theater, that is, make white folks laugh. The novel, he said, “carries no theme, no message, no thought,” but exploited those “quaint” aspects of Negro life that satisfied the tastes of a white audience. By the end of the forties, a decade dominated by Wright and by the stormy fiction of social realism, the quieter voice of a woman searching for self-realization could not, or would not, be heard.²⁶⁸

²⁶⁸ Mary Helen Washington, “Foreword” to *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, by Zora Neale Hurston, (New York: Harper Perennial, 1990 edition), viii.

This “quaint” aspect of Hurston’s work that Wright points to, then, proves troubling because it potentially clouds and undermines resistance to white oppression. As Washington explains, part of the problem surrounding Hurston’s work when it was first published, involved the manner in which she did not appear to subscribe to contemporary literary and cultural movements. Although Harlem Renaissance scholars by no means reach any type of consensus regarding the exact dates when the movement began and ended, most agree that the beginnings of the Great Depression in the 1930s had a profound impact upon the concerns driving African-American art and literature. As James De Jongh explains,

In the 1930s and 1940s, Harlem’s deterioration created a crisis for the black cultural awakening represented by the literary trope of the 1920s ... In contrast to the writers of the Renaissance generation, who had initiated the theme of Harlem in poetry, novelists were the first writers of the new generation to turn their attention in imaginative literature to the decline of Afro-America’s cultural capital, for the emerging Harlem ghetto offered rich material for the naturalistic impulse exemplified with such authority by Richard Wright in Native Son.²⁶⁹

During the 1930s and 1940s then, African-American literature typically reflected increasing economic concerns and the particular ways in which they affected the African-American community. On one level then, as Washington points out, Hurston’s novel about a young woman searching for selfhood that is manifested through different relationships with men does not indeed fit in with what would appear to be the current

²⁶⁹ De Jongh, *Vicious Modernism*, Chapter 6.

pressing issues impacting African-Americans, or even the direction literary movements were taking in general.²⁷⁰ As a result, the novel fell quickly out of print.

Thirty years later, Alice Walker's persistence in calling attention to both Hurston's novel and Hurston herself not only allowed Hurston's work to become more visible within academic discussions, but helped it become one of the textual forerunners in the revised canon movement (or the notion that heretofore excluded minority and women writers should be included within the literary and academic canon) emerging in the 1970s. As Michael Awkward proclaims,

Alice Walker has been the single most instrumental figure in the recent establishment of Hurston's literary reputation. Walker published several provocative essays during the 1970s which brought Hurston's work to the attention of many, and said of *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, "There is no book more important to me than this one." Walker also paid her debt to Hurston by

²⁷⁰ In fact, Hurston herself was not a figure who fit within any conventional boundaries. As an anthropologist working under the direction of the white Dr. Franz Boaz, she spent a great deal of time in the South, researching African-American folktales and language, many of them becoming the basis for her novels and collections of stories. What this means for the manner in which she viewed resistance and oppression proves very complicated. In fact, Martha Jane Nadell claims that "Hurston employs an aesthetic of lying to wrestle with these [cultural] questions. She explicitly frames her work as a collection of 'lies,' meaning on one level, the folktales and stories that were told on the front porches, around the campfires, and in other informal social settings in the rural South, seemingly gathered according to her mentor's demands of 'pure objectivity.'" (Martha Jane Nadell, *Enter the New Negro: Images of Race in American Culture*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004, 96). This approach to representing African-American life and subjectivity then, certainly does not match the gritty realism of Wright's work for example, and Hurston's intentions surrounding this community also do not prove quite as clear. Hurston herself was in fact, many times criticized by both sides of the political spectrum for her comments about race, gender, and identity.

locating and marking her previously unmarked grave with a tombstone designating her literary forebear as “A Genius of the South.”²⁷¹

In fact, as Mary Helen Washington explains in her foreword to the 1990 Harper Perennial edition of the novel, in March of 1977, the novel was “unanimously at the top of the list” of the MLA Commission on Minority Groups and the Study of Language and Literature’s first publication of out-of-print books “most in demand.”²⁷² Indeed, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, with its focus on themes of African-American female self-realization is a novel that only seems to gain attention by both mainstream culture and academia.²⁷³ Todd McGowan, for instance, in his discussion of “psychoanalysis and the new canon” even includes a lengthy analysis of *Their Eyes Were Watching God* as an example of a “repressed” novel, or “those works whose exclusion from the canon doesn’t make sense.”²⁷⁴

Despite the general consensus regarding the merits of the text’s retrieval though, the novel itself is decidedly still not without controversy. It is specifically the particular aesthetics of the book that leads many scholars to become uncomfortable with what it potentially represents politically. Interestingly enough, Richard Wright’s particular critique of *Their Eyes Were Watching God* when it was first published, resembles very

²⁷¹ Michael Awkward, “Introduction,” ed. Michael Awkward, *New Essays on Their Eyes Were Watching God*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 5.

²⁷² Washington, “Foreword,” x.

²⁷³ The novel is still written about quite frequently, and the 2005 made-for-television film adaptation of it starring Halle Berry and produced by Oprah Winfrey, demonstrates its enduring appeal for readers.

²⁷⁴ Todd McGowan, *The Feminine “No!” Psychoanalysis and the New Canon*, (New York: State University of New York Press, 2001), 7.

closely many current scholars' problems with the novel. In her essay, "The Politics of Fiction, Anthropology, and the Folk: Zora Neale Hurston," Hazel Carby points out, "In Hurston's work, the rural black folk becomes an aesthetic principle, a means by which to embody a rich oral culture." At the end of this essay, Carby ultimately asks us to interrogate our privileging of Hurston's work, based upon the manner in which its aesthetic form promotes a particular political representation of African-American female identity, stating, "Perhaps, it is time that we should question the extent of our dependence upon the romantic imagination of Zora Neale Hurston to produce cultural meanings of ourselves as native daughters."²⁷⁵ For Carby, our "dependence" upon a romantic or folk tradition in representing African-American identity potentially obscures the reality of white oppression that the African-American individual faces every day. What is also implied in Carby's argument is the manner in which the recent glorification of Hurston's novel has constructed readers' own sense of selves and subjectivity to perhaps too great an extent.

Thus, while critiques such as Carby's might initially appear socially and culturally recent in their concern with representation of African-American women in particular,²⁷⁶ (a very specific group that Wright decidedly was not invested in in his review of the novel), the apprehension surrounding the specific form of the novel and what it politically signals, has endured. I would like to argue however, that it is precisely through this

²⁷⁵ Hazel V. Carby, "The Politics of Fiction, Anthropology, and the Folk: Zora Neale Hurston," ed. Michael Awkward, *New Essays on Their Eyes Were Watching God*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 71-90.

²⁷⁶ Hazel Carby, Barbara Christian, and Barbara Johnson for example, whose work and interests revolve around black feminism, are just a few current scholars writing about Hurston and this very issue.

conflict between representation and sociopolitical meaning and actualization that Janie constructs her sense of self. As a result, while white oppression (with a few notable exceptions) does not overtly emerge in the form of actual characters in this novel, critiques of white patriarchy and its discourse nonetheless abound in this text, represented through the men Janie chooses and rejects. This novel does not so much privilege any tradition or voice then, as much as it demonstrates the manner in which Janie constructs a unique sense of self that ultimately and subversively transcends aesthetic and political categorizations.

The novel is structured in such a way so that its motifs become self-referential clues for Janie and the reader as well in her quest for self-discovery. The formal complexity of the novel has led many scholars to believe that the text's structural use of time in its narrative is flawed. Bernard Bell, for example, while praising the novel's aesthetic sensibility, declares

The major problems in the narrative are the awkward handling of point of view, especially the moral and emotional distance between the protagonist and her grandmother, and of time structure. Choosing to mix third-person omniscient, dramatic, and first-person modes of presentation, the implied author begins the frame story in the first chapter with the omniscient narrator metaphorically setting the mood, introducing the theme, and dramatizing the conflict between her enlightened, independent central character and the inhibiting conventions of her folk community.²⁷⁷

²⁷⁷ Bell, *The Afro-American Novel and Its Tradition*, 123.

For Bell then, the flaw in the novel's structure resides in its apparent lack of coherence and consistency in point of view and chronology. However, time in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* is actually very neatly structured, according to the specific theme of individual self-discovery it is trying to represent. The novel significantly opens with a metaphorical image of time and vision:

Ships at a distance have every man's wish on board. For some they come in with the tide. For others they sail forever on the horizon, never out of sight, never landing until the Watcher turns his eyes away in resignation, his dreams mocked to death by Time. That is the life of men. Now, women forget all those things they don't want to remember, and remember everything they don't want to forget.

The dream is the truth. Then they act and do things accordingly.²⁷⁸

This opening image initially seems at once both abstract and reductive. We are not introduced to any concrete individual characters through this description. Instead, the text personifies the concepts of time and vision, signified by the capitalization of the words "Time" and the "Watcher." Yet, this opening passage also simultaneously, in its broad statements about what men and women see and remember, through the use of time as a metaphorical image, narrowly categorizes the two groups, causing a seemingly uneasy negotiation between metaphorical abstraction and definitive proclamations about gender identity.

²⁷⁸ Zora Neale Hurston, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, (New York: Harper Perennial edition, 1990, orig. published 1937), 1. All subsequent citations will refer to this edition.

However, the fact that we immediately see this image enacted in the textual representation of Janie Crawford and her story proves significant. Immediately after this passage, the narrative reads: “So the beginning of this was a woman and she had come back from burying the dead ... The people all saw her come because it was sundown ... It was the time to hear things and talk ... Seeing the woman as she was made them remember the envy they had stored up from other times. So they chewed up the back parts of their minds and swallowed with relish,” (1-2). The novel begins then, with the chronological ending of Janie’s actual story, signified through the use of final images such as sundown, the return from burial, and memories “stored up from other times,” and ultimately solidified for the reader soon after when Janie settles in to tell her friend Phoeby her story. Through the juxtaposition of these scenes then, the text reveals the manner in which time functions for Janie in her narrative. By beginning the story at the chronological ending, and then releasing it to Janie’s narrative to Phoeby, the textual narrative relinquishes control to Janie over what she indeed wants to “forget” and “remember” in her story. By opening with images of time and vision that additionally emphasize them through personification and capitalization, the text actually calls attention to the fact that this will be *Janie’s* story and voice. The narrative opens with a statement about time and then immediately enacts a noticeable shift in chronology. Similarly, the narrative opens with a statement about “the Watcher,” and then immediately constructs a more sharply defined point of view, in its shift of concentration to Janie’s own narration. These structural shifts in time and point of view then, actually

represent highly measured clues towards understanding Janie's construction of her sense of self.

The novel's use of repetition additionally proves extremely important in the representation of Janie and her self-discovery. This motif correlates with Henry Louis Gates's arguments regarding "repetition and revision" or the notion that "repetition and revision" are key to "black artistic forms." He states, "Free of the white person's gaze, black people created their own unique vernacular structures and relished in the double play that these forms bore to white forms ... Whatever is black about black American literature is to be found in this identifiable black Signifyin(g) difference."²⁷⁹ In other words, by creating a vernacular that repeats and revises white language, African-Americans resist white oppression through the "double play" that this creates and signifies. *Their Eyes Were Watching God* certainly does possess and utilize an African-American vernacular.²⁸⁰ Hurston additionally extends this "repetition and revision" into the structure of the text as well, most significantly in its use of foreshadowing and mirroring. Early in the novel, Janie tells Phoeby, "Yeah, Phoeby, Tea Cake is gone. And dat's de only reason you see me back here – cause Ah ain't got nothing to make me happy no more where Ah was at. Down in the Everglades there, down on the muck," (7). Here, it is not just Janie's type of language that "signifies" but what the particular phrases she uses mean in terms of the story that unfolds in the narrative. By informing Phoeby that Tea Cake is "gone," we now effectively know how the story will end before it

²⁷⁹ Gates, *The Signifying Monkey*, xxiv.

²⁸⁰ The particularities and implications of this will be addressed later in this chapter.

begins. Janie's retelling of the story and our experience of it are thus consistently and pointedly affected by this scene, as we always remember the story's ultimate demise before we even see it. Similarly, the phrase "down on the muck" is one that will actually be repeated multiple times throughout the course of the novel. What these initial phrases demonstrate and emphasize then, is the significance of particular scenes, moments, and people for Janie. Moreover, these repeated phrases highlight for the reader, Janie's reflection upon them as important. She has undergone the scenes once through living them, and another time through telling them.²⁸¹

The novel also accomplishes this particular form of conveying meaning through its use of mirroring. The narrative constructs multiple examples of female characters who overtly reflect whom Janie could become. In one particularly significant example, just before leaving for the Everglades with Tea Cake (a man much younger than herself), Janie remembers one Annie Tyler, and her unfortunate betrayal in a similar situation:

Then two weeks later the porter and conductor of the north bound local had helped [Annie] off the train at Maitland ... Everything that you could see was hanging. Her chin hung from her ears and rippled down her neck like drapes. Her hanging bosom and stomach and buttocks and legs that draped down over her ankles. She groaned but never giggled ... The daughter came as soon as she could and took Annie Tyler away to die in peace. She had waited all her life for something, and it had killed her when it found her. The thing made itself into

²⁸¹ While this is of course theoretically true for all narratives told from the simultaneous narrator and protagonist's point of view, the overt repetition of events and phrases here calls particular attention to this fact.

pictures and hung around Janie's bedside all night long. Anyhow, she wasn't going back to Eatonville to be laughed at and pitied. (114-115)

Annie Tyler then, represents not only what Janie could become but significantly what she decidedly does not want to be. What Janie will repeat is Annie's decision to leave with a younger man, but she will revise what happens to Annie by not returning to be "laughed at and pitied," in turn signifying an identity that is uniquely hers.

Recurring motifs in the novel actually exist then, for a very particular signifiatory purpose. It is highly crucial that the narrative signals the death of Tea Cake twice through the use of water. During the flood of the Everglades, Tea Cake fights off a rabid dog about to attack Janie: "Tea Cake split the water like an otter, opening his knife as he dived ... Tea Cake rose out of the water at the cow's rump and seized the dog by the neck ... They fought and somehow he managed to bite Tea Cake high up on his cheek-bone once. Then Tea Cake finished him and sent him to the bottom to stay there," (157). This climactic scene is then immediately followed by description of other pressing concerns plaguing Tea Cake and Janie (namely trying to escape the impressment of African-American men to retrieve and bury dead bodies found in the water) that significantly almost make the reader forget about the potential danger of the dog bite. This danger resurfaces though, when Tea Cake finds himself unable to drink water: "Janie dipped up a glass of water and brought it to the bed. Tea Cake took it and filled his mouth then gagged horribly, disgorged that which was in his mouth and threw the glass upon the floor" (166). The same violence that occurs during the flood when Tea Cake fights the dog reemerges here. Where Tea Cake must fight with the water in the

flood to overcome the dog by “splitting” it like a “knife,” drinking water here causes him to “gag horribly.” The use of water then in this latter scene proves doublefold. It signals a common symptom of rabies, and it also reflects back with pointed clarity to the moment where Tea Cake contracts the disease. The danger of the dog bite and what it signals, now stand out in sharp relief for both Janie and the reader, through the common clue of water. This linkage of a motif then, does not just exist within the narrative as a pure matter of literary form, but is overtly utilized (or “signified” through structural repetition) to show the manner in which Janie and the reader piece together meaning from her narrative. What is signified then through the novel’s repetition and revision of recognizable literary motifs is narrative connection. The narrative is not merely unfolding a story, but insisting upon creating meaning and significance from it. Its structure thus proves highly organized according to the unique meaning it is building.²⁸²

The manner in which discourse functions in this novel then, proves highly important specifically in terms of resistance. Although we switch from an omniscient third-person point of view to a first-person one when Janie begins to tell Phoeby her story, three pages into Janie’s narrative, the perspective switches again: “Nanny didn’t love tuh see me wid mah head hung down, so she figgered it would be mo’ better fuh me if us had uh house ... Phoeby’s hungry listening helped Janie to tell her story ... She though awhile and decided that her conscious life had commenced at Nanny’s gate,” (10).

Thus, we almost immediately move from Janie’s particular voice and vernacular to

²⁸² While of course all novels create meaning through their narratives, no matter how “disorganized” or confusing they may seem, what I am trying to bring to light here are the particular structural and symbolic clues and motifs within the space of the narrative of *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, aesthetic and meaningful details that many critics and scholars seem to overlook or fail to see.

another third-person point of view. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. defines this particular strategy of narration in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, as “free indirect discourse,” stating,

Hurston’s narrative strategy depends on the blending of the text’s two most extreme and seemingly opposed modes of narration – that is, narrative commentary, which begins at least in the diction of standard English, and characters’ discourse, which is always foregrounded by quotation marks and by its black diction ... In other words, through the use of what Hurston called a highly “adorned” free indirect discourse, which we might think of as a third or mediating term between narrative commentary and direct discourse, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* resolves that implicit tension between standard English and black dialect, the two voices that function as verbal counterpoints in the text’s opening paragraphs.²⁸³

Thus, according to Gates, the novel’s mediation between the “extremes” of the third-person and first-person point of view results in a particular kind of discursive narration that actually functions as a resolution of the tension between two forms of culturally coded language, namely standard English and African-American vernacular.

It is in fact through this “free indirect discourse” in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, that we additionally view Janie’s particular resistance towards discursive traditions that could potentially define her. Much has been made by many readers of the pear tree scene. Early in the novel, as Janie lies on her back beneath a pear tree,

²⁸³ Gates, *The Signifying Monkey*, 191-192.

She saw a dust-bearing bee sink into the sanctum of a bloom; the thousand sister-calyxes arch to meet the love embrace and the ecstatic shiver of the tree from root to tiniest branch creaming in every blossom and frothing with delight. So this was a marriage! She had been summoned to behold a revelation. Then Janie felt a pain remorseless sweet that left her limp and languid. (10-11)

The obvious orgasmic symbols in this scene (from the “arch” and “ecstatic shiver” of the tree to Janie’s own “sweet pain” that leaves her “limp and languid”), have resulted in many critical discussions of the importance of this scene for the construction of Janie’s own budding sexuality. Carla Kaplan designates this scene as impetus for her argument that the novel is “the story of a young woman in search of an orgasm.” She claims, “The meaning of Janie’s pear tree ‘revelation,’ it turns out, is not marriage or a husband or sex, but talk itself, the experience of conversation, the act of storytelling and self-narration.”²⁸⁴ Houston A. Baker Jr. takes a more unfavorable view of this scene, arguing, “The pear tree metaphor – the protagonist’s organic fantasy of herself as an orgasmic tree fertilized by careless bees ... leads away from the more significant economic dimensions of the novel.”²⁸⁵ For Baker then, this scene detracts from what he deems more serious and important social aspects of the novel.

This scene undoubtedly proves significant in terms of the introduction of Janie’s newfound sexuality, regardless of whether or not one finds this particular theme a crucial

²⁸⁴ Kaplan, *The Erotics of Talk*, 99-101.

²⁸⁵ Baker, *Blues, Ideology, and Afro-American Literature*, 57.

social or political issue. However, what is at least equally important here, is precisely the fact that this scene is construed symbolically. As Hazel Carby explains,

Language is accented differently by competing groups, and therefore the terrain of language is a terrain of power relations. This struggle within and over language reveals the nature of the structure of social relations and the hierarchy of power, not the nature of one particular group. The sign then, is an arena of struggle and a construct between socially organized persons in the process of their interaction; the forms that signs take are conditioned by the social organization of the participants involved and also by the immediate conditions of their interactions.²⁸⁶

If, as Carby states, language exists as the discursive sign for the struggle for power, it is highly significant that the text constructs Janie's first sense of sexual identity (or a classification that is potentially easily placed into a particular discursive power dichotomy) within a symbolic framework in a narrative mediation. The layered modes of narration and linguistic representation do not fit within an easily recognizable or overtly prevailing type of discourse. No type of language or discourse wins out then, in any struggle of power as each recognizable form (i.e. first-person versus third-person, dialect versus Standard English, or figurative versus literal language) is so obviously and continuously mediated by another. What we see then, in this particular scene, and the particular narrative structure of the novel, is the manner in which the text's portrayal of Janie resists discourse as a potentially limiting culturally defining code, but instead utilizes it as an individual means to depict Janie claiming an identity that is unique to her.

²⁸⁶ Carby, *Reconstructing Womanhood*, 17.

The manner in which we first see Janie's sexuality in response to a particular person then, proves highly significant. Almost immediately after the pear tree scene, the narrative reads, "Through pollinated air she saw a glorious being coming up the road. In her former blindness she had known him as shiftless Johnny Taylor, tall and lean. That was before the golden dust of pollen had beglamored his rags and her eyes" (11). Here, it is specifically Janie's fantasy that dictates her literal vision of Johnny Taylor. Where he was once "shiftless," her earlier experience with the pear tree now transforms him into a "glorious being" that walks through "pollinated air." This immediate linguistic reference to the earlier scene underscores through its reiteration, the manner in which Janie is defining her sense of sexuality specifically through her language. It is through Janie's own symbolically constructed fantasy that she and the reader will view and understand her sense of self.

We view Janie's construction of identity more clearly and overtly through the specific discourses that she embraces and rejects. As often noted by readers, the sense of a female community (and the divisions within it), play a large role within this text. Barbara Christian, for example, claims about the novel, "Hurston was so clearly concerned with the peculiar characteristics of the relationship between the black woman and her community that she rarely moved outside it."²⁸⁷ The ways in which Janie interacts with other women in this text, indeed prove important. Early in the novel, in response to the neighbors' gossip, Janie tells Phoeby, "Ah don't mean to bother wid

²⁸⁷ Christian, *Black Women Novelists*,. In *The Erotics of Talk: Women's Writing and Feminist Paradigms*, Carla Kaplan also emphasizes the importance of the relationship and communication between Janie and Phoeby.

tellin' 'em nothin', Phoeby. 'Tain't worth de trouble. You can tell 'em what Ah say if you wants to. Dat's just de same as me 'cause mah tongue is in mah friend's mouf" (6). Janie's assertion that her tongue is in her friend's mouth emphasizes the importance of her relationship with Phoeby in the narration of her story. In this declaration, Janie underscores the fact that her figurative voice can literally be attributed to and bound up with Phoeby, demonstrating the importance and influence of female friendship for her.

In fact, gender identity and relationships prove to be important elements in the construction of Janie's identification as specifically an African-American woman.²⁸⁸ As Paul Gilroy declares, "Gender is the modality in which race is lived."²⁸⁹ In *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, we see the implications of this inextricable connection between race and gender in the construction of subjectivity through the history of Nanny (Janie's grandmother). In this particular story that Nanny recounts to Janie, she has just given birth to a baby, fathered by her white slaveowner: "It was de cool of de evenin' when Mistis come walkin' in mah door. She throwed de door wide open and stood dere lookin' at me outa her eyes and face ... 'Nigger, whut' yo' baby doin' wid gray eyes and yaller hair? She begin tuh slap mah jaws ever which a'way," (16-17). This tactile and violent confrontation Nanny has with her female mistress contrasts sharply with the last interaction she experiences with her male master: "[He] run into mah cabin and made me let down mah hair for de last time. He sorta wrapped his hand in it, pulled mah big toe, lak he always done, and was gone after de rest lak lak lightnin'" (16). Significantly, Nanny's

²⁸⁸ See Chapter Five for an in-depth discussion about African-American masculinity in particular.

²⁸⁹ Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993), 85.

encounter with her mistress becomes the most physical contact we see, despite the obvious fact that her master has fathered her baby. Where her mistress looks intently at her out of her eyes and face, notices everything about the baby's features, and even slaps Nanny, her master never appears to look closely at her nor the baby, pulls her big toe distractedly, and leaves quickly.

Thus, what we see here is the manner in which the parentage and identity of Nanny's child has been placed solely upon Nanny. Hortense Spillers addresses this particular displacement in her discussion of imposed matriarchal structures upon the African-American community beginning in slavery: "Th[e] stunning reversal of the castration thematic, displacing the Name and the Law of the Father, to the territory of the Mother and Daughter, becomes an aspect of the African-American female's misnaming."²⁹⁰ In other words, forcing matriarchy upon the African-American community allows a white patriarchal society to solidify its power and dominance, namely through tracing family lines through the African-American woman, or a figure whose combined race and gender would render her inherently powerless. The master's invisibility in the implications of the sexual act with Nanny then, (the baby will never be acknowledged within his own family structure as his child), establishes his dominance and Nanny's powerlessness. Because she possesses sole responsibility for the child, the anger and jealousy of the mistress will be thoroughly displaced onto her.²⁹¹ The physicality between the two women in this scene and lack thereof between Nanny and her

²⁹⁰ Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe," ed. Spillers, *Black, White, and in Color*, 258.

²⁹¹ See Chapter Two for an in-depth discussion about the complicated relationship and struggles for power between white female slave owners and black female slaves.

master then, emphasize this particular gendered dichotomy in the establishment of racial power.

In *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, the inclusion and revelation of culturally discursive narratives such as these however, function as accounts from which Janie learns and grows individually, rather than definitive codes that she must overcome. In justifying her relationship with Tea Cake to Pheoby, Janie explains,

Ah done lived Grandma's way, now Ah means tuh live mine ... She was borned in slavery time when folks, dat is black folks, didn't sit down anytime dey felt lak it. So sittin' on porches lak de white madam looked lak uh mighty fine thing tuh her. Dat's whut she wanted for me – don't keer whut it cost ... So Ah got up on de high stool lak she told me, but Phoeby, Ah done nearly languished tuh death up dere. (198-109)

Here, Janie identifies and acknowledges the discursive codes that shape her grandmother's resistance and sense of self in relation to them, even attempting her grandmother's method herself. However, Janie significantly develops her own resistance to the historical oppression that follows her, by constructing her own individual reaction that importantly does not simultaneously denigrate Nanny's choices. Janie is after all, able to explain the reasoning behind Nanny's desire to sit on porches "lak de white madam," and will even go so far as to try it. This way is simply just not for Janie in particular, emphasized by the manner in which she repeats the manner in which she specifically "nearly languished tuh death." Through Janie's encounters with and highly individualized responses to other women and the culturally discursive narratives that are

constantly surrounding them, the text is able to expose and simultaneously subvert the overdeterminacy of those codes.

The specific discursive codes that Janie rejects then, prove very important in terms of recognizing and understanding the text's potential political stances. For all of the questions surrounding its ability to resist racism and sexism, the novel consistently critiques white patriarchy with a vengeance, most notably and overtly through a condemnation of the structure's economic system, thus calling attention to the inextricable connection between race and class. As Stuart Hall argues,

Capital reproduces the class, including its internal contradictions as a whole – structured by race. It dominates the divided class, in part, through those internal divisions which have racism as one of its effects ... racism as an ideological configuration has been reconstituted by the dominant class relations, and thoroughly reworked. If it has performed the function of that cementing ideology which secures a whole social formation under a dominant class, its pertinent differences from other such hegemonic ideologies require to be registered in detail. Here, racism is particularly powerful and its imprint on popular consciousness especially deep, because in such racial characteristics as color, ethnic origin, geographical position, etc., racism discovers what other ideologies have to construct: an apparently “natural” and universal basis in nature itself.²⁹²

²⁹² Stuart Hall, “Race, Articulation, and Societies Structured in Dominance,” *Black British Cultural Studies*, 56.

According to Hall, race and class are inextricably intertwined because of the manner in which their ideological structures function. For both instances, the maintenance of dominance occurs through naturalizing difference according to specific power dichotomies.

The inherent invisibility and insidiousness of these seemingly innate ideological divisions are demonstrated through the figure of Joe Starks, Janie's second husband.²⁹³ Joe becomes a symbol of patriarchal power, represented through his capitalistic ambition. After Joe is elected mayor of Eatonville (an all African-American town), he responds to the townspeople's urging that Janie make a speech with, "Thank yuh fuh yo' compliments, but mah 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." Janie's response proves significant: "Janie made her face laugh after a short pause, but it wasn't too easy ... 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 of things" (40-41). Thus, it is the election of Joe to mayor that signals the subordination of Janie. While Joe clearly possesses ambition when Janie first meets him, he significantly never makes proclamations about her subordinate role, until he has actually gained the mayoral position of power. It is the literal fulfillment **then**, of this position of power that solidifies Joe's embracing of the discursive narratives surrounding this role.

It is highly significant **then**, that the text represents Joe's transformation in particular, through the use of symbols and codes. In showing the transformation of Joe

²⁹³ The term "husband" both here and in the novel itself is not used in the traditional sense, as Janie never legally marries Jody, yet poses as and considers herself his wife.

from one role (that of Janie's love interest) to one that voices patriarchy and the division of gender roles, the text reveals the manner in which these positions of power indeed prove narrativized. Joe's personality and outlook change, depending upon which discursive role he assumes. Consequently, the undoing of Joe stems from Janie robbing him specifically of symbolic power. When Janie finally responds to Joe's browbeating later in the novel, proclaiming, "Talkin' 'bout *me* lookin' old! When you pull down yo' britches, you look lak de change uh life," the narrative reads, "Then Joe Starks realized all the meanings and his vanity bled like a flood. Janie had robbed him of his illusion of irresistible maleness that all men cherish, which was terrible" (75). Here, Janie shatters the illusion of Joe's symbol of power (his penis or a symbol of his masculinity), by vocally calling attention to it as an entity, thus ascribing to it a new meaning. In describing and deriding Joe's penis, Janie symbolically undermines the illusory authority he wields through it.

The novel's own reliance upon the semiotic then, proves extremely important in its representation and critique of discursive power. In *Blues, Ideology, and Afro-American Literature*, Houston A. Baker, Jr. critiques the notion that "material" struggle or the "living and laboring conditions of people," can be reduced to the "semiotic," claiming that the conditions and lives of people "designated as the 'desperate class' ... have always been sharply conditioned by an 'economics of slavery' as they worked the agricultural rows, searing furnaces, rolling levees, bustling roundhouses, and piney-woods logging camps of America. A sense of 'production' and 'modes of production' that foregrounds such Afro-American labor seems an appropriate inscription of the

material.”²⁹⁴ In other words, Baker is troubled by the idea of potentially reducing social inequality to ideological signifiers, as this equation potentially glosses over and ignores the all-too-real circumstances in which people must live.

The particular use of aesthetics in Hurston’s novel can indeed seem to pose this problem that Baker pinpoints. After all, the text’s placement of its portrayal of white capitalist patriarchy²⁹⁵ in an all-black town appears to ignore the key oppressive element: the white capitalist patriarch. Consequently, the novel’s potential critique of white power structures can seem muddled. One can see a particularly telling example of this aesthetic and political dilemma through the manner in which the narrative solidifies Joe’s dominion over Janie and the town. Early in the novel, Janie’s grandmother tells her, “De nigger woman is de mule uh de world so far as Ah can see” (14). This motif later becomes significantly repeated first when Janie openly sympathizes with a sick mule that Joe leads the townspeople in making fun of, and again when Joe organizes a mock funeral for the mule when it dies: “Starks led off with a great eulogy on our departed citizen, our most distinguished citizen and the grief he left behind him, and the people loved the speech. It made him more solid than building the schoolhouse had done. He stood on the distended belly of the mule for a platform and made gestures,” (57). This scene thus demonstrates symbolically the manner in which Joe effectively stands upon others (most notably and specifically Janie, whose particular connection to the mule has already been linguistically documented) to deliver and maintain discursive power.

²⁹⁴ Baker, *Blues, Ideology, and Afro-American Literature*, 3.

²⁹⁵ I am assuming specifically white patriarchy here, given the fact that this was indeed the group in power. Joe’s ascension to this particular kind of power then, represents the dominant status quo.

Because this occurs symbolically rather than literally however,²⁹⁶ the “real” or concrete conditions of Janie can theoretically become lost. We see Joe figuratively “standing upon the belly” of Janie, but in this particular scene, we do not view him do so in a concrete way, thereby potentially creating through language, a romanticized distance between the reader and real oppression.

However, this scene actually intertwines linguistic signifiers with material conditions to portray and emphasize the manner in which ideology constructs them. It is in fact the use of symbolism here that brings the realities of what Janie experiences into sharp effect. If Janie has repeatedly been linguistically linked to the mule, then the body of Janie (and simultaneously the body of all African-American women, as initially stated by Nanny) is truly what stands out here when Joe steps on the mule’s belly, emphasized by the narrative’s repetition of the symbol. In this case, the repetition of the mule as symbol serves to underscore continuously its meaning, namely the way in which the African-American female body is used as a means for white patriarchy to gain power. Moreover, to include this particular symbol, as well as utilize Joe (an African-American male) as a symbol for white patriarchy, exposes the manner in which these power differentials are not naturally divided, but ideologically constructed. bell hooks describes the psychological effect of white patriarchy upon African-American males, claiming,

²⁹⁶ The literal is admittedly an odd term to use for a novel, whose narrative construction inherently makes it representational. A more concrete representation of Joe’s power however, for example, might reside in some specific instances of Joe taking physical or economic advantage of Janie or the town. A few of these scenes do occur in the narrative, most notably when Joe slaps Janie and forces her to tie up and hide her long hair, or when as owner and manager of the town’s general store, he publicly refuses to give enough bread to a poor woman in the town. These scenes come later in the novel though, and tend to reinforce what we already know about Joe. The mule funeral scene arguably represents the moment where the complete solidification of Joe’s power becomes very apparent, emphasized through the manner in which the town now recognizes him as “more solid.” The highly symbolic construction of this moment then, proves extremely significant.

“The black male quest for recognition of his ‘manhood’ in American society is rooted in his internalization of the myth that simply by having been born male, he has an inherent right to power and privilege.”²⁹⁷ By configuring Joe as a symbol of white patriarchy²⁹⁸ then, the text of *Their Eyes Were Watching God* demonstrates its discursive nature. Its mythic ideology creates and maintains power most forcefully when its specific referent (a white male body) is absent. Here then, the use of literary symbols reflects and reveals the symbolic nature of power.

Resistance in this text then, resides in the manner in which Janie is able to reject discursive systems that potentially define and categorize her. One of the largest political problems many critics and scholars have with this novel is the way in which Janie’s path of self-discovery appears to take place primarily through her relationships with different men. Even when Janie finally finds a relationship with which she is happy in the character of Tea Cake, resulting in new ways of viewing herself,²⁹⁹ she still achieves this through Tea Cake, rather than self-initiated introspection. This perceived lack of autonomy, and dependence upon men for her sense of identity, causes many readers to be uncomfortable with the novel. Hortense Spillers for example, argues, “The trouble, then, with the relationship between Janie and Teacake is not its heterosexual ambience, but a curiously exaggerated submissiveness on Janie’s part that certain other elements of the

²⁹⁷ bell hooks, *Ain’t I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism*, (Boston: South End Press, 1981), 100.

²⁹⁸ I am conflating whiteness with patriarchy here, since this specific power structure is what simultaneously dominates and drives Joe to attain.

²⁹⁹ One fairly unsubtle example occurs after Tea Cake has complimented Janie extensively on her mouth, eyes, and hair. After Tea Cake leaves, the narrative reads, “Janie hung over the newel post thinking so long that she all but went to sleep there. However, before she went to bed she took a good look at her mouth, eyes, and hair,” (101). Tea Cake’s influence then, literally causes Janie to look at herself anew.

heroine's character contradict ... Hurston's pursuit of an alleged folk philosophy in this case – as in, all women enjoy an occasional violent outburst from their men because they know then that they are loved – is an obscene idea.”³⁰⁰ Spillers then, critiques the potentially contradictory and troubling idea that Janie finds individual liberation and self-worth only through submission.

Indeed, at first glance, some of the differences between Tea Cake and Joe can appear fairly superficial, especially when viewing them from a late twentieth-century or twenty-first century feminist lens. What Spillers points to in her particular interpretation of the novel is the physical abuse both Joe and Tea Cake exercise upon Janie. After Janie finally stands up to and emasculates Joe in the store, the narrative reads, “Then Joe Starks realized all the meanings and his vanity bled like a flood ... And the cruel deceit of Janie! Making all that show of humbleness and scorning him all the time! Laughing at him, and now putting the town up to do the same. Joe Starks didn't know the words for all this, but he knew the feeling. So he struck Janie with all his might and drove her from the store” (75-76). This scene is juxtaposed quite clearly with a later one where Janie and Tea Cake experience an altercation while they are working and living in the Everglades together, and Tea Cake becomes jealous of another perceived suitor:

Before the week was over he had whipped Janie. Not because her behavior justified his jealousy, but it relieved that awful fear inside him. Being able to whip her reassured him in possession. No brutal beating at all. He just slapped her around a bit to show he was boss. Everybody talked about it next day in the

³⁰⁰ Spillers, “A Hateful Passion, A Lost Love,” ed. Spillers, *Black, White, and in Color*, 105.

fields. It aroused a sort of envy in both men and women. The way he petted and pampered her as if those two or three face slaps had nearly killed her made the women see visions and the helpless way she hung on him made men dream dreams. (140)

Thus, the narrative of the novel frames these two scenes as decidedly different in nature. Where Joe slaps Janie because he is worried about himself, and how he will appear to the town, Tea Cake justifies his whipping of Janie as a demonstration of his love for and protection of her. According to the text then, Tea Cake's physical treatment of Janie then, is definitely positive. He "pets and pampers" her, and arouses envy amongst both men and women over the strong love Janie and Tea Cake have for each other. These two scenes tend to be coded very differently though, for more recent readers. After all, both Tea Cake and Joe hit Janie, and Tea Cake's whipping overtly demonstrates possession of Janie, emphasized in the "helpless" way she "hangs" on him. These words and themes present definite taboos and problems for many contemporary readers.³⁰¹

Indeed, Tea Cake is importantly and significantly not perfect, even within the world of the narrative. When Janie first runs away with him, Tea Cake takes her money without informing her to gamble with it, leaving her in a hotel room for almost an entire day. The torture she feels while waiting for him does not manifest itself in scorned betrayal, but instead depression over a potentially lost love: "Janie dozed off to sleep but she woke up in time to see the sun sending up spies ahead of him to mark out the road

³⁰¹ I am by no means suggesting that we ignore or excuse the elements of these scenes that make us uncomfortable. The concerns here are important and valid, especially in an era where domestic abuse in particular is a problem that many lawmakers and citizens within even mainstream culture are striving so vigilantly to eradicate. I nevertheless do think it is important though, to recognize the manner in which our current discursive systems are driving the ways in which we read this novel.

through the dark ... But it was always going to be dark to Janie if Tea Cake didn't soon come back ... She dwindled down on the floor with her head in a rocking chair" (115).³⁰² Thus, even though Janie obviously loves Tea Cake and the transgression is ultimately forgiven through mutual communication (Janie tells Tea Cake how she feels, and he promises never to do something similar again), it is highly significant that we still see potential danger warnings such as these in Tea Cake. The narrative takes the time to show to us that Tea Cake possesses the same potential faults as Joe. Like Joe, he appears to care deeply about money and dominance over women.

However, these connections between the two men in fact become exceedingly necessary for Janie as she constructs her own self-discovery. In viewing and understanding both the subtle (and not so subtle) differences between Joe and Tea Cake that prove meaningful for her, she creates her own individual narrative. The men in this novel thus function as necessary narrative space through which Janie moves. Many critics and scholars make much of Janie's movement through her physical environments, namely her migration from a farm with her first (and only legitimate) husband to Eatonville with Joe, and then ultimately to the Everglades with Tea Cake.³⁰³ While not discussing *Their Eyes Were Watching God* specifically, Farah Jasmine Griffin characterizes a typical African-American migration narrative as follows:

The narrative is marked by four pivotal events: (1) an event that propels the action northward, (2) a detailed representation of the initial confrontation with the urban

³⁰² During their stint in the Everglades, Tea Cake also comes dangerously close to having an affair with another girl.

³⁰³ There are many Hurston studies for example, devoted to Hurston's relationship to the folk, and the political and cultural significance of regions for her characters.

landscape, (3) an illustration of the migrant's attempt to negotiate the landscape and his or her resistance to the negative effects of urbanization, and (4) a vision of the possibilities or limitations of the Northern, Western, or Midwestern city and the South.³⁰⁴

For Griffin then, the characterization of an African-American migration narrative relies upon the characters' negotiations with landscapes that represent potentially hostile and/or friendly sociopolitical discourses.

The current focus on Janie's migration through the rural South in *Their Eyes_Were Watching God*, and what this politically signifies for the African-American community is no doubt important and valid, but it is also crucial to recognize and examine (beyond ways that are purely dismissive or critical) the significant role that other characters play in Janie's journey. In this novel, an equally important migration Janie undergoes is her negotiation between different relationships with other people. Her interactions with male characters become so prevalent³⁰⁵ within the textual narrative because they represent varying forms of discursive power through which Janie must navigate. Consequently, the initial similarities between Joe and Tea Cake exist as a means for Janie to confront and learn from them. When Janie first sees Joe after doing housewife chores while married to Logan, the narrative reads, "It was a citified, stylish dressed man with his hat set at an angle that didn't belong in these parts ... The shirt with the silk sleeveholders was dazzling enough for the world. He whistled, mopped his face and walked like he knew

³⁰⁴ Farah Jasmine Griffin, "Who Set you Flowin?"; *The African-American Migration Narrative*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 3.

³⁰⁵ We must of course also remember that, as noted earlier, Janie rejects and embraces different discursive ideas through her relationships with other female characters as well.

where he was going ... Where would such a man be coming from and where was he going?" (26). Janie first meets Tea Cake in a similar manner at the general store when he asks her to play checkers with him: "Somebody wanted her to play. Somebody thought it natural for her to play ... She looked him over and got little thrills from every one of his good points. Those full, lazy eyes with the lashes curling sharply away like drawn scimitars. The lean, over-padded shoulders and narrow waist" (91-92). Thus, both men initiate important narrative movements for Janie, in that they both represent something new and dazzlingly tantalizing for her. Joe represents the city in his clothes and his ability to take her out of the rural landscape, and Tea Cake represents freedom by encouraging her to play checkers, and assert her autonomous individuality. Significantly, of course, both men actually take Janie to a new physical space within the narrative as well (Joe to Eatonville, and Tea Cake to the Everglades).

The crucial difference between the two men then, proves to be the ways in which Janie finds and preserves her sense of self through them. It is highly significant that Janie is able to shoot and kill Tea Cake after he is bitten by a rabid dog and threatens her with a gun. In this scene, the narrative states,

The pistol snapped once. Instinctively Janie's hand flew behind her on the rifle and brought it around ... If only the doctor would come! If anybody at all would come! ... The pistol and the rifle rang out almost together ... Tea Cake crumpled as his bullet buried itself in the joist over Janie's head. Janie saw the look on his face and leaped forward as he crashed forward in her arms. She was trying to cover him as he closed his teeth in the flesh of her forearm. They came down

heavily like that. Janie struggled to a sitting position and pried the dead Tea Cake's teeth from her arm. (174-175)

Thus, despite Janie's obvious enduring love for Tea Cake, evident through the manner in which she attempts to catch him as he falls, her own self-preservation ultimately and significantly wins out. She is able to shoot him, and "pry" his teeth from her arm in order to save her own life. Tea Cake in the most literal sense, cannot control her life. This contrasts sharply with Janie's relationship with Joe, a man whom she does not love, and proves to be incredibly domineering, but she does not kill.³⁰⁶ Male characters in this text then, function not as dictators of Janie's identity, but as catalysts for her growing sense of self-knowledge, as she moves through them. Given that Janie exists in a world ruled by men, to be able to use and learn from them without relying upon them fully proves highly subversive indeed. Janie thus resists any defined discourse by constructing her own.

Consequently, Janie's refusal to participate vocally in the courtroom scene where she is on trial for shooting Tea Cake, reflects not so much a lack of self-assertion as it does a refusal to participate in the discourse surrounding her. The fact that the text does not allow us to view Janie's direct testimony, tends to confuse and disturb readers, especially given the fact that Janie's voice has played such a strong presence throughout the novel up until this point. In her introduction to the 1990 Harper Perennial edition of *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Mary Helen Washington cites Robert Stepto's discomfort with Janie's lack of vocal presence in the novel's famous courtroom scene

³⁰⁶ This assertion may seem a bit simplistic, given Janie's verbal emasculation of Joe that appears to lead to his death within the narrative. However, it is significant that Janie can kill Tea Cake (the man whom she loves) in a much more visceral and overt way to maintain her own self.

claiming, “Although, like Stepto, I too am uncomfortable with the absence of Janie’s voice in the courtroom scene, I think that silence reflects Hurston’s discomfort with the model of the male hero who asserts himself through his powerful voice.”³⁰⁷ Although Washington interprets Janie’s silence in a different manner than Stepto, she still importantly makes known her “discomfort” with the scene’s political implications in representing African-American female identity. Additionally Carla Kaplan points out, “Janie’s politics of voice can seem downright reactionary. Whereas both Nanny and the community view voice as a mode of negotiating into and within the public sphere, Janie’s view of voice seems private and personal, even privatistic. Throughout the novel she consistently chooses not to fight back with her voice.”³⁰⁸ One particularly significant passage in the courtroom scene provides an example of this potentially “reactionary” usage of Janie’s voice: “She tried to make them see how terrible it was that things were fixed so that Tea Cake couldn’t come back to himself until he had got rid of that mad dog that was in him and he couldn’t get rid of the dog and live ... But she hadn’t wanted to kill him ... She didn’t plead to anybody. She just sat there and told and when she was through she hushed,” (178). Thus, if we read the courtroom scene as the climax of the novel, the lack of Janie’s particular voice in this testimony definitely proves disappointing. The third-person narration used to sum up Janie’s testimony does not allow us to see her defend herself, consequently theoretically undermining the strength of both her literal and figurative voice.

³⁰⁷ Washington, “Foreword,” xii.

³⁰⁸ Kaplan, *The Erotics of Talk*, 111.

Yet, what occurs in this scene is the text's refusal to include Janie's voice within the legal discourse surrounding her, even though she has a good enough defense to win (and she does). This discourse is not part of Janie's world, and her vocal refusal to engage in it, enacts an overtly emphatic form of resistance. This discourse literally does not belong to Janie. We have to read it (if we must) without her. As a result, Janie's silence in the courtroom scene is actually completely consistent with the strength of her voice (as well as that of the African-American female community) throughout the text. As we rely upon Janie's voice and perspective to see and hear her story, the courtroom scene (whose language and narrative belong completely within the white patriarchal realm) represents a discourse from which Janie is excluded, but whose rules and parameters, she is paradoxically held subject to.

Janie's lack of voice thus represents her refusal to participate within this discourse. As Carla Kaplan claims, in her definition of what she deems the "erotics of talk," "Electing classics on the basis of their politics of voice obscures the presence of a competing topos in women's literature ... This topos [the erotics of talk] is the search not for a voice, but for a listener capable of hearing that voice and responding appropriately to it."³⁰⁹ Thus, in this particular scene, there is no need for the textual narrative to include Janie's direct voice, because no one within the courtroom truly understands it, or is willing to listen to it. Within the discursive space of the courtroom (which of course mainly reflects white patriarchy), Janie is not speaking for the correct listener. Similarly, it is not necessary for the text to rehash Janie's reasons for killing Tea Cake to the reader

³⁰⁹ Kaplan, *The Erotics of Talk*, 15.

in her own voice, because we already know them, and have indeed already viewed them in this particular manner. Consequently, whether or not Janie is found innocent or guilty according to legal discourse is really besides the point here, emphasized through the rather anticlimactic description of the scene and verdict.³¹⁰ What does become important is what Janie knows and learns about herself. Thus, if we read the courtroom scene as the culmination of Janie's self-discovery in this novel, we are really missing the point, and potentially falling into a discursive trap of our own; namely that the legal discourse represented in this scene possesses the fundamental power to shape our sense of happiness, and the manner in which we view ourselves. The text does not offer Janie as a universal representative of any "type" of group, but as just one particular example of an African-American female character finding her own unique identity.

It is very fitting then, that the novel ends with Janie's introspective thoughts. As we read the final lines,

Of course [Tea Cake] wasn't dead. He could never be dead until she herself had finished feeling and thinking. The kiss of his memory made pictures of love and light against the wall. Here was peace. She pulled in her horizon like a great fish-net. Pulled it from around the waist of the world and draped it over her

³¹⁰ After the jury announces the verdict, the narrative reads as follows: "So she was free and the judge and everybody up there smiled with her and shook her hand. And the white women cried and stood around her and like a protecting wall and the Negroes, with heads hung down, shuffled out and away. The sun was almost down and Janie had seen the sun rise on her troubled love and then she had shot Tea Cake and had been in jail and had been tried for her life and now she was free. Nothing to do with the little that was left of the day but to visit the kind white friends who had realized her feelings and thank them. So the sun went down" (179). The lack of exclamation points used to represent Janie's victory, the primary description of others' reactions to the verdict, and the final sentence "So the sun went down" (intimating that this is just another ordinary day) all promote the anticlimactic feel of this verdict.

shoulder. So much of life in its meshes! She called in her soul to come and see.

(183-184)

It is actually here that we view the culmination of Janie's self-discovery. She has truly constructed her own sense of self and what life means to her, emphasized through the fact that she speaks to no one in this scene but her own "soul." Even though Tea Cake has died, she will continue living and relying on herself. The novel's ultimate resistance then lies in Janie's carving out an individual visible narrative and identity.

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