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THE QUARREL IN AUNT HAGAR'S GARDEN: THE IMPACT OF INTRARACIAL COLOR AND CLASS BIAS IN AFRICAN AMERICAN POPULAR CULTURE

By

Dolores V. Sisco

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ABSTRACT

THE QUARREL IN AUNT HAGAR'S GARDEN: THE INFLUENCE OF INTRARACIAL CLASS AND COLOR BIAS IN AFRICAN AMERICAN POPULAR CULTURE

By

Dolores V. Sisco

The purpose of this cultural study is to put into perspective, the issue of intraracial class and color bias which continues to affect the everyday lives, and the cultural products (literature and film) of African Americans. As I maintain, differences in skin color and economic class position have determined oppositional ideologies that claim the rights to black cultural authenticity. The broad differences in these claims have been between those who find an end to racial privilege in cultural assimilation with the dominant culture, and those who advocate a cultural essentialism based on the visibility of color differences. We need to examine these two political stances as they reflect the tensions in the black community over who gets the right to name black authenticity. The question I want to consider throughout is what constitutes an authentically black cultural product? Claims for black cultural authenticity, however, have not been created in a vacuum, and the issue of intraracial color and class bias – the result of white hegemony – informs and shapes black group positionalities of class, gender, and sexuality throughout, what cultural critics Isaac Julien and Kobena Mercer have insightfully termed, "representational practices." It is these "representational practices" that are at issue here.

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DEDICATIONS

For my Daddy – Alfred E. Sisco

For my family, who now know why many family functions were missed: Diane M. Sisco, Alfred E. Sisco, Jr., Frank J. Sisco, Desiree M. Sisco, Matlynn Jones, Chynna M. Sisco, Ijumaa S. Shelton, Jr., Cherise V. Sisco, and the late Lawrence Carl Seldon. Above all, I could not finish my education and the arduous task of scholarship with out the love and support of my mother Naomi – love you, Mom.

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The Quarrel in Aunt Hagar's Garden: The Impact of Intraracial Colorism on African American Popular Culture

Introduction

The purpose of this cultural study is to put the issue of intraracial color and class bias into perspective. As I maintain, differences in skin color and economic class position have determined oppositional ideologies that claim the rights to black cultural authenticity, oppositional ideologies that are reflected in black produced writing and black commercial film making. The broad differences in these opposing claims have historically been between those who find an end to racial privilege in cultural assimilation with the dominant culture, and those who advocate a cultural essentialism based on loosely defined Afro-centric cultural practices. However, both ideologic camps assign certain values – whether assimilationist or essentialist – based on gradations of skin color and other visible signs of European physical attributes. As we know, the darkness of skin has often been an indicator of economic success in a racist America, but within black communities, there has also been a simultaneous need to defy this dicta as detrimental to African American political and cultural cohesiveness – such as the late 1960s Black is Beautiful Movement. Thus, this study argues that we need to examine these two political stances as they reflect the tensions over skin color and economic class movements in the black community over who gets the right to name a black political and cultural authenticity. The questions to be considered throughout this study is what exactly

constitutes an authentically black cultural product? Claims for black cultural authenticity, however, have not been created in a vacuum, and the issue of intraracial color bias – the result of white hegemony – informs and shapes black group positionalities of class, gender, and sexuality throughout, what cultural critics Isaac Julien and Kobena Mercer have insightfully termed, "representational practices." It is these "representational practices" that are at issue here.

Why examine black representational practices? To answer this question we need to consider Stuart Hall's much anthologized essay *What Is This 'Black' in Black Popular Culture?* . Hall's essay provides a means to put this question into context in considering black cultural authenticity. Hall contends that: "By definition, black popular culture is a contradictory space. It is a sight [sic] of a strategic contestation." As black cultural formations have historically emerged, reformulated, and reconfigured themselves from plantation tales, songs, and dances to the latest style of hip-hop, Hall's definition, as he rightly points out, firmly establishes black popular culture as a postmodern formation.

> However deformed, incorporated, and inauthentic are the forms
> in which black people and black communities and traditions
> appear and are represented in popular culture, we continue to see,
> in the figures and the repertoires on which popular culture draws,
> the experiences that stand behind them. (27)

Hall identifies three broad constituents that identify what we mean by "black" culture in the use of style, the substitution of music for "the mastery of writing," and the use of the body. As Hall concludes "repertoires of black popular culture" were affected on two

fronts, first from the retention of disparate African folkways, and secondly from the conditions that come out of exclusion from – and resistance to – mainstream culture.

There is a long tradition of black political thinking that longs for an imaginary, essential blackness that is somehow recognized as the sign of "authenticity," this ideology, for example, is represented in its overdetermination in the current logics of Afro-centrism. While there is some sense in the thinking of a West African source of cultural retention, the problem with Afro-centrism is its stubborn refusal to see clearly the hybridity and creolization that have come from the contact with many other cultures, including the dominant European. It is "weak," writes Hall, "because it naturalizes and de-historicizes difference, mistaking what is historical and cultural for what is natural, biological, and genetic" (29), a thought I will come back to, but in its most extreme manifestation is the impulse to reject any signifier of a European co-option, much like its older turn of *negritude* which puts the Afrocentric imperative at odds with the assimilationists.

At issue for both assimilationists and essentialists is the *authority* to speak, the authority to define an African American cultural identity by forcing hybrid cultural forms into rigid ideologies. This presumption is shared by both the advocates for racial essentialism, and those who argue that cultural assimilation is the best way to succeed in a racist environment. "Who needs identity? ," queries Stuart Hall:

> In common sense language, identification is constructed
> on the back of a recognition of some common origin or
> shared characteristics with another person or group, or

> with an ideal, and with the natural closure of solidarity and allegiance established on this foundation. In contrast with the 'naturalism' of this definition, the discursive approach sees identification as a construction, a process never completed – always 'in process.' (2)

What Hall describes is common to both groups; however, extremists exist on both sides who use skin color and economic class position as markers for cultural authority. For example, cultural assimilationists insist on finding common ground in their shared ideals with the wider American culture and often insist that *class* is more important than racial differences. Within the black community, such thinking has allowed them to organize around the commonalities of skin color, and educational and professional occupations in an effort to separate themselves from racial stigmas. Thus, there is an insistence on an adherence to what some see as "white values," "white language patterns, "etc. bell hooks sees harm in the "Integrated educational structures" as the locations where whites could best colonize the minds and imaginations of black folks"(1995, 109). "Aping whites, assimilating their values (i.e., white supremacist attitudes and assumptions) was clearly the way to achieve material success." However, such an evaluation of the racist agenda which supports colorism and classism does not mean that hooks herself advocates an oppositional ideology of an uncritical essentialism. hooks advocates, instead, an active resistance and a self-love as practices to ending the divisions in the black community.

If, as Stuart Hall contends, black culture is rooted in those forms which come from the black vernacular of the plantation, then the cultural assimilationists used their genetic

difference, their visible color and class position to distance themselves from those forms. Darkness of skin denoted the degradation of slavery, a reminder of positions a lighter-skinned elite strove to distance them from. The proponents of Afro-centrism, on the other hand, used the signifier of black skin as an embrace of the same "degradation." "The moment the signifier 'black' is torn from its historical, cultural, and political embedding and lodged in a biologically constituted racial category," explains Hall, "we valorize, by inversion, the very ground of the racism we are trying to deconstruct."

> In addition, as always happens when we naturalize historical categories (think about gender and sexuality), we fix that signifier outside of history, outside of change, outside of political intervention. And once it is fixed, we are tempted to use "black" as sufficient in itself to guarantee the progressive character of the politics we fight under the banner – as if we don't have any other politics to argue about except whether something's black or not. (30)

The above passage bears special attention in the struggle to use visible and social positions of demarcation. What this study proposes is an examination of the signifier of "blackness"on both sides of a color-line that, as Hall points out, is based problematically in "political, symbolic, and positional boundaries – as if they were genetic."

For example, the proponents of black nationalism believe in a cultural transmission uniquely African and unadulterated by European constituents where dark skin color is one of the attributes of cultural authenticity. Instead of assimilationist co-options, black nationalism focuses on a heightened awareness of an undifferentiated African identity

rooted in the communal values that speak more to the experience of plantation slavery. Unity of the masses, and their roots as field hands, was where African American cultural authenticity and resistance to white domination were located. Black political and cultural nationalists often cite the dark-skinned field hand as the true instigator of slave rebellions which gave their eager listeners a sense of pride in a culture that saw their African skin and features as negative values. Lightness of skin and the assimilation of the master's cultural values were indicators of betrayal to African communal values and the cultural traditions that sustained the black masses during slavery. Appealing to the masses of darker-skinned, and economically disadvantaged blacks, points out Michael C. Dawson, "produced both the reality and the illusion of shared interests and unity, but it has also served to mask severe disagreements over strategy, tactics, and goals within the black community" (133). What I want to stress is that, although this type of political thinking was reductionist and historically inaccurate, the use of skin color divisions tapped into a long history of intraracial resentment as black cultural groups vied for political and cultural authority in the twentieth century, years before the Black Power movement of the 1960s.

The darkness of his skin, for example, is what attracted many working-class blacks to the Garvey movement in the 1920s. Regardless of his organizational shortcomings, Garvey offered his working-class adherents a sense of pride in their color, a point over looked by the integrationist and light-skinned elitist NAACP. Even W. E. B. Du Bois publically denied such divisions existed within the black community, and accused Garvey of bringing a "Caribbean problem" to Afro-America. The Nation of Islam was

another group whose essentialist teachings were attractive to darker-skinned blacks who resented the elitism and middle-class values of the traditional civil rights organizations, although according to Karl Evanzz, the leadership of the NOI preferred light-skinned males. Although their own colorist choices, as either a matter of political tactics or personal preference is a matter of debate. "One gifted orator," relates Evanzz, "was regarded as too dark-skinned to attract recruits. Muhammad selected ministers based on a ranking system which included intelligence, oratorical skills, and physical features" (288).

In the early 1970s, Dr. Frances Cress Welsing began to publish her scientific papers on what she termed *The Cress Theory of Color-Confrontation*. Dr. Welsing's theories, in brief, used a complicated scientific equation to explain racism as a lack of genetic melanin, and "proved" the superiority of black skin. Welsing often showed valuable insights about the need to resist racism in the collected papers, The Isis Papers: The Keys to the Colors, but like other proponents of black nationalism Welsing's brand of Afrocentrism was rigid in its adherence to a pseudo-African cultural tradition based on a strict patriarchal heterosexism. In Welsing's view, deviations of black feminism and black homosexuality were dismissed as white cultural brainwashing. Welsing's views, a revisioning of 19th century scientific racism at its best, were extremely popular among male nationalists during the late sixties, and continues to resonate today among blacks.

Political and black cultural satirist Aaron McGruder uses the form of the daily comic-strip to comment on the complicated relationships between contesting ideologies within the black community. The Boondocks allows McGruder "free play" in which to

articulate the contradictions in black cultural formations by personalizing them in the fictional Freeman household. The household consists of Grandfather Freeman, a veteran of the civil rights movement, Huey, the black nationalist radical who sees racial conspiracies at every turn, and Riley, a pint-sized gangsta' thug in training who represents the nihilism and mindless hedonism of rap. All three represent the changing ideology of a history of defining the meaning of "black cultural authenticity," as the diatribes of black nationalist Huey are dismissed and ignored by his working-class Grandfather, and the black middle-class, symbolized in the character of Tom Dubois. The interaction between Riley and his 74-year-old grandfather accurately reflects the animosity from an older generation who cannot understand the hip hop translation of "I had a Dream" to the desire for "bitches," "hos," "gats," and magnums of Cristal. Moved to an all-white suburb, McGruder further complicates the character's ideological stances as they react to various levels of white perceptions to inner-city blacks suddenly in their midst. But it is in the confrontations with intraracial color and class that makes The Boondocks a pertinent example of the ways in which these tensions continue to be reflected in African American popular culture.

McGruder critiques the existence of intraracial color and class bias by introducing the assimilationist Dubois family to the world of black cultural authorities Huey and Riley Freeman. McGruder uses the upper-middle class Thomas Dubois (a lawyer for the NAACP) to slyly signify on the outmoded relevancy of the traditional middle-class civil rights organization. Tom and his white wife are the parents of the biracial Jazmine who insists that she "is not black," and black nationalist Huey constantly reminds her of the

sign of blackness – her hair. When Huey "labels" her black because of her "Afro," Jazmine protests that she does not have an "Afro," that her hair is just "frizzy."The Afro-wearing, cultural nationalist Huey scoffs – "Well first of all Mariah, your Afro is bigger than mine. Angela Davis' hair was a little frizzy. You have an Afro." Huey, the black cultural voice of authority, declares that Jazmine suffers from a case of "Afro-Denial" which is typical of "Ethno-Amibguo Hostility Syndrome", and prescribes – "An immediate intervention of positive Nubian reinforcement."Huey takes his case to Tom Dubois, Jazmine's black father, in an effort to reach Tom's black consciousness, but Tom explains to Huey how he and his wife have used every chemical method so that the hair-sensitive Jazmine can have hair like her white mother's. "Have you tried emphasizing the natural beauty of her African features,? "suggests the Afro-centric Huey. Tom is, however, oblivious to Huey's message as he suggests maybe a treatment of lye will burn her hair straight.

Although in many of his strips McGruder points to the structural fallacies in the arguments of black nationalism (as if an authentic cultural "blackness" is based on nothing more substantial than recognizing cultural and revolutionary black icons), he also comments on the perceived cultural "racelessness" of the assimilationists. McGruder highlights both sides of this cultural simplicity by signifying on the biracial Jazmine's lack of cultural history when she has no idea of who icons Angela Davis and Richard Roundtree are. In addition, McGruder pointedly demonstrates the lack of communication between ideological and class positions in the black community as the middle class black Tom (in suit and tie) attempts to "explain" to working-class Huey what a lawyer is. The

lack of communication is further revealed when Huey explains that he was named for Huey P. Newton, and the assimilated Tom counters that he thought Huey was named for Huey Lewis "from Huey Lewis and the News, pop star of the mid-eighties." It is significant that Huey acerbically informs Tom that the eighties were "before my time," and yet he connects politically with the black power groups of the late sixties and early seventies who remain politically and culturally relevant to aware black people. Furthermore, the Dubois family represent what many black nationalists view with apprehension as today's "multi-culturals" lobby for a separate racial category. Huey asks Jazmine "If you're not black, then what are you?" And Jazmine ticks off a list of one-half, one-quarter ethnic groups, with African significantly missing. Huey wryly tells her that he too is "mixed" – "I'm part black, part African and part colored."

McGruder's critique of cultural and political ideologies suggest what Kobena Mercer terms as "critical dialogism" by questioning the shifting positions of cultural authority in the black community. Mercer sees in a critical dialogism "the potential to overturn the binaristic relations of hegemonic boundary maintenance by multiplying critical dialogues *within* particular communities and *between* the various constituencies that make up the "imagined community of the nation."

> At once articulating the personal and the political, such dialogism shows that our "other" is already inside each of us, that black identities are plural and heterogeneous and that political divisions of gender and sexual identity are to be transformed as much as those of race and class. (65)

McGruder's "critical dialogism" also reflects the New Black Aesthetic outlined by Trey Ellis where the children of the Civil Rights era turn a critical eye, not only on past generations, but also on their own. "NBA artists are now defining blacks in black contexts," explains Ellis, "so we are no longer preoccupied with the subjects of interracial dating or integration. And these artists aren't flinching before they lift the hood on our collective psyches now that they have liberated themselves from both white envy and self-hate" (267). For the New Black Aesthetics there are no simple binaries, and many feel free to accept (and reject) multiple cultural identities that cross class and color boundaries. But as I demonstrate in Chapter three, some of the artists who create under NBA sensibilities continue to replicate the color and class attitudes of previous generations, especially in their depictions of black women.

In her essay, *If the Present Looks Like the Past, What Does the Future Look Like*, novelist Alice Walker eloquently questions the unexamined issue of what she defines as colorism within African American communities. Colorism, Walker maintains, is "the prejudicial or preferential treatment of same-race people based solely on their color. . . .If we continue to envelope, and invest our selves in the practice, "we cannot, as a people, progress. For colorism, like colonialism, sexism, and racism impedes us" (291). The issue of color bias within the black community is a special kind of black on black pain, which along with divisions of class, continue to plague a sense of black unity constantly under threat. Cultural critic bell hooks, although naming it a self-hatred, argues that the totality of white supremacy is so complete, that we are "obsessed with whiteness," and calls for a much needed resistance agenda of "loving blackness."

> Many black folks see us as "lacking," as inferior when compared to whites. The paucity of scholarly work looking at the issue of black self-hatred, examining the ways in which the colonization and exploitation of black people is reinforced by internalized racial hatred via white supremacist thinking, is awesome. Few black scholars have explored extensively black obsession with whiteness. (1995, 148)

Although there is some truth in hooks assessment, the existence of color and class differences and hostilities have been examined in clinical detail by social scientists Cedric Herring, Verna M. Keith, and Hayward Derrick Horton in Skin Deep: How Race and Complexion Matter in the "Color-Blind" Era. The significance of the urgency of exploring the problem is indicated by the use of the double quotation marks around color-blind because it reminds us of the current myth that racism in American life is a "dead issue." But the quotation marks also indicate the lack of recognition by many whites that they are complicit in maintaining the internal divisions between blacks. The authors, however, pose a significant question which has been verified by other studies done by social scientists: "Does skin tone mediate the likelihood of being discriminated against in the 21st century? The answer, verified by others in the field concurs with what we know has been a very real fact: "The evidence with respect to color-differentiated stratification *outcomes* is fairly clear. Empirically, skin color has been a consistent predictor of education, occupation, and income . . . ."(9).

This occurrence is not unique to African Americans, however, but it does highlight the intricate connections of color and class in African American populations. The authors of Skin Deep cite previous studies that documented the impact of racial hierarchies imposed on African Americans for inclusion in American social and political life.

> These studies demonstrated that higher status Blacks tended to be of lighter skin tone than lower status Blacks. Moreover, they demonstrated how lighter skinned Blacks were extended more social and economic amenities than the larger group. This translated over successive generations into the Black elite being of fairer complexion. (9)

While the studies cited by the authors were conducted in the mid to late twentieth century, historians have noted that the internal stratifications predate the twentieth century, but I consider the cultural importance of the ascendancy of a light-skinned elite from post-Reconstruction to the Harlem Renaissance, and later I want to examine the beginnings of a concerted opposition to the ideology propagated by Alain Locke and others to put their imprimatur on a specific black cultural authenticity. But the authors of Skin Deep rightly identify a historic moment that was engendered by the polarized political stances of the 1920s when "among Blacks during the 1960s and 1970s, dark skin coloring lost its negative connotations and associated stereotypes. The term "Black" became a unifying description of the entire race rather than a divisive term used in a derogatory manner" (9). This is the type of impulse to *essentialize* that Hall warns makes the Afrocentric so problematic, which is not to say that a modicum of essentialism as a

critical corrective is a bad thing, but to replicate the same discourse of racial difference does not change the implications inherent in racializing differences.

The aim of this study is to hopefully add to the scholarly work that hooks and Walker both call for. In that regard, my aim is to highlight the urgency of continuing the critique of color and class bias in the African American community that was begun in earnest during the 1960s. In order to closely examine the continued existence of color and class bias, we need to consider several factors. First, there is the impact of slavery and the sexual abuse of black women, and the intersections of race and gender, intersections which have been covered extensively elsewhere; however, I want to highlight the ways in which these intersections are further problematic under the lens of color, class, and sexuality. Second, we also must take into account highly competitive black political ideologies (either assimilationist, or nationalist) as sites where the contestation of a black cultural authenticity is historically formulated, often politicized, and eventually disseminated for mass consumption outside of the black community. Thus, my emphasis on black popular culture where color and class biases are reflected, resisted and refuted in the cultural productions of African Americans.

While on the surface, skin color may appear to be a less potent issue than race, the unspoken attitude toward skin color within African American communities is implied even in the current debates over the moral failings of the black underclass who are often darker-skinned than those who accuse them of not "holding up their end of the bargain" in the fight against systemic racism. While colorist attitudes on both sides of the line are most often perceived as a "nonissue,"in many ways, blacks "see it" while refusing to

"name it"since an admittance to the psychological investment in racist values seems to be a contradiction in the fight against racism, or what black conservative Shelby Steele argues is an investment in the "innocence of victim-hood."But group victim-hood, however, hardly equates to a blameless, and uncritical group sainthood. Marita Golden recalls that her selection of appropriate colleges was dictated by the specter of color and class bias: "I had been wounded, and quite deeply, by colorism in my eighteen years. Now that I was nearly an adult, I wanted to opt out of any situations that could rekindle pain that was never far from the surface" (47-48). Golden relates that she chose a white school instead of Howard – "Howard's colorist history was one of the reasons that I did not apply to the school" – preferring the racism of an all-white school to the intraracial colorism at Howard.

> Because the color complex is a form of intraracial genocide, because it positions Blacks versus Blacks, the emotional toll it imposes and the lack of trust or acceptance of others that it breeds are exhausting and demoralizing. (47)

Even the internal struggle with naming ourselves indicates division over skin color as reflected in the internal designations of "Negro" and "Colored" near the end of the nineteenth century. *Negroes* were understood to have dark skin, kinky (bad hair), big lips, and wide noses. On the other hand, as historian Deborah Gray White suggests, the term *Colored* was preferred by those of lighter-skin, or visibly of mixed race. The fact that both terms come from the field of "scientific racism,"underscores the consequences of assimilating centuries of mainstream racist ideology.

Similar to the contestations over whether or not systemic racism currently exists, the efficacy of light-skin in today's culture remains on the same parallel course as a matter of concern for healthy black esteem. "Coming of age before black power," explains bell hooks, "most black folks faced the implications of color caste either through devaluation or overvaluation."

> In other words to be born light meant that one was born with an advantage, recognized by everyone. To be born dark was to start life handicapped, with a serious disadvantage. (1995, 121)

Although blacks as a visible minority are quick to point out the uneven playing field in a racist mainstream America, we hesitate to call each other out for the same type of discriminatory practices followed in our own institutions. Internal divisions are the "dirty" secrets many blacks insist we keep "in the family," but as Jill Nelson contends "secrets are not healthy, they are always more trouble than they are worth."

> The act of keeping secrets eventually becomes all-consuming: the initial secret spawns lies created in order to protect the secret, which spawns bigger and more dangerous lies, and more secrets. By its very nature, the keeping of secrets presupposes the greater importance of those from whom the secrets are being kept, whoever they are. (18)

On the one hand, keeping the divisive issue of internal color and class bias as secret allows blacks to continue the myth of an essential black unity – that because of race, and the unitary experience of cultural loss and exile in the West – blacks speak and act as one

in the resistance to racism. On the other hand, we should consider Nelson's statement as extremely pertinent to the consequences of keeping colorism a secret. The consequences are not inconsiderable. Not exposing the issue of colorism makes us complicit in the same racist agenda we purport to fight by not using the issue to demonstrate to whites their own complicity in the matter. When, for example, Affirmative Action is under attack by a conservative government as a racially biased system of racial preference, we circle the wagons in a quick response to a perceived attack on African Americans as a whole. But the same type of response – or even a deep, self-critical interrogation – is never aimed at the intraracial color and class racism of *our* own cultural institutions. The obvious question we need to ask is why there has not been a concerted attack against such an insidious practice.

The failure to include a critical engagement with internal color and class differences implicitly glosses over an aspect of the very racism blacks continue to fight today. For African Americans, the darkness of skin has been a troublesome indicator of worth in a world that prizes Caucasian standards and values; at various times the issue of intraracial color bias has received a "public" airing, but again there is the hesitation of implying a disunity to outsiders that will be turned against the group as a whole. Sociologist Ronald Hall, however, admits that in his own experience he believed differences between blacks were based on class. Turning from a psychological study of race, Hall clearly found intraracial color differences as equally damaging, and focused instead on the clinical implications of skin bleaching by African Americans. One possible answer to the assimilated racism of blacks toward other blacks is offered by psychiatrists

William H. Grier, and Price M. Cobbs. Black Rage offers a psychiatric approach to the problem of intraracial color bias as an internalized process, but it is in understanding the past – the authors point – that offers the best evidence of where the internalization begins. Slavery taught the African "that his color" was the badge of degradation and white skin signified unlimited power. As the authors state - "Teachings so painstakingly applied do not disappear easily" (26). The early (and painful) lessons of skin color values, the authors argue, resulted in a lesson well learned: "That blacks are inferior," and as we know, the closer the resemblance to that signifier of "unlimited power," the further the distance from black degradation.

No one knew, or could express the intense psychological impact of European cultural and racial hegemony, or the resulting degradation on black psyches in more bitter terms than the Martinican psychiatrist Frantz Fanon who wrote in stinging tones about the self-hatred that assimilated racism engenders in the colonized subject which we can deem applicable to African-Americans. In Black Skin, White Masks, Fanon argues that the colonizing mission is to plant an inferiority complex in the colonized subject at the point of the initial encounter with Europe. " The colonized are elevated above his jungle status in proportion to his adoption of the mother country's cultural standards. He becomes whiter as he renounces his blackness, his jungle" (18). Here Fanon speaks of a cultural "blackness," a distancing from the original culture that makes the self-hating black a marginal man adrift in an alien culture that has not made him "white" because he is sealed in his blackness by the color of his skin. This blackness under cover is the

problem with assimilation and the adoption of class attitudes that become explosive issues during the 1960s black nationalist movement mentioned earlier.

Quite often, criticism of color bias is embedded in the critical accusations directed toward black class privilege. Class and color have been so entwined that, at first glance, the two categories appear hard to extricate and examine as two mutually exclusive categories. Historically, whites have (and still) preferred blacks who closely resembled themselves in coloring and phenotype from the era of slavery to today's mainstream embrace of the biracial body. Many of the "old-guard" elite black families continue to use their genealogical connections to "illustrious" white Southern families, or their lineage as "free blacks" in order to keep the intraracial color-line intact. Phenotypical affinity often resulted in better economic and educational advantages for light-skinned blacks during slavery (in the black vernacular the myth about the house-slave and the field-slave is still current shorthand for color and class divisions), and years later in the rigidly segregated economic markets that have loosened incrementally. As the authors of The Color Complex: The Politics of Skin Color Among African Americans point out:

> The unique privileges granted to mulattoes under slavery enabled them to advance further, educationally and occupationally, than Blacks who were dark skinned. The result was a leadership pool of light-skinned Blacks with both money and education. Within that pool, it was often those Blacks light enough to pass who became the Black community's most vocal and active leaders. (35)

Again, their observations concur with the assessments pointed out by the authors of Skin Deep. The significance that both social studies stress is that as recognized, and as self-appointed leaders, the light-skinned middle and upper-classes guarded their "private"institutions against dark lower-class encroachments from below as stringently as those of white, Anglo-Saxon Protestants. Historically this ease of mobility is rooted on a hierarchy of color gradations which were foisted on the psyches of African Americans due to their group racial status under a system that insisted on simple binaries of "so-called"racial and cultural values. Consequently these values — whose signs were equated with American inclusion and exclusion — were assimilated by privileged groups of African Americans whose adopted values inevitably surfaced as intraracial fractures in a seemingly cohesive group cultural identity. Although there have always been challenges to the colorist attitudes of a black, lighter-skinned elite, darker-skinned less economically advantage folks were rarely given a public forum to express their rebuke of black folks hating on other black folks. As I discuss later, the working-classes were not mute, and silent sufferers. Criticism was a part of the oppositional cultural practices aimed at thwarting the social work of "uplift" that began in earnest during the Great Migration. But the late 1960s offered a perfect forum for a more sophisticated agenda for cultural "uplift"in time to take advantage of a radical mood of change in the country.

By the late1960's the fractures of color and class become vehemently contentious during a renewed Afrocentric ideology that promulgated a black cultural model based on the conditions under which the black working classes were forced to live, and the origins of black political solidarity which political radicals found in the devastating experience

of slavery. However, the fact that the black working and lower-classes were often darker in appearance than the handful of black elites in the middle-class Civil Rights Movement was an inescapable fact that did not escape criticism from those in radical black movements. bell hooks recalls the most "unnoticed and undiscussed" achievement of the black radical movement was the open challenge to intraracial color hierarchies.

> Issues of skin color and caste were highlighted by militant black struggle for rights. The slogan "black is beautiful" worked to intervene in and alter those racist stereotypes that had always insisted black was ugly, monstrous, undesirable. One of the primary achievements of black power movement was the critique and in some instances dismantling of color-caste hierarchies. (1995, 120)

hooks, although romanticizing the period, views the issue as one of "self-love," however, skin color hierarchies remain. The question is why? If, as hooks, asserts the agenda of such a radical idea called into question a reevaluation of color supremacy which was welcomed by black working-class people who were marginalized and devalued by color and class, then why weren't they eradicated in the 1960s?

Clearly, the ambivalence over matters of skin color denotes ongoing ambivalence over the acceptance (or nonacceptance) of European standards among blacks. Tellingly, author Shirlee Taylor Haizlip, in her introduction to Wallace Thurman's novel of colorism during the Harlem Renaissance, <u>The Blacker the Berry</u>, states that even during periods of vehement self-love, and civil rights gains, Blacks are *still* ambivalent over the

value of color gradations within Black populations. "Despite the 'Black is Beautiful' movement of the sixties," she writes, "and the increasing images of blacks in films, videos, and advertisements, the preference patterns persist."

> Quietly. We can't talk about it. We don't want to talk about it. And when we do talk about it, the discussion is usually so emotionally freighted that it breaks down into name calling recriminations. (12-13)

However, Haizlip wrongly implies that the appearance of blacks in popular media should somehow render the existence of continued intraracial color bias a nonissue. In fact, Haizlip misreads the issue by *assuming* that the very visibility of black faces in popular culture are given the same value by the creators (black and white) and the spectators of these images. And what Haizlip fails to discern is the *skin color* of these visible blacks in mainstream culture. "The idea that Black is beautiful remains controversial, questioned, and doubted. Even as Black women's magazines have begun routinely featuring darker-skinned models," explains Marita Golden, "and as African models like Alek Wek from Sudan, Liya Kebede from Ethiopia, and Oluchi from Nigeria grace the pages and covers of *Vogue*, *Elle*, and other women's fashion glossies in America and abroad, the question still remains: *Is Black beautiful*? (93).

hooks, realizing that the problem of class and colorist attitudes have outlived the 1960s, "blames" integration and cultural assimilation. hooks accedes the point that the "collective militant black struggle for self-determination began to wane," but she states that "alternative ways of seeing blackness and defining beauty continued to flourish,"

without describing what these "alternatives" were, and falls back on the evils of assimilation as black folks acquiesced to the dominant hegemony in order to enter the mainstream.

> Since freedom for black folks had been defined as gaining the rights to enter mainstream society, to assume the values and/or economic standing of white privileged classes, it logically follows that it did not take long for interracial interaction in the areas of education and jobs to reinstitutionalize, in less overt ways, a system wherein individual black folks who were most like white folks in the way they looked, talked, dressed, etc., would find it easier to be socially mobile. (1995, 123)

At first glance, hooks' assertion that civil rights gains were to blame for a resurgence in colorism seems (at least hooks means it to be) a plausible answer. But if we examine her answer closely, hooks' answer skirts too closely to the rhetoric of "blaming the victim" for not holding up their end of the bargain. Furthermore, hooks "buys" into the romanticization of the black power radicals who, for the most part, were the children of light-skinned, college educated black parents themselves. While the "leaders" of the Black Power Movement with their theories culled from the works of Fanon, Cabral and the three Ms – Marx, Memmi, and Mao – clearly indicated that the "masses" were not "intellectually" capable of understanding revolution, the black working-classes no doubt secretly resented being harangued at every turn. And it is this sense of resentment where hooks correctly gets to the heart of the problem about the persistence of colorist values.

"Those black activists who remained in the public eye did not continue a militant critique and interrogation of white standards of beauty. They did not continually call for a focus on a black self-love, on ending internalized racism"(124). Simply put, a black self-love did not extend to a love of dark-skinned , African featured women. hooks describes a well-established practice that many black women have observed since the post-Reconstruction era about black male "race" leaders of all ideological political persuasions. "Heterosexual black male leaders openly chose their partners and spouses using the standards of the color-caste system."

> During the most militant stages of black power movement they had never really stopped allowing racist notions of beauty to define female desirability even as they preached a message of self-love and an end to internalized racism. This hypocrisy also played a major role in creating a framework where color-caste systems could become once again the accepted norm. (1995, 125)

Although there is no way to verify hooks' assertion that this seeming betrayal of the black is beautiful mantra contributed to the persistence of colorism, if we take into account the reactions of dark-skinned, working-class women to the daily assaults against their own desirability, then the Afrocentric rhetoric that proclaimed them cherished African Queens, no doubt made the colorist choices of these same "leaders" a rank betrayal on the deepest level. Many dark-skinned women were uncomfortably too close to the cultural joke that has remained a staple of black humor: "Said one black man to

another as they sized up women on a street corner: 'Man, I don't want nothin' black but a Cadillac!" As Marita Golden sadly assesses: "even while focusing on the sins of 'The Man' and 'The System' and 'White Racism,' my generation squandered a precious, perfect moment that could have allowed us to move from a theoretical assertion that Black Is Beautiful, to the first necessary, halting acceptance that it really is beautiful *in fact*" (38).

Increasingly the number of critical voices are those of black feminists who locate the fixity of color supremacy as part of a black patriarchal and heterosexist form of controlling and dividing black women, a fact which points to the important intersections of gender and color. Felicia R. Lee in her review of Marita Golden's Don' Play in the Sun, refers to a previous review of Golden's memoir by African American professor of journalism David J. Dent. Dent, whose own book In Search of Black America (2000) purports to dispel, as William Julius Wilson terms it, "the familiar themes about racial perceptions and attitudes in the African-American community,"for a readership "who have grown weary" of the "race problem," gathers anecdotes about "race and politics" from the experiences of what he terms "the black majority – middle-and upper-middle-class African Americans." Dent, in his review of Golden's book is a perfect example of the way in which Dent – like many black conservatives who firmly believe that race no longer matters – also dismisses the intersections between color and gender as either irrelevant, or no longer important. Lee quotes Dent –

> I admire Marita Golden, but you can't take her personal story and impose it on the whole of black America. That's a problem with a

> lot of contemporary black memoirs. Recently, he said, "the most visible woman in the world was Condoleeza Rice. She's a dark - skinned woman. Was she concerned at all about her skin color? The issues for Ms. Rice are the commission and 9/11," Mr. Dent said. "People were not focused on her skin color and features. That's where the world has gone."

Dent, however, completely misses Golden's point. Either he is being purposely obtuse about the issue and impact of colorism, or he blindly ignores the issue because of his own book's agenda of calling attention to his vision of upper-class black America (how he could have ignored the issue of skin color here is disturbing), Rice is *not* a dark-skinned woman. Dent is again dismissing colorism for race, and by "people" who "were not focused on her skin color and features," Dent forgets the history of skin color as avenues for advancement in America – and Rice has certainly played by the "rules." However, what is most disturbing is Dent's cavalier dismissal of Golden's book, implied in his statement that "whining" over color differences is "a problem with a lot of contemporary black memoirs," is what he really means: "That's a problem with a lot of bitchy black women."

But the resentment of color – or lack of color – cuts both ways. Many light-skinned women with the long, pretty hair actively resent their "trophy status," and the implication that their identity exists of nothing more than their close resemblance to white women. And in some cases, they find that *they* can be passed over for a lighter-skinned, or worse, yet, a *real* white woman. "While dark women can be rendered

invisible," observes Marita Golden, "the objectification and hyper-sexualization of light women imposes a kind of invisibility on them as well. And in both cases the women suffer considerable pain" (109). However, as the authors of The Color Complex point out, the issue of colorism is not exclusive to black heterosexual relationships, as black gays note the color preferences of "dinge and snow queens." Black lesbians note the same color preferences in their own community where women suffer the same color and hair anxieties of their heterosexual sisters. "Sadly, it seems the most intimate of relationships are still governed by the politics of color and race" (107).

The issue of color and class bias within African American communities is one fraught with a tangle of contradictions and ambiguity about identity. While the history of a collective identity as a specific racialized group is too long, and intricate a history to go into here, let us just consider for the moment the effect skin color and class differences have on the dynamics of black families. In a way, the black family is a microcosm of the larger black community. Undoubtedly, many African Americans can recount the quarrels, accusations, and recriminations at family reunions between those who "made it," and those family members left behind in the PJ's. How many "escapees" are labeled "sellouts," or accused of not "acting" black enough? How many flaunt their light-skinned, green-eyed trophy wives who are accused (sometimes rightly so) of being stuck-up? Or correct their cousin's English, and refuse to eat "ghetto food?" How many black folks can recall the problems of sibling rivalry which were exacerbated by the lighter skin and "good hair" of a sibling who was showered with parental approval, just because the "lucky one" has escaped the stigma of what blackness holds in a world that does not

equate beauty or worth with black skin. How many countless little black girls had to suffer because they had "bad hair," or had to listen to the old folks tell them they were pretty "cute" for someone so *damn* black – "and take off that red dress, yo' ass is too black to wear red." Or perhaps the family approval goes the other way since for some blacks, looking close to whites is a painful reminder of a painful past.

First, the issue of class within some large African American families can be painful as the black middle-class rapidly expands. Many are accused of leaving behind the cultural patterns that helped blacks as a recognized group survive the harsh environments of slavery and the four hundred years of systemic racism. Leaving behind this tradition is the equivalent, many believe, of a racial self-hatred; a disdain for a unique African American tradition. But the adherence to an identifiable African American tradition calls into question what the tradition actually consists of. Often the class animosities presuppose that in terms of economic class position, *all* African Americans are signified by color as belonging to the working classes. Since Africans began at the nadir of an American class system this may have been true at one time, but even under slavery the exigencies of plantation economies developed a hierarchal division of slave labor, often based on skin color. Nevertheless, the system was recognizable as a class system recognized as such by slaves. Furthermore, the period of legal slavery unified slaves under their conditional position as slaves, recognized as such by their color, and since the majority of slaves were visibly closer to African phenotype than they were to whites, a mystique rose around "blackness" as *more* authentic as blacks began to face life as politically free people.

In many ways, I want to consider these family tensions as quarrels between the personal fulfillment of desire by assimilation and the essentialization of racial identity as survival tactic. I consider the realm of African American popular culture as the best site in which to examine these issues as competing values internal and external to the African American community.

Chapter One: Framing Black Culture: The Nappy Roots centers on the competing ideologies – cultural and political – that were rehearsals for the cultural fights over cultural authenticity today between the assimilationists and those who argue for a black nationalism based on race and skin color. The period of the Harlem Renaissance is important for two reasons: first, the cultural expressions from a darker-skinned working and lower-class establish themselves as an authentic, and distinct cultural formation. The second reason comes from the influence of the Garvey movement which challenged the light-skinned, middle and upper black classes as black community leaders. As I argue, Garvey sets the template for the growth of oppositional voices to the modern Civil Rights movement by establishing a space for other voices in the black community, especially from women who "called out" the heterosexist constituents of black resistance movements.

Chapter Two: She's Pretty – For a Black Girl: Genderized Colorism discusses the literary and oral vernacular responses to the centrality of the biracial woman in the texts of early black women writers. The purpose here is to underscore the intertextuality, revisioning, and signification in black women's cultural products. I focus on the dialogic textual strategies of post-Reconstruction writing that continue the questioning of rigid

racial categories in the classic female slave narrative. However, the post-Reconstruction era called for a renewed attack on the inhumanity of newly freed blacks which presented literate and socially active black women to use the figure of the biracial woman for two audiences. Keeping this dualistic nature of these texts in mind, I consider the reconfiguration of the rape motif in accordance with the rise of a lighter-skinned elite who take upon themselves the authority of presenting models of black female "social value."

Frances E. W. Harper's Iola Leroy: or Shadows Uplifted is utilized here as a representative example of reconfiguring the black woman's mythical sexual identity with an overdetermined ethos of a new model for black female "social value" that would, in turn, "uplift"the race. This ideology of "uplift," as I argue, was based on policing under-class black female behavior which was felt to be detrimental to the main-streaming of the race as a whole. To further support the black woman's role as a figure of "social value," policing of behavior included providing models of dress, color, and hair as the attributes of Christian piety which would serve to insure the reputation of chastity in the black woman. I examine the results of erasing objectionable black female behavior in Quicksand by Nella Larsen.

Using Quicksand for textual support, I attempt to illuminate the tensions between Larsen's effort in establishing the black woman as a sexual subject and the imperatives of 1920s black middle-class codes of behavior. To illustrate the constraints under which Larsen was forced to revise former tropes, I discuss the impact of the urban blues as a competing, underclass alternative for a black female agency. The blues woman, I argue,

directly confronted and challenged the values demanded by patriarchal and heterosexist cultural institutions in the black community. Furthermore, as a cultural product from the working and urban poor, the rise of the blues questions the supremacy of the upper classes to dictate the terms of a black cultural authenticity. My overall aim for this chapter is to demonstrate a legacy of challenges to a unified picture of the middle-class light-skinned heroine as the only possibility for the public face of the black woman. I demonstrate this by including oppositional examples from The Bluest Eye and The Color Purple.

Similar to the challenges faced by black women in the political turmoil of the late nineteenth century, black men were challenged by the debilitating images of mainstream America. Chapter Three Are We Not Men? : Color, Class and Black Masculinity focuses on the ways black men sought to provide an alternative image of a black masculinity, that was, nevertheless, based on its resemblance to the constituents of idealized white manhood and economic class standing. Caught between the docile Sambo-like figure of the plantation myth, and the raging, black rapists of white fears, late nineteenth century writers Paul Lawrence Dunbar and Charles W. Chesnutt were forced to combat the racist myths about the African's inability to access the privileges of "whiteness" such as the capacity to produce the creative hallmarks of civilization.

By adopting the figure of Sambo and Henry Louis Gates' trope of the black and white costume of the African figure of Harlequin, as a critical lens, I attempt to explore the difficulties Dunbar faced caught between the signifier of his African features and his creative impulse. The issue of language use is central to my discussion as Dunbar was

faced with the "code-switching" in his poetry. I also offer an alternative reading of his novel The Sport of the Gods as a signification on the importance of skin color.

Continuing with the meaning of the black and white motif of the Harlequin costume, I posit Chesnutt's The House Behind the Cedars as a revisioning of the "tragic mulatto" genre. Chesnutt's "trick" is a narrative misdirection away from the tragedy of his female biracial character which renders the central male character to disappear from the text, and from the white readers fears of miscegenation. But I also want to point out Chesnutt's agenda of the face of black manhood that depends on the accessability to, and the capturing of the "properties of whiteness" in economic terms, as the novel argues that inclusion in American life can only be achieved by a conscious rejection of blackness. This theme of rejecting the maternal blackness connects House with James Weldon Johnson's The Autobiography of An Ex-Colored Man. In addition, I argue that Johnson's novel begins a conversation about the sexual attributes signified by skin color where, I maintain, is explicitly stated in Wallace Thurman's The Blacker the Berry.

In Thurman's novel I consider the suggestion between the connections of light-skin and a moral degeneracy begun by Paul Lawrence Dunbar's The Sport of the Gods. However, Thurman is quite direct in his association of light-skin with "femininity" as he charts the downward spiral of the light-skinned Alva into homosexuality. Fellow Harlem Renaissance author, Claude McKay furthers Thurman's agenda by situating black masculinity in the darker-skinned working-class character Jake. The point I attempt here is to call attention to the changing openness to sexual differences in order to

acknowledge an alternative to the heterosexual, light-skinned image of a public black masculinity.

The final chapter of my study – Representin' and Frontin': Cinematic Images in Black and Beige – explores the ways in which color, class, and gender are represented in black filmmaking. I begin with a consideration of the impact of black pioneer filmmakers, especially Oscar Micheaux, who reflect the same types of bourgeois models called for by cultural gatekeepers of cultural "uplift" – W. E. B. Du Bois and Alain Locke. Although there appears to be a gap in chronology between the black filmmaking praxis of Micheaux and the next black filmmaker I examine – Melvin Van Peebles – there are several reasons for the lapse in a chronological continuum. First, I want to emphasize the importance of Micheaux to the establishment of a truly, independent black filmmaking praxis. Second, in cultural importance and impact, no other black independent (or commercial) film made the type of seismic impression on how blacks would be portrayed on film like Van Peebles Sweet, Sweetback's Badasssss Song. The cultural importance of the film is such that young, black filmmakers from Spike Lee to John Singleton do not consider Oscar Micheaux at all as a cinematic forefather due to his perceived preoccupation with perpetuating color and class bourgeois values. In a recent documentary Conversation, producer/director Warrington Hudlin introduced his and other young, black filmmaker's cinematic idols: the late Ossie Davis, Gordon Parks, and Melvin Van Peebles.

Furthermore, I want to consider carefully the demarcations between independent black filmmaking and commercial black filmmaking. Because of the difficulties and the vagaries of film financing, I am interested in the black filmmaking which presents a

biased view of black women to wider audiences. Furthermore, by choosing to focus on commercial black filmmaking, I want to suggest a certain elitism in black intellectual circles that privileges the noncommercial over the "popular." Such disdain for the appeal of commercial success, I discuss, led to the generational, class and gender oppositions to Sweetback and the emergence of the Blaxploitation film which appealed to a core audience composed of a darker-skinned male underclass. Moreover, the demonization of the "popular"continues to dog the career of once-independent Spike Lee who continues to defy the "ghettoization" of the black independent film whose only available venues are often in the bastions of white cultural institutions where many working-class and urban poor youth feel unwelcome.

As I point out, certain black male filmmakers and actors have a certain box-office appeal that allows them a voice in casting choices in regards to the genderized skin color in their films. For example, John Singleton's Boyz n' the Hood depicts both polarized, and conflicting images of dark-skinned black women, which not only reflects the ambivalence surrounding the mythic economic independence of the modern, successful black woman, but also the mythic dependence of the "welfare queen," a staple in the repertoire of white political conservatives. Antwone Fisher, the directorial debut of the biggest box-office black actor, Denzel Washington, further demonizes the dark-skinned black woman in telling iconography by resurrecting the tropes of the inherent sexual deviancy of the lower-class black woman by positing the lighter-skinned black woman as a properly chaste model of black female virtue that recalls the late nineteenth-century exemplars from the fictions of Charles W. Chesnutt and Pauline Hopkins.

I end this chapter with a complaint voiced by many dark-skinned female actors who see their replacement as romantic leads by "exotic" women. Many blacks have noticed a new trend that pairs a black male with a female Latina co-star in order to capture the widest box-office appeal. The excuse Hollywood gives for this new trend is an embrace of diversity, however, the trend does *not* extend to a pairing of black women with white A-list male stars and when white males are paired with black female actors, the casting-choices turn to the small pool of young, biracial women typified by actor Halle Berry.

Finally, I end this work with the state of a black America still in turmoil over the meanings of class and color as the twenty-first century begins. Some of the challenges remain the same as a much larger black middle-class grapples with its geographic and cultural distance from those left behind in America's inner cities. However, there are more critical voices as black women protest the demeaning way they are portrayed in a visual and musical culture controlled by young, black underclass men. The widespread appeal of hip-hop as an authentic black cultural product is actively opposed by a black middle and upper-class in strident and disparaging tones that outdo the stinging rebukes of W. E. B. Du Bois when he was confronted with the open sexuality of the blues. But other challenges face the black upper classes who worry that the distance they have achieved has negatively affected their children as they mistakenly reinforce class attitudes in their attempts to instill racial unity in their children who have grown up in deracinated environments.

As black leaders warily eye declining population group numbers, a new brand of colorism is beginning to loom as biracial (multi-cultis) politically lobby the federal government for their own "racial" category. In many ways, the movement attempts a new challenge to the "one-drop-rule" of American racial categorization, however, I would argue, in the case of black and white mixtures the implicit message lies in the "social meanings" attached to African ancestry. The movement is gaining ground on college campuses as biracial students feel "pressured" to label themselves as "black" for political and cultural purposes. Currently, as I finish this project, many biracial students have announced the formation of their own support group here at Michigan State University for the Fall semester of 2005.

When Alice Walker penned the essay – "If the Present Looks Like the Past, What Does the Future Look Like?" – as a letter from a dark-skinned woman to a light-skinned woman to examine her own light-skinned complicity in the genderizing of color, Walker admitted that her own biracial child would inherit the legacy of privilege accorded to the light-skinned female, to which Walker herself was sadly excluded. In her own answer to her mother's plaint, Rebecca Walker describes – in an echoing of W. E. B. Du Bois's theme of double-consciousness – what it "feels" like to have "two warring souls in one body." In a genre I would term light-skin-black-female-apologia, a number of "racially-mixed" women critically assess a loss of culture, either intentionally, or unintentionally in a series of racial "mournings," or in an embrace of exuberance over their lack of racial conflict typified by the well-adjusted Lisa Jones, the daughter of black nationalist activist/poet Amiri Baraka. Clearly, there are no easy solutions for eradicating what

appears to be an investment in color and class differences within the black community. Mired in capitalist systems of racial hierarchies, and the concomitant gulf between the minority of blacks who have become American success stories, and the majority of those who continue to slip behind, there seems to be as much black community confusion over race and culture as there was at the beginning of the twentieth century.

Chapter One: Framing Black Culture: The Nappy Roots

Introduction

Historically, the fight over the "sign of blackness" in popular culture has been waged by two warring camps: the assimilationists (or proponents for racial integration), and those who counter argue that a distinct African American cultural form is by necessity born of, and should reflect the very real experiences of resistance and other oppositional resistance practices of African slave descendants to the horrors of racial injustice. Both positions, however, raise their own problematic questions about the doubled uses of a racial privilege: the utilization of skin color gradations as visible markers of class and racial inclusion, and the politicized commodification of the "sign of blackness" in the marketplace of popular culture as prima facie evidence of racial authenticity. Moreover, these issues are at the base in explaining how — and possibly why — contemporary African Americans have utilized historic cultural representations in order to access a black authenticity rooted in cultural codes that for some are no longer relevant, or are yearnings of a bygone cultural romance. However, black cultural authenticity remains problematic as "authentic" black cultural representations, such as the rise of hip-hop culture and its allure for other nonwhite minorities, continues to emanate from America's post-industrial cities, especially at a time of an ever-widening chasm between middle and working (and under) class blacks, and a renewed interrogation concerning the borders of racial categories.

The very admittance of a group color and class hierarchy exposes a deep cleavage in the public myth of an African American cultural and social unity. Very often,

a unity based on common origins is politically rooted in nationalist notions of a diasporic Pan African solidarity; a solidarity many black intellectuals were convinced would result in a black political ideology committed to opposing the hegemony of a European racial supremacy. This is not to say that these were not laudable ideals, but the impulse led to a racial essentialism that was doomed to failure. We now understand that the dangers of a racial essentialism in many ways glosses over the very real legacies of historic differences in African American lives where warring camps fight for the cultural image of black America.

In many ways, such cultural fractures problematize the very use of the term "black community." As Dwight A. McBride perceptively points out, the term "assumes a kind of monolith," or rather, a series of agreed upon responses to white oppression on a recognized racial group as a whole. However, I am impelled to agree with McBride when he cogently suggests that we understand the term as "a shifter, or floating signifier." The term 'black community," he points out, "presumes a cultural specificity that works as much on a politics of exclusion as it does on a politics of inclusion" (27). There are many communities that the modifier "black" glosses over or totally renders invisible. For example, McBride notes the exclusionary practice of rendering black *gays and lesbians* as outside of the cultural meaning of "black community." McBride's query of the meanings of the term call into question of who really has the authority to define the contours of what we mean when we refer to a black community. Traditionally, the black community has been configured in heterosexist terms, but like the issue of sexual diversity, black community has glosses over a host of slippery categories based on the

authority to "speak." As McBride asks "Who speaks for "the race," and on what authority?" My purpose is to attempt a brief examination of competing ideologies based on internal struggles to "speak for the race," and what these voices mean for black popular cultural formations.

Ideology Is A Sometime Thing

Without replicating the history that resulted in a light-skin elite at the approach of the twentieth-century, we will just consider the obvious political imperatives that stretched before them. First, there was the belief in the *promise* of American inclusion, although the reality of the Jim Crow era indicated otherwise. But the implications in the promise were read by many blacks in authority as meaning that blacks would have to be as close to whites in thinking and culture as possible in order to be "granted" the rights to full Americaness. This reading by blacks was not as fool-hardy as it seems on the surface. After all, the promised expectations of American inclusion was working for the millions of European immigrants who traded their "otherness" for American inclusion. For many blacks who could visibly do the same, dropping the stigma of "blackness" was as easy as changing geographical location and excising themselves from the associations that assigned degraded positions for those legally black. For those who couldn't easily escape the badge of color, or for those who refused, the other option of assimilation presented itself.

In order to refute the myths surrounding the humanity of African Americans, a set of oppositional values to that myth were instituted that mimicked the values of the dominant culture. The plan may have been in Marxian terms an example of "false

consciousness" in the face of bitter reality, but it was a much needed construction of blacks that presented a reality of themselves. To paraphrase the theories of Louis Althusser, the black community was under the most repressive of a "certain number of realities, which present themselves to the immediate observer in the form of distinct and specialized institutions" (2001, 96). Clearly, as a racialized group, blacks were subject to a variety of Repressive State Apparatus defined by Althusser as entirely under the public domain. In this case, the most repressive was the violence of lynching supported by the *ideology* a body of values that constructed the black subject, or as Althusser terms an act of interpellation – "all ideology hails or interpellates concrete individuals as concrete subjects, by the functioning of the category of the subject" (2001, 117). I take this as meaning that the skin color of blacks equal slave, therefore, slave equals black an ideology (racism) that supported and reified the Repressive State Apparatus of Jim Crow law. However, as free men – at least constitutionally – black people did not see themselves as *hailed*. The answer, as blacks viewed it, was to counter with an opposing discourse supported by a series of internal Ideological State Apparatuses.

That an opposing internal set of corrective values were copied from the white middle-class was not accidental. As I have pointed out, a light-skinned emerging middle-class firmly believed in the promise of inclusion for African Americans only if they mimicked the observable values of the dominant society. The discourse of "up-lift," or the "cult of respectability" settled on a set of values that aimed to correct the practices deemed offensive to whites – color could not change, but an insistence on behavior and appearance was insisted on."Many African Americans," notes Noliwe Rooks, "who had

been living in urban areas since before the Great Migration identified themselves as middle class and constructed representations of themselves that portrayed them as educated, refined, and forward thinking" (72). Newly arriving black migrants were often at train stations, or visited in whatever over-crowded housing they could find by black charitable organizations, including the Urban League, with card-board illustrations of how the migrants were expected to appear in a wider public arena in order not to embarrass, or set-back "the Race." Although these instruments were repressive in their way, the more formal black institutions that served as ISAs were rooted in the black church, black education, and the emergence of black writing. "It was in this volatile milieu of cultural conflict," argues Robert E. Washington, "that the young black writers formed both their perceptions of the American racial scene and their ideas about black American literature's mission" (29).

The contestation over the practices that make the "black" in black popular culture, are of course, best exemplified in the crowning moment of modern black cultural formation in the 1920s cultural movement known as the Harlem Renaissance. Sociologist Robert E. Washington cites the 1920s as "a most extraordinary period in American cultural history."

> Marking the nation's transformation from a rural and small-town way of life into a predominately urban and industrial society, the decade produced a dizzying array of changes in both the mainstream white society and the black American community. (13)

Houston Baker, Jr. recognizes the period as part of the modernist movement that begins in 1910. However, Baker reaches further back to locate African American modernism to Booker T. Washington's Atlanta Address in 1895 where Washington understood the "game" of wearing the mask of minstrelsy in front of whites for black survival. Thus, Washington, Dunbar and Chesnutt reconfigured existing tropes of blackness for political and cultural survival. Dunbar and Chesnutt, of course, demonstrated narrative strategies under-cover of the minstrel mask for the artists of the Harlem Renaissance. I deal extensively with the cultural import of both Dunbar and Chesnutt as black male artists who are forced to contend with the prevailing myths about black masculinity in Chapter 3, Chapter 1 focuses instead on the 1920s as the point in which fractures in black cultural representation become public. As this chapter maintains the 1920s clearly demonstrated the political and cultural rifts in the black community as the traditional civil rights organizations were opposed by the nationalist Garvey movement, and the cultural ideology of the Harlem Renaissance was met with the influence of the African vernacular as a cultural formation. However, these fractures were an early rehearsal for the black nationalist and black feminist movements of the late twentieth century which challenged an elite black leadership on the grounds of their exclusivity toward skin color, economic class, gender, and sexuality.

The Harlem Renaissance is momentous in the contestation for black popular culture formation because of the movement of plantation cultural forms from the rural to the urban, and because the cultural practices in the forms recognized by Hall (style, music, emphasis on the body) were easily commodified to reach a broader audience

where mainstream America "discovered" that it had a distinctive culture itself – separate and apart from European forms – in "black American popular vernacular traditions." The seamless quality of the embedding of Africanness, or the sign of blackness as an invisible, haunting shadow is explicated by Toni Morrison in Playing in the Dark.

> Even, and especially, when American texts are not "about" Africanist presences or characters or narrative or idiom, the shadow hovers in implication, in sign, in line of demarcation. It is no accident and no mistake that immigrant populations (and much immigrant literature) understood their "Americanness" as an opposition to the resident black population. (47)

Morrison's accurate statement also applies to an urban, black population who tied their own political future to, not so much as an embrace of European culture, but a rejection of the blackness pouring out from the past. This was the imperative of a new, highly educated black middle-class elite who firmly believed that the way out of racial inequality was through the cultural imitation of European aesthetic forms. However, the geographic movement of black populations, and the technological advances of mass communications seriously exacerbated the hidden fractures in a black community struggling to liberate itself from the cultural images created by the same dominant ideology they sought to refute. Since the post-Reconstruction era, as a recognized racial group, African Americans have been in contestation with an image created outside of themselves, and the political imperative was to demonstrate their "Americaness" as much as possible.

The New Negro & The Criteria of Negro Art

The very public, and modern "birth" of The New Negro in arts and letters was at the 1924 dinner sponsored by the Urban League's Charles Johnson. The occasion was, according to David Levering Lewis, "the dress rehearsal of what was soon to be known as the 'Harlem Renaissance'." Aware that a small coterie of white American writers were beginning to experiment with new artistic forms on the ashes of a spiritually depleted Western civilization, some white writers turned to the subject of the "negro as the perfect symbol of cultural innocence and regeneration," the artistic black community saw their chance to represent their own engagement with the new age of modernity. Although many black intellectuals had their reservations "about this new wave of white discovery."

> Nothing could have seemed to most Afro-Americans more extravagantly impractical as a means of improving racial standing than writing poetry or novels, or painting, but Charles Johnson and a few older Harlem luminaries were keenly aware that some white writers had already found the Afro-American a salable commodity in the literary world. The times were obviously ripe. (Lewis 90-91)

Undeterred, Johnson joined with the black intellectuals of the day – Jessie Fauset and Alain Locke – to present young, black artists to willing, and eager white publishers who were eager to get in on the interest in the Negro.

However, there were disagreements from the start between the Urban League and the NAACP as both organizations vied for the dollars of white, wealthy patrons, and the interests of white publishing houses. Still under the influence of the long-deceased

Booker T. Washington, wealthy patrons like the Rockefellers were reluctant to give money in aid of something as "frivolous" as "the literary efforts of the New Negro." But the cash-strapped organizations found equally deep pockets in the Rosenwald Fund, and individual white donors, and although "white capital and influence were crucial, and the white presence, at least in the early years, hovered over the New Negro world of art and literature like a benevolent censor, politely but pervasively setting the outer limits of its creative boundaries."

> The motives of the whites, however, were as varied as those of the Afro-American intelligentsia were single-minded, and the whites' disunity provided room to play fast and loose along the borders of the arts or for raids even into the heartland of racism. (Lewis 98)

Although the internecine squabbles between the two civil rights organizations are not my concern here, the issue is what they both could find as common cause in presenting black cultural representations as a plank in the civil rights agenda.

According to David Levering Lewis, in spite of their own "temperamental discordances," Locke and Johnson "both wanted the same art for the same purposes" which Locke solidified in his essay "Enter the New Negro" in the special issue of the Urban League's *Survey Graphic* of March 1925. What they wanted represented, continues Lewis, was highly polished stuff, preferably about polished people, but certainly untainted by racial stereotypes or embarrassing vulgarity. Too much blackness, too much streetgeist and folklore – nitty-gritty music, prose, and verse – were not

welcome" (95). It was the "Old Negro" that was not wanted. "The Old Negro," wrote Locke "we must remember, was a creature of moral debate and historical controversy. He has been a stock figure perpetuated as an historical fiction partly in innocent sentimentalism, partly in deliberate reactionism." In one fell swoop, the Harlem Renaissance attempted to divorce themselves from the masses. As Locke implicitly suggests, the New Negro will put an end to the myth about the African American's lack of civilization and humanity. Locke and Johnson's sentiments were not far from those of their rival W. E. B. Du Bois, although Du Bois made it quite clear that he was not for art for art's sake, but for an art that would serve the purpose of racial propaganda.

> Thus all art is propaganda and ever must be, despite the wailing of the purists. I stand in utter shamelessness and say that whatever art I have for writing has been used always for propaganda for gaining the right of black folk to live and enjoy. I do not care a damn for any art that is not used for propaganda. But I do care when propaganda is confined to one side while the other is stripped and silent. . . .

What Du Bois and the other middle-class intellectuals were fighting was the fascination of whites with the "primitive" side of black life; the tasteful imitations of white life in the works of the more conservative artists reflected in the pages of *Opportunity* and *The Crisis*. "Although he warned that the 'migrating peasant' held the final answer to the success of the New Negro," explains David Levering Lewis, "Locke's second essay, 'Enter the New Negro,' made it clear that migrating peasants were expected to leave the immediate future to the upper crust – Du Bois's Talented Tenth" (1997, 115).

Jes' Grew Meets the Harlem Renaissance

"Du Bois, whom Arna Bontemps described as a fastidious gentleman of aristocratic leanings," writes Cary D. Wintz, "always found it difficult to embrace the black masses unless they had been thoroughly regenerated and cleansed of all traces of the curse of their slave heritage. Perhaps because of his own literary tastes, Du Bois was an early supporter of black art and literature. However, it is also possible to detect very early the attitudes that would alienate him from much of the Renaissance" (142-143)

> For example, as early as 1905 he had proposed the establishment of a "Negro Journal," which would attempt to portray black life "on its beautiful and interesting side." Two decades later he would castigate Rudolph Fisher, Claude McKay, and other young black writers for neglecting the beautiful in their rush to depict ghetto life. (143)

What the conservative members of the Harlem Renaissance failed to realize was that the ideology of the New Negro was too imitative, and could not compete with the folk culture and music that *jes' grew* with darker-skinned Southern migrants. "Like the other black civil rights intellectuals," maintains Robert E. Washington, "he [Du Bois] took a dim view of literary works that celebrated the black lower class's putative emotional freedom and sensuality' (41). But what galled the younger black artists under the ideology of black middle-class respectability in the arts was the 1926 publication of white art's patron Carl Van Vechten's sensational <u>Nigger Heaven</u> which illuminated the primitive life to be had in Harlem's underworld. For artists Langston Hughes, Zora Neale Hurston, Wallace Thurman and others, the time was ripe to forge an alliance with the

folk culture of the masses, to discover, as Arna Bontemps recalled that "it was fun to be a Negro."

Furthermore, Du Bois and the other staid traditional civil rights organizations failed to correctly assess the iconic power of Marcus Garvey and the attractiveness of his black nationalist ideology on the very people Du Bois tried to influence. In speech after speech, Garvey became the voice of the black working and lower classes in rhetorical phrases that would be common in the latter half of the twentieth century. Garvey made his dark-skinned listeners and readers "generals and field-marshals" in his evocation of a glorious African past and future to be. But it was Garvey's skin color and features that most resonated with the black masses who resented the hands-off, up-lift leadership who Garvey categorized as "half-breed mulattoes." The West Indian Marxist Cyril Briggs, the editor of *The Messenger*, successfully sued Garvey when he publically denounced Briggs as a "white man,"and Garvey stirred up the already bitter tensions between the West Indian and African American professional classes. "For the first time outside the genteel sphere of literature, the concealed tensions and subconscious antipathies of dark and light Afro-Americans were furiously exposed and nurtured."

> The days of "subtle and underhand propaganda fostered by a few men of color in America, the West Indies, and Africa to destroy the pride of the Negro race by building up what is commonly known as 'blue vein' aristocracy" were finished he warned. (41)

Alarmed at this disruption of his integration-through-acceptable-values-and-behavior ideology, Du Bois through the *Crisis* retaliated with ad hominem attacks on Garvey's

appearance. In "Back to Africa" (1923), Du Bois described Garvey as "A little, fat black man, ugly, but with intelligent eyes and a big head. . . ." Further describing a Garvey meeting (which he did not attend in person), Du Bois dismissed the Garveyites as deluded, and the elaborate uniforms as belonging to "comic opera" and "simply silly." To a casual observer, the ceremonies would appear sinister, "this enthroning of a demagogue, a blatant boaster, who with monkey-shines was deluding the people and taking their hard-earned dollars; and in High Harlem there rose an insistent cry, "Garvey must go!"

"The sad truth of the Garvey-Du Bois feud," opines David Levering Lewis, " is that it might well have been avoided. That Du Bois was viscerally, even aesthetically, repelled by Marcus Garvey to the point of being intellectually deaf to anything the President General of Africa had to say, is well known. If the Bookerite feud was ultimately ideological, that with the Garveyites was ultimately one about power." As Lewis explains, at issue was Garvey's capacity to raise money and "issuing marching orders to twelve million second-class American citizens"a feat beyond the traditional middle-class civil rights groups. Garvey also anticipated the theories of Dr. Frances Cress Welsing and the black power movement[1] of the late 1960s and early 1970s when he preached to his avid followers that "all the beauties of creation are the black man's." Although Du Bois accused Garvey of bringing "to the United States a new Negro problem, it is doubtful if even Du Bois was convinced of his own argument, but he did (within his attacks on Garvey) presciently predict the structural failing of a nationalism

[1] And like many black leaders, Garvey married a woman so light that she could pass for white.

based on race and skin color supremacy. The distinctions of intraracial color differences, argues Du Bois, is in the "poorest taste for a Negro to refer."

> Colored folk as white as the whitest came to describe themselves as Negroes. Imagine, then, the surprise and disgust of these Americans when Garvey launched his Jamaican color scheme. . . .for what shall this poor world gain if it exchange one race supremacy for another?

Like future nationalist groups who were influenced by his ideology, Garvey over-stepped himself in wrapping his back-to-Africa and black separatist movement too closely to the ideology of white supremacists, and by 1927 the Garvey movement was destroyed by the co-operation of the traditional civil rights organizations with the Federal government, and Garvey's financial and political naivete. But Garvey's importance was in his ideology of African race pride and African American self-determination, an ethos kept alive in the black nationalist groups that continued to fight black cultural assimilation.

The Struggle For Cultural Authenticity

Although the NAACP and the Urban League joined together in an "integrationist ideology" under the recognized race leaders Du Bois, Walter White and Charles Johnson, their base in the black community was primarily among the conservative black middle-class who deplored the culture of the darker-skinned masses whose "dysfunctional"folkways many felt would disrupt the fragile new accord between black and white intellectuals. Although they acted as self-appointed spokesmen for the black community as a whole, they disapproved of the black vernacular and the blues forms that jes' grew in public spaces reserved for the best of the race. What was worse for the more

conservative members, like Du Bois, was the influence of the migrant culture in the works of the younger artists. But the civil rights organizations saw, instead of a vital addition to the American cultural mainstream, a glorification of lower-class lifestyles.

Robert E. Washington provides a relevant framework in which we can quickly sort out a tangle of political and cultural divisions which aligned themselves along color and class in order to claim black cultural authority. As we have seen above, the conservative members of the Harlem Renaissance disagreed on the place of traditional African American cultural formations that attracted black and white proponents of the "primitive" school. Notably, Alain Locke and James Weldon Johnson were sympathetic to what Houston Baker, Jr. calls the "blues ideology." As Washington identifies, there were two sectors of the Harlem Renaissance "located within the social base of the black cultural intelligentsia." One sector of cultural producers whose "social location"was "restricted to the segregated black community," but the second, argues Washington, a cosmopolitan group, were socially located "outside the black community in the newly forming, predominately white Jazz Age social milieu in downtown Manhattan. It was the local cultural intelligentsia that became the chief bearer of the Harlem Renaissance doctrine" (44). The first group included the black singers, and dancers of the new black musical comedies of which the middle-class disapproved, but this sector also included the early jazz performers and female blues shouters. Washington points out that facing on the one hand, the "primitive" culture of the masses, and on the other, the political threat of the Garvey movement, "the black middle class needed a cultural ideology that would allow it

to profit from these developments by affirming its aspirations and identity as the driving forces behind black American culture."

> This it did by appropriating the new public symbols of black ethnic identity, a feat that the narrowly focused and defensive civil rights ideology, rooted in assimilationist assumptions, lacked the flexibility and scope to accomplish. (44)

However, Washington's sweeping generalization needs a closer examination; in his cosmopolitan sector were, as I mentioned earlier, the younger members who, as Washington is forced to admit, signified on the black middle-class ideology by "mocking, deriding, and parodying their lifestyle and values, with a level of rancor and meanness that went beyond any previous public criticism of the group" (46). But what exactly did they critique?

Langston Hughes, Zora Neale Hurston, Wallace Thurman, and Claude McKay severely critiqued the color and class elitism of the middle-class civil rights leadership in works that celebrated the color and rhythm of black vernacular speech and the music of the darker-skinned masses in much the same way exhibited by the New Black Aesthetics of the last decade of the twentieth century. Significantly, Hughes, and Hurston came from economically poor backgrounds and derided the class pretensions of the black "genteel" brand of literature famously "mid-wived" by Jessie Fauset, Hughes (and McKay) were grateful for Fauset's early support. Hurston and Hughes both also relied on the financial support of the wealthy white Charlotte Osgood Mason who often dictated to Hughes and Hurston what "primitive" topics she was willing to pay for. However, as much as they

mocked the color and class elitism of the black middle-class, they never became attracted to the Garvey movement because "it lacked a literary school," and, except for McKay, "they loathed racial nationalism. Moreover, it is doubtful that Garvey's largely working-class followers would have become consumers of black literary works" (53).

The melding of black cultural representations with political nationalism comes to fruition in the late sixties with the Black Aesthetic and the Black Arts movement which developed some of the ideological assumptions found in the works of these younger Harlem Renaissance writers, and in the back-to-Africa movement of Marcus Garvey. These impulses are identified by Washington as:

> 1. A biological conception of black American ethnic culture which was seen as derived from their African ancestry.
> 2. Equation of African ancestry with primitive instinctualism.
> 3. Depiction of lower-class blacks as the chief bearers of primitive instinctualism, the defining feature of black ethnic culture, which is manifested in their carefree and hedonistic lifestyles.
> 4. Depiction of middle-class blacks as social misfits, alienated from the emotional vitality of black ethnic culture.
> 5. Depiction of white Western culture as being emotionally repressed and sterile.

Although these assumptions about the working-classes suggest class condescension, some of these assumptions still exist in the ideology of today's hip-hop culture of "keepin'it real,"but the important structural issues faced by the black working and lower-classes are conspicuously missing Notes Washington "absent in their primitivist depictions of black America were images of racial problems, environmental influences (e.g., family, neighborhood, school, church), poverty, black nationalism, and the white American social world" (69). These were problems that awaited the pens of Richard Wright and James Baldwin, especially Baldwin who lived long enough to see his own

black cultural authenticity (and relevancy) attacked under the Garvey influenced Black Panther Party.

The Jazz Age party of the Harlem Renaissance ended with the crash of Wall Street, and by 1929 Harold Jackman and Langston Hughes agreed that "the genteel letters team was losing badly," but the period limped on as the promise of achieving full American parity through black cultural representations declared the experiment a "failure."

> By the end of 1931, the most detached artist and resolute optimist realized that nothing was any longer quite as it should be, that the aggravating national chaos could impinge in unexpectedly cruel ways even upon the lives of distinguished Afro-Americans. (Lewis 254)

Although some literary critics account the Harlem Renaissance a "failure," in part, their assessment is true when we consider that the "naturalist" school exemplified by Richard Wright established the political and cultural movements to come as "masculinist" in form. This "failure;" unfortunately erased the black vernacular work of Zora Neale Hurston until the work of black feminists demanded a political voice, and reached back to find Zora's. But what was important for the strength of authority from a black elite to dictate the boundaries of black cultural and political representations, was that their reign was over. Black cultural expressive culture continues to rise from the "under-class" of black America, this does not mean, however, that oppositional voices have surrendered. But as I have hoped to demonstrate, the struggles over cultural and political ideology were first rehearsed during the Harlem Renaissance which means that the period was not a "failure."

Chapter Two: "She's Pretty – For A Black Girl": Color, Class and Gender

Introduction

I want to begin this chapter by recalling one of the traditional expressions of black women's creativity: the quilt. Besides its obvious utilitarian capacity, slave women used the occasion of a quilting party to gather for community far from the surveillance of white mistresses, white masters, and just white people period. A quilting party was a chance for slave women to gossip, share long, remembered stories, and give advice to each other about surviving the special hell slavery presented for women. Alice Walker refers to this tradition in the short story "Everyday Use" which uses the quilt as cultural artifact, and as an occasion for female bonding in The Color Purple where Celie, Sofia and Shug work on a pattern Celie names "Sister's Choice." As I discuss below, it is significant that Celie is joined by the two women who teach her an independence unavailable, or expected from a woman like Celie. Quilts are laden with cultural import as aged hands came together with younger ones as a motley collection of patches are incorporated from favorite dresses that recall happier times, remnants from the clothing of loved ones whose existence was too brief, or snatches of bright cloth that happen to take the maker's fancy because of the shear marvellousness of its existence.

But the quilt also had other uses – if you were able to read the signs. On its surface, the intricate designs of a quilt hanging on a make-shift laundry-line was a mute testament to the skill and artistry of the black female hands who created it, but embedded in the same, colorful designs was another story that pointed to the physical road to freedom. If one could "read" the quilts correctly, then the signs woven into them were narratives of

the liberation and freedom that a collective creativity brings at a time when many black women bound by class, color, and race had neither.

In Alice Walker's The Color Purple (1982) as Celie takes her first steps to self-liberation she lays one of those old Southern female-to male curses on her abusive husband. "He laugh. Who you think you is? he say. You can't curse nobody. Look at you. You black, you pore, you ugly, you a woman. Goddam, he say, you nothing at all" (176). Nothing at all is the way Pecola Breedlove feels in Toni Morrison's The Bluest Eye (1970). Wishing for blond hair and blue eyes, black-skinned Pecola devours the talismatic Mary Jane candy as hopefully as dark-skinned women devoured tabs of arsenic in the 1920s in the vain hope that the toxic substance would bleach their skin. Teenaged Terri, in April Sinclair's Coffee Will Make You Black (1994), tries to convince her color and class conscious mother that the Black Is Beautiful movement means no more hot combs and chemical perms, as her mother pushes the latest bleaching creams at her; while weight-conscious domestic Blanche, worries about her encounter with elite "light-skinned folks who *act* light-skinned" in Barbara Neely's Blanche Among the Talented Tenth (1994). I offer these books to indicate the centrality, and longevity of color and class in the works by black women. Equally significant is the fact that these works are from the daughters of the working class, often the first college educated children in their families, and their works respond to the legacy of a culture that based their worth on the attributes of skin color and economic class.

"There is hardly a novel by a black woman, " states Daryl Cumber Dance, "that does not touch upon the issues of complexion, hair, and general physical appearance. . .

." (92). The truth of Dance's observation is born out in the tradition of black women's writing from the era of the slave narrative to the fiction of Gwendolyn Brooks during the 1950s, Toni Morrison, Alice Walker in the 1970s, and the less "canonical" fictional narratives of Barbara Neely and April Sinclair at the end of the twentieth century. The legacy of the model black heroine whose white features were central to black women's creative writing remains a constant reminder of the value color and European phenotype has for African American women. "Color-based social stratification within the race was real," observes Deborah E. McDowell.

> Though not the only basis for divisions in black communities, color - consciousness was real and pervasive and found subtle, perhaps un - conscious, expression in strategies of nineteenth-century black fiction and overt expression in the structures of everyday life that affected those who wrote it. (57)

I consider the purpose of this chapter, in a way, like the construction of quilts – an early example of black female cultural expression – as a patchwork of signs pointing to the past, while simultaneously pointing out the avenues to escape and personal freedom. I want to consider the construction of the quilt as a metaphoric frame in which to examine the way in which black women respond to the issue of color and class. The issue of genderized colorism runs throughout the lives of black women like the basting thread that attaches disparate clutches of colorful patches in the formation of a quilt, and each patch represents an individual pain over contesting the worthlessness of their bodies based on standards they have, at various times, struggled to emulate and reject.

What black women face is the "beauty myth," a description from Naomi Wolf's The Beauty Myth: How Images of Beauty Are Used Against Women a definition which is useful to consider here. The beauty myth, explains Wolf, "is actually composed of emotional distance, politics, finance, and sexual repression. The beauty myth is not about women at all. It is about men's institutions and institutional power" (13). Although Wolf's description is apt – and as I demonstrate later – the problem with the beauty myth is that Wolf describes a condition that assumes that the beauty myth applies to white women only, but it is in this "white women only" context that we can apply Wolf's term to the issue of colorism, for the simple fact, that colorism is grounded on European aesthetic values as applied to women of color. There is "emotional distance" because skin color divides black women; it is "political," and in conjunction with living in a patriarchal society, colorism is supported by black men. Although Wolf does not take into consideration how the beauty myth affects women of color, I will come back to the second half of her title as part of the discussion.

Alice Walker points out that "colorism," not only divides African Americans, but skin color envy, resentment, and denial are divisive tools supported by a mainstream culture that denies the worth of black women. "Ironically," confesses Walker, "much of what I've learned about color I've learned because I have a mixed-race child."

> Because she is lighter-skinned, straighter-haired than I, her life – in this racist society – is infinitely easier. And so I understand the subtle programming I, my mother, and my grandmother before me fell victim to. Escape the pain, the ridicule, escape the jokes, the lack of attention,

> respect, dates, even a job, any way you can. And if you can't escape, help your children to escape. Don't let them suffer as you have done.
> and yet, what have we been escaping to? (1983, 291)

Trellie Jeffers succinctly captures the issue of women and gender in class terms, and bluntly "calls out" the black middle-classes on its class and color bias: "What it is, is an insanity that has helped whites turn blacks on themselves and that has caused the black middle class to claw itself into a form of psychic annihilation." Jeffers joins Walker in setting her sights on "the great cannon of cruel racism directed toward the black black woman by the black middle class." Traditionally, the shade of skin and the straightness of hair have been indicators of economic class in African American communities, and as sources of economic gain, black women's bodies have been judged according to skin color since the days of the auction block.

As Jeffers argues, the black middle-class only "pretends to honor blackness while secretly despising working class blackskinned [sic] . . . ." I discuss Jeffers charge in greater detail as it informs the movie casting choices of black commercial filmmakers in the next chapter. But for now, I want to examine the critical reader's response to the images in black women's writing that support Jeffer's charge. Walker, for example, scrutinizes the earliest representations of creative writing by nineteenth century middle-class African American women and finds the expected: "black heroines depicted as white – and non-working class" (296). What Walker finds in her examination of early black women's writing, however, does not indicate entirely a misreading on her part, but instead points to the dialogic nature of early nineteenth and twentieth century black

writing. While Walker's observation is true at first glance, unfortunately, she falls into the trap of applying twentieth century attitudes (or a lack of bracketing) to the nineteenth century circumstances which severely circumscribed, and dictated the terms under which middle-class black women could enter the public sphere of arts and letters.

The specific narrative strategies employed by early black women writers, the dualistic purposes – the double-voicing – of their texts mediated through the bodies of the near-white black woman were ideological strategies forced upon them because of the historical period that denied the humanity of blacks as a whole. I offer Frances E.W. Harper's novel Iola Leroy: Or Shadows Up-Lifted as a representative post-Reconstruction text in which Harper's construction of the mulatta heroine is designed to explicitly "speak" to a reader knowledgeable of the formal conventions of a specific textual genre. But contained in Harper's text is another reading, an unmediated voice that allows Harper's black middle-class readers to read a different utterance that does not "recognize" the mediation of the mulatta figure as "different." What this means for my purposes is that Iola Leroy is able to contest the boundaries of race, on the one hand, while projecting a distinct ideology of black female social value, on the other. Black women writers of the post-Reconstruction were acutely aware of their unique status as black elites, ready to take their positions at the head of the vanguard of the New Negro. If literacy gave a voice to the millions of ex-slaves, then the activity of reading and writing gave voice to the most voiceless of blacks: the black woman.

After slavery, American mainstream culture may have preferred to "forget"the effects of slavery on the bodies of black women, but, as Paula Giddings recounts "Black

women may have been the only group in America able to see not only the degradation but the triumph of transcending what the system would make of them. In their minds, the experience of slavery provided evidence of the Black woman's moral strength and resiliency" (87). Writing in the post-Reconstruction era, literate and educated women like Anna Julia Cooper, Ida B. Wells, Frances Harper and Pauline Hopkins specifically directed attention to the physical and psychic effects of slavery on the black woman to a divided audience, divided not so much by gender as it was by race and the entrenched belief in the absence of the black woman's sexual integrity. By continuing to center their texts on the body of the biracial woman early fiction by black women writers specifically signified on an existent text of female racial difference by revising the core text of mainstream American cultural history by borrowing models of female heroics from mainstream *and* slave texts. Secondly, both Harper, Hopkins and other literate and politically active black women were aware that an important by-product of their work was to be one of racial up-lift; that by providing models of respectable black womanhood their female characters would not only refute the vicious myths about black womanhood, but also act to enlist the masses of black women below them in the cause, or as Frances Smith Foster accurately sums up their aim: "They used the Word as both a tool and a weapon to correct, to create, and to confirm their visions of life as it was and as it could become" (2).

Claudia Tate refers to post-Reconstruction fiction as black narratives of domestic liberation and political desire for a formerly enslaved people who had neither. As she argues, the novels of bourgeois domesticity was a concerted revision of the American

narrative of family – "the family being implicitly understood as white and patriarchal."In this case, we need to consider the multiple narrative strategies, or as Iser terms the *intentionality* of the slave narrative text whose textual intent is to illicit a response from an implied reader that "accommodates both thematically and historically conditioned changes, and variations in reader response." The American novel has long been used as a tool, both for moral instruction and for entertainment which made the genre an ideal form in which to combat the degrading image of blacks as a race, and in particular, the image of the black woman. In this form, early black writers were able to reformulate the black experience on two fronts. In what she terms as "the multidimensionality of racial rearticulation," Maxine Leeds Craig points to the bodies of black women as sites of group racial resistance in the struggle for racial equality. "Though both black men and women live in 'marked' bodies, many African American efforts to reclaim the honor due to the race have particularly focused on celebrating and defending the beauty or dignity of black women" (14).But for black readers, these "marked" bodies were also the site of color and class ambiguity as evidenced by an unreconciled gap between accepting *and* rejecting racial hierarchal standards. One of the responses to class hierarchies I examine is the vernacular form of the blues as a contestation of darker-skinned, lower class women who refused to place racism over gender, and circumspect female behavior over personal female sexual liberation.

One intent of the slave's narrative comes out of a public desire for political resistance, and one of private desire to assert a self-hood denied by forces beyond the text. However, all slave narratives contain another text that remind the white reader of

the humanity of the slave in the omnipresence of the racially ambiguous narrator whose body contains the marks of the "white patriarchal family."The female slave narrative only increased the white family inclusion stakes, as her body was the conduit through which visible race could disappear. Thus, the post-Reconstruction novels often-times addressed the issue of inclusion to the mainstream of American (white) society on two separate and conflicting grounds for the scores of interracial bodies who were white and black; free and unfree under Jim Crow. On the one hand, they posited their well-bred, "white" skinned characters as a separate caste between the white and black barring a full, legal and social embrace by the paternal family. On the other hand, publically they advocated for the rights of all African Americans, including the sanctity of their legal domestic rights. Thus, early writing focused on themes of black middle-class domesticity, Christian morality, and the sexual chastity of black women among a growing class of African Americans at the turn of the century who sought to distance themselves from the stigmas associated with the mass of blacks. As many critics of post-Reconstruction African American writing have pointed out, the political intent of black fiction steadfastly argued for American inclusion, but unfortunately at the expense of the millions of darker-skinned blacks.

As we have come to understand, the black woman's autobiography (the slave narrative) placed the black woman's body at the center of a national debate about race and gender in 19th century America. That the black woman was biracial only high-lighted the unspoken, but *visible* truths about slavery and gender that were glossed over in the male slave narratives that posited race over gender. But the racial instability presented by

biracial female body represented more than a plea for humanity based on a racial identification between author and reader where, as Alice Walker notes, the white female reader "could identify human feeling, humanness, only if it came in a white or near white body" (301). Not only did the slave narrator call attention to the constant threat of sexual abuse, but she also provided a model of black womanhood for the post-Reconstruction period of the late nineteenth century where early black women novelists utilized the light-skinned, European featured woman as central to the evolving trope of racial "up-lift."

In order to uphold the dignity of black women, an intraracial ideology evolved based on the visible amounts of white ancestry as a standard for African American female respectability. An intraracial demythologizing of the scurrilous beliefs about black women, many male black political and cultural leaders argued, would inevitably help to erode the color barriers to American inclusion for all African Americans as a new generation copied mainstream ideals of middle class female domesticity at its core. This was the problem faced by Harlem Renaissance writers Jessie Fauset and Nella Larsen. Larsen's Quicksand, especially, struggles with the tension between black middle-class female respectability, and the new sexual openness of the early 1920s. I consider Larsen's narrative strategies as she suggests a coming to terms with the erasure of sexual desire in the biracial female's body.

Much has been written about the nature of early black women's writing, especially in the use of the biracial heroine in the fictional works of post-Reconstruction authors Frances E. W. Harper and Pauline Hopkins. As Claudia Tate notes "Problematic attitudes

about class and color emerge in the portrayals of heroes and heroines in post-Reconstruction black fiction." The novels, Tate continues, "reveal a preponderance of light-skinned heroes and heroines, while the comic and local-color character roles are reserved for the folk who are literally black in hue" (62). Indeed, as Henry Louis Gates points out in his introduction to the important Schomburg series of 19th century black women writers: "Black women writers dominated the final decade of the nineteenth century." But, as scholars have come to recognize, the early twentieth century writing of black women was forced to confront two related tasks. One task was the reclamation of the black woman from a historic myth of their inherent sexuality, and the other task confronting them as educated, literate women, was the burden of representation to be shouldered for the "race."

Significantly, over one hundred years of writing by African American women has established an engagement with what Deborah E. McDowell has correctly observed as "the shifting aesthetic, critical, cultural conventions and values that influence, and at times determine, writing *by* and *about* black women" (xii). In other words, the works under discussion did not spring fully formed in an ahistorical, acultural vacuum in which they *happened* to emerge as imitators of black male writers. While I set these works within their cultural milieu, attention must be accorded to their formal literary structures also. As I indicated earlier, I want to highlight the inter-textuality of black women's writing besides its dialogic nature as Iola Leroy and the rise of black women's magazines in the late nineteenth-century issues a call Quicksand and the rise of the blues vernacular responded at the beginning of the twentieth-century. The works also call attention to a

repetition of tropes that are readily identified in African American women's writing. This pattern of repetition, revision and difference are tropes that Henry Louis Gates notes are unique to what he calls the "discrete black text." The act of Signifyin(g) – an act rooted in the black vernacular -- is "the trope of revision, of repetition, and difference" found in the works of African American creative writers in general, and I find useful in this focus on African American women's writing and oral expressions.

To Be of Social Value: Iola Leroy

"Like Harriet Jacobs and Harriet Wilson," recounts Hazel V. Carby, [Frances] Harper told her readers that though black writers did not write out of situations where they had both money and leisure, they were determined to write books that could both take their place in 'the literature of the country' and be 'of lasting service for the race.' These two desires," continue Carby, "were fused into a didactic novel" (71). In her groundbreaking survey, Black Women Novelists: The Development of A Tradition, 1892-1976, scholar Barbara Christian asks an important question about Frances Harper: "What images of black women was Harper struggling against, and why was it important for her to use the novel as a form in refuting them?" (5). To answer Christian's question it is useful to consider historian Deborah Gray White's argument on the moments of repetition and revising of the female slave narrative. "Pairing the psychological with the enslaved woman's means of survival," argues White, "has helped us analyze many patterns that emerged *after* slavery.

> America's constant concern with black women's morality, chastity, and respectability flow from slavery's legacy, as well as the rape, medical

experimentation, and reproductive control that black women continued to endure through the twentieth century.

bell hooks adds: "Devaluation of black womanhood after slavery ended was a conscious, deliberate effort on the part of whites to sabotage mounting black female self-confidence and self-respect" (1981, 59). To counter the continued efforts against black female "self-confidence and self-respect" was an over-determined insistence on the same gender stereotypes that restricted the white women whose "purity" was defined by their own "impurity". As Hazel V. Carby correctly asserts, the myth about the black Jezebel's inherent sexuality was used to define the proper boundaries for white female behavior by the opposing image of the black female: "To qualify as a 'true woman,' the possession of virtue was an imperative. Without it she was, in fact, no woman at all, but a member of some lower order" (25). Thus, in order to "become" women Harper had to erase any hints that her black model of female rectitude had any sexual desires at all. This over-determined erasing of female sexuality as a class bound constituent will prove problematic for black female writing in the 1920s, but again, we need to consider the peculiar cultural position these early writers found themselves writing in, and writing without.

As historians and critics have noted, the two prevailing images of the black woman were the young, inherently lascivious Jezebel, *or* the old, sex-less Mammy; either way, both stereotypical images were in service to whites. "Mammy is consistent," agree Gray, hooks, and Christian. As Christian points out, the establishment of the Mammy was the racist self-interested, mis-reading of the importance of mother-child bond in African

cultures - "her tendency to see maternal duties as natural and sacred must have reinforced the southern planters' stereotype that black women were perfectly suited to be mammies. Tied to her physical characteristics are her personality traits" –

> she is strong, for she certainly has enough girth, but this strength is used in the service of her white master and as a way of keeping her male counter-parts in check; she is kind and loyal, for she is a mother; she is sexless, for she is ugly; and she is religious and superstitious, because she is black. She prefers the master's children to her own, for as a member of a lower species, she acknowledges almost instinctively the superiority of the higher race. (12)

The figure of the all-knowing and all-loving black mammy was a stubborn (and comforting) myth nearly impossible to eradicate from American popular culture. On the other hand, as the young Jezebel, the black woman was understood to be controlled by lust; that they were easy "prey" available to any man, white or black. For white women protected by the cult of "lady-hood,"the image of the black Jezebel insured her respectability for the simple fact that black women were implacably barred from "true womanhood" because of the myth of their inherent hypersexuality. Thus, black women themselves were forced to revise, and reconfigure the mainstream image of black women under the very terms that excluded them with narratives that reflected past historic and future social needs. To refute these images, and to provide a model of black female respectability, however, meant that a new black female face would be forced to mirror as

closely as possible the standards of contemporary popular culture and fiction. For many middle class blacks, *behavior* under the eyes of whites was believed to be the key to American inclusion and acceptance. Thus, the emphasis on bodily integrity, religion, and a strict attention to the domestic black home became the key components of black respectability.

In Domestic Allegories of Political Desire (1992) Claudia Tate contends that, although Frances E. W. Harper's Iola Leroy (1892) the eponymous black heroine is a beautiful "mulatto", the danger here is in reading the novel as an instance of Harper's own "racial ambivalence". Instead, Tate reads the novel as an example of "virtuous behavior and accomplishment, rather than physical appearance." Tate formulates her reading from a re-definition of "female value in mid-nineteenth-century British and American women's novels", novels that Harper was forced (by literary market considerations) to copy.

> The white feminine ideal of early-nineteenth-century British and American fiction emphasizes female piety, discretion, modesty, and sympathy, all exemplified by the white heroine's fragile fair beauty; by the mid-nineteenth century, however, that ideal centers moral and physical well-being independent of appearance (144).

Tate refers to the " bright, virtuous, and compassionate but decidedly plain" heroine of Charlotte Brontë's 1848 novel Jane Eyre as a pointed example of the literary shift in gender construction, and concludes that such a shift ". . . probably influenced late-nineteenth century black women authors' revision of the unquestioned privilege of light

skin color". If we follow a tradition of black writing that consciously refers to textual forms outside of the black experience, then obvious questions arise – what precisely makes a novel like Iola Leroy a specific black female text? Where does European mimesis end and black particularity begin? How exactly does this "literary shift," as articulated by Tate, work in privileging the light-skinned black woman in an era of racial up-lift that was meant to benefit *all* black women?

Although Tate's conclusion is logical (there is no denying her observations about the "shift" in gender representations of European and American female main characters) her argument insists that the black heroine of a post-Reconstruction novel like Iola Leroy posits the weight of "social value"over appearance, closely following British and American women's writing. "As a result", she asserts:

> the social value of the heroine of post-Reconstruction black woman's domestic novels resides not in her white appearance but in her virtue, comportment, and ability to enhance the virtuous prosperity of her family, as *Iola Leroy* poignantly illustrates. (144)

However, her assertion calls into question the necessity of utilizing class and color as arbiters of, what Tate indicates as constituents of "social value". Nevertheless, the preponderance of light-skinned black heroines exposes a gap in determining *which* women in the black community are of "social value." A careful reading of the works of Harper, Hopkins and the social work of the black "club-women" reveals a demarcation of class and color that are the constituents of what Tate argues is clearly an ideology of "social value." To be of "social value" is the overriding concern of nineteenth century

black women's fiction whose stated purpose was to morally guide as well as entertain black readers which separated the texts of Harper and Hopkins from the" bright, virtuous, and compassionate but decidedly plain" heroines of their white contemporaries, but another distinction was the continued emphasis on the appearance of their central figure who defined "social value" in a variety of ways.

Clearly by centering their texts on white-skinned, well behaved black "ladies", the goal of many early black writers was aimed at an inclusion in a category whose purpose by definition was to keep black women out. Based on her readings of the works of Frances E. W. Harper, Frances Smith Foster aptly sums up the mission of black authors like Harper: "African American writers , like other American writers, Foster relates, "responded to the need to repair the psychic damage of a war between the states and to adjust to a land without slavery but with an awesome number of former slaves."

> They believed that their stories of strength through adversity, of struggle and achievement, of hard work and discipline replacing the slave's rags with the decorous attire of proper citizens, could serve to inspire other blacks, assuage the fears of some whites, and help revive the American Dream. (131)

However, many "well-behaved" young black women viewed their darker-skinned sisters as either threats to their elevated positions as elite blacks, or secretly believed in the inherent stigmas attached to black skin. The up-lift of darker-skinned people – the mission of "social value" to the race was considered a *duty*, a duty expected of race men and women which did not translate into a corresponding social interaction between

classes. To be of "social value" meant a "rescuing" of blacks from their own culture, and as "cultural conductors" between the white and the black, where the beautiful, refined light-skinned heroines of Frances Harper and Pauline Hopkins "give to the black race" the culture they have *inherited* from the white.

> And what culture means is Western Christian civilization at its best. She becomes, then, a cultural missionary to the ignorant, the loudmouth, the coarse but essentially good-natured blacks, who need only to be shown the way. (29)

But to be of "social value" also held a dual purpose as its visible meaning is centered in the body of the light-skinned, cultured black woman. The implications were that the dark-skinned black woman was not of "social value," in the sense that physically they were far from the white ideal, as Noliwe M. Rooks points out, "In a society that equated color with character and civilization" (41).

In assessing the intentional values of texts like Harper's Iola Leroy , I want to borrow Deborah E. McDowell's intuitive paradigm of public and private forms of narrative fiction, again suggestive of Bakhtin's dialogics. As McDowell suggests there is a distinction between texts by black women "that seem to imply a public readership (or one outside the black cultural community) and those that imply a private readership or one within that cultural matrix"(36). Although, as McDowell reminds us, that an author can never "determine conclusively who their actual readers are. Nevertheless, all writers begin by fictionalizing or imagining an audience." However, as I have noted earlier with the female slave narrative, texts by post-Reconstruction authors such as Pauline Hopkins,

Emma Dunham Kelley, and especially Frances Harper were intent on fashioning their narratives to a public (read: white) audience for two very obvious reasons; first, their intent was to counter the charge against the incapability of African Americans to be fully political and cultural functioning beings, and secondly, to demonstrate the existence of a black middle-class who shared the same cultural and class affinities with the mainstream. For a private readership their works offered a middle-class model of decorous, respectable citizenship and moral instruction for black aspiration.

Our Sister's Keepers: A Culture of Association

In her invaluable survey of African American women's magazines, Noliwe M. Rooks bears out the incalculable influence these magazines had on shaping a distinct cultural matrix that was directly intended for black women. But, as worthy as these magazines were for middle-class black women, the *images* in their pages had "significant consequences. . . . for African American women who were young, poor, uneducated, and not biracial" (27) which were questioned, not only in oral narratives, but were actively resisted in fiction by black women themselves in the wake of the black migration and the Black Power movement of the late 1960s and early 1970s. Although the women editors of such well-regarded (but largely) forgotten journals like *Ringwood's Afro American Journal of Fashion* (1891-1894) and *Half-Century Magazine for the Colored Home and Homemaker* (1916-1927) shared the same imperatives of post-Reconstruction female novelists, the difference between the two types of narrative is in the use of images which supplied a more immediate text for those black women who could not easily navigate written texts, but who, nevertheless, aspired to elevate themselves in the patterns

followed by the black classes above them. I consider the influence of these magazines because they contribute to an internal narrative discourse of black female difference based on European definitions of female appearance and respectable female behavior. For African American women, the continued emphasis on these categories for women were inextricably tied to the racial commitment of black nation building. The intent of these magazines – in the advice columns, advertisements, and images of clothing and hairstyles – thus, equated the pride in appearance with the racial imperative of pride in race. To do otherwise, these magazines argued, would reflect badly on the progress of African Americans as a whole. However, the underlying results of this discourse – which remains a narrative background throughout periods of twentieth century African American cultural and social upheavals – proved to demonstrate the conflict,(and contradictions) inherent in the black community over the meanings of class, color and gender.

As Rooks recounts: "Between 1891 and 1950 there were eight African American women's magazines published for a variety of audiences and purposes" (4). Significantly, these the post-Reconstruction magazines replicated and textually supported the idealized messages contained in contemporary fiction by middle-class black women, and their content was as didactic in tone as the novels. Appearing in the same period were Iola Leroy (1892), Four Girls At Cottage City (1898), and Contending Forces (1900) all with unrealistic biracial female characters who publically worked at up-lifting the masses. The overriding sentiment in black women's journals was the firm belief in the ideology of "culture by association." In a letter to *Ringwoods*, one enthusiastic club-

woman urged other right-thinking race women "to gather under their wing as many young women as possible, whose minds should be enlightened, whose fingers trained and whose sentiments elevated by personal contact with cultured, refined women" (Rooks 51). The unknown writer, of course, does not need to make clear *whose* minds needed to be "enlightened," but the establishment of black fashion magazines devoted to the attributes that even elite women felt they lacked, offered a highly ambivalent agenda of respectable representation to hundreds of poor black woman. Founded in 1891 by Julia Ringwood Coston the offspring of a white master and a female slave, *Ringwood's Afro American Journal of Fashion* was "The first popular magazine aimed at an African American female readership, it was also the first fashion magazine for women of African descent."

> Distributed and read throughout the United States and parts of the Caribbean, it was published in Cleveland, Ohio by Ringwood, who chose to use her birth name in the magazine's title to ensure that so "frivolous" a venture would not "embarrass" her husband, or damage his social standing[2]. (28)

The intent of these magazines, however, was not designed for an imagined reader outside of the black cultural matrix (and an argument could be made that neither were they directed at a black male readership), but the explicit message to black women contained a

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[2] Coston was married to the well-regarded W. H. Coston, pastor of Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Hagerstown, Maryland. Coston was also an editor and activist in service to the race. Together, the couple appear to be a real-life example of the type of idealized black middle-class marriages Frances Harper had in mind for Iola Leroy.

direct appeal to black women that offered an association between them as receptive readers, and the magazines as purveyors of desirable black female images.

This is not to say that the championing of black literary efforts, and black achievements were not worthy and much psychologically needed efforts, but for each reportage of black society, black "firsts", and talented black literary efforts, there were hundreds of advertisements that disrupted "the bonds of racial brotherhood," bonds which many of the magazines purported to embrace. "To gain access to the American dream", explains authors Ayana D. Byrd and Lori Tharps, "one of the first things Blacks had to do was make White people more comfortable with their very presence" (26). As one article in *Ringwood's Journal* pointed out:"Women who eschew the garish and gaudy in dress may demand more consideration and respect than those who violate this principle." Black women were counseled on what colors would deter or attract unwanted sexual attention, especially "the lechery and depravity of the fair-skinned destroyers whose hearts are blacker than Erebus" (52). In addition, as these magazines painfully pointed out, skin color had to be regarded when choosing appropriate colors for dress.

Nella Larsen's 1928 novel Quicksand repeats the types of injunctions against placing black skin against "loud" colors at a typical Southern black college whose purpose was to instill "respectability" to its black female students. "Bright colors are vulgar"– "Black, gray, brown, and navy blue are the most becoming colors for colored people" – "Dark-complected people shouldn't wear yellow, or green or red." Helga Crane who considers herself a "despised mulatto," notices that the "women workers," wear "Drab colors, mostly navy blue, black, brown. . . ." and decides that "bright colors

were fitting and that dark-complexioned people *should* wear yellow, green, and red" (51). Alice Walker, however, plays with this trope by *embracing* the significance of what these forbidden colors have for dark-skinned women in The Color Purple. Celie is taken by the sisters of Mr.______ to the general store in order to buy material for clothing, and Celie tries to think "what color Shug Avery would wear."

> She like a queen to me so I say to Kate, Somethin purple, maybe little red in it too. But us look an look and no purple. Plenty red but she say, Naw, he won't want to pay for red. Too happy lookin. We got choice of brown, maroon or navy blue. I say blue. (20)

Celie is enamored with Shug's daring and open sexuality indicated by her going against the conventional colors dictated by the respectable, bourgeois ideas of black female respectability. Shug, a travelling blues woman, is the first dark-skinned woman (with nappy hair) that Celie has ever seen portrayed as a figure of "romance."

> She not lying down. She climbing down tween Harpo and Mr.______. And she dress to kill. She got on a red wool dress and chestful of black beads. A shiny black hat with what look like chickinhawk feathers curve down side one cheek, and she carrying a little snakeskin bag, match her shoes. (42)

As Angela Y. Davis recounts in Blues Legacies and Black Feminism about the stage attire of Bessie Smith, who was partial to elaborate plumed headressess and clothing liberally covered in "pearls, gold, and rhinestones," Smith presented a rare vision of sartorial display. In full Empress regalia she was bold, beautiful, outrageously out of line,

and impossible to forget"(137). Although the black middle-class sneered at such costuming as "typical niggerish attire," the importance to the mass of black women of seeing one of their "own" dressed in anything else other than the typical "mammy" regalia depicted in mainstream popular culture, was of no little psychological importance.

Modesty in dress at all times, *Ringwood's* stressed, "was part of a larger project aimed at refuting charges of African American moral inferiority and distancing African American women from cultural associations with rape and sexual availability."Although, the post-Reconstruction ideology strove to document their rise from the ignominy of racial bondage in fiction in the aftermath of Reconstruction civil and social promise, there was the chance, many firmly believed, that possible inclusion as *full* American citizens could be achieved by outward appearance. "The civil law protects us against certain evils" wrote Charles W. Chesnutt on the topic in1881, "but there are other evils which the civil law does not and cannot reach"(2). For Chesnutt and other middle class blacks accepting middle class mores meant the beginning of access to the privileges of mainstream society. The goal was to be ". . . considered as gentlemen and ladies, or received in good society," although "good society" was clearly defined by white standards of Christian morality, sober behavior, and special attention to appearance.

Reconfiguring Troubled Narratives

Acutely aware that the evidence of their own non-black bodies was the "proof" of the "unspeakable," prominent lighter-skinned black women of the upper-classes, like Harper, "had to negotiate a complicated emotional, psychological, and cultural landscape"in which the narrative of their tale centered on a putative love match between

white males and black women against the laws of consensual miscegenation. Under patriarchal standards of female worth, many women like Harper, Mary Church Terrell, and Ida B.Wells utilized their patrimonial *inheritance* – both in economic terms, and in the value of their skin color – in order to rise above the darker masses in the black community who were coming to terms with the responsibilities of freedom. Accordingly as Noliwe M. Rooks observes, the reality of "rape" in their own pasts was often " reinscribed as happy family narratives that resulted in light-skin privilege for the offspring; the performance of middle-class identities and sartorial practices would wipe the morality slate clean. In short, rape and violence were refashioned and rewritten, though not forgotten" (42).

A history of consensual miscegenation (real or fictive), thus, erased what some in the black community viewed as a reminder of the sexual abuse of black women. For example, the reconfiguration of sexual abuse into romantic *mesalliances* across racial lines is repeated in Pauline Hopkins' Hagar's Daughter, Charles W. Chesnutt's The House Behind the Cedars, and even as late as James Weldon Johnson's 1912 novel The Autobiography of An Ex-Colored Man. The point of these revisions of the very real incidents in the lives of too many slave girls was in part a careful construction of new genealogies for the light-skinned elite. In psychological terms, a romantic relationship that accounted for their own color and class was preferable than one that had the violence of rape in the background, and significantly, allowed the upper-class of black elites an opportunity to "claim" kinship with the best families of the South by glossing over any of the real circumstances that caused their own coloring. Hence, by following the patrilineal

line, elite black women wielded the symbolic power transferred from the white father as the source of their authority to refashion the truth, and to dictate codes of behavior for working and lower-class black women.

Furthermore, under the post Reconstruction imperative of establishing the virtue of the black woman, many elite black women could point to the example of Harriet Jacobs who *consented* to a sexual relationship in order to save herself from the sin of adultery. As Harriett Jacobs' own narrative demonstrates she *chooses* a sexual relationship with the sympathetic, white Northerner Mr. Sands over her lecherous master. "I knew the impassable gulf between us; but to be an object of interest to a man who is not her master, is agreeable to the pride and feelings of a slave" (84). Furthermore, Jacobs contributes to black women's liberatory discourse by anticipating the relative freedom of sexual autonomy (albeit under stress) that black women begin to articulate in the 1920s. But the point must be stressed that the black women at the center of these romantic genealogical creations was the fact that they resembled white women, and the telling sub-textual implications were that they could "escape" the sexual degradations that befell their darker-skinned sisters because of their "exotic" *otherness* that leveled racial animosities against racial miscegenation.

The Problematic Mulatta: Quicksand

Nella Larsen complicates the romantic notion of patriarchal genealogy associated with class, color and gender by acknowledging another "truth" unaddressed in the narrative fiction of black women – that of the unromantic (and unthinkable) inheritance of a white *matriarchal* heritage. In Quicksand (1928), Larsen using the circumstances of

her own parentage of white mother and black father, questions the values of the black middle and upper classes that center on the body of the biracial black heroine. "Her thoughts lingered with her mother, long dead. A fair Scandinavian girl in love with life, with love, with passion, dreaming, and risking all in one blind surrender. A cruel sacrifice. In forgetting all but love she had forgotten, or had perhaps never known, that some things the world never forgives" (56). And what the insular world of black "first families" will not forgive is that Helga cannot offer an "alternative,"or an acceptable account for her European phenotype. This social significance is underscored later in the novel by the black socialite who takes Helga under her wing in New York, and gives her a kindly bit of advice before she introduces Helga to her color-conscious friends: "And by the way, I wouldn't mention that my people are white, if I were you. Colored people won't understand it. . . ." (75). Her benefactress proposes to introduce Helga as a "friend of mine whose mother's dead." Engaged to the scion of an elite black family, the weight of her lack of white patriarchal ancestry weighs on her decision to break a relationship that the family does not approve of: "Her own lack of family disconcerted them. No family. That was the crux of the whole matter. Negro society, she had learned, was as complicated and as rigid in its ramifications as the highest strata of white society. If you couldn't prove your ancestry and connections, you were tolerated, but you didn't 'belong'" (43).

Trying to dissuade Helga from leaving the insular world of the black college (and by implication) her future advantageous connection to one of the black first families, the head of the college appeals to Helga's "social value" and commitment to racial up-lift.

"What we need is more people like you, people with a sense of values, and proportion, an appreciation of the rarer things of life." In this instance, Dr. Anderson assumes that Helga's light-skin denotes what the black community has come to believe are the markers of middle-class standing, and elite ancestry. "You're a lady. You have dignity and breeding." But Helga is restless, suffering from the "nameless and shameful"impulse that the "cult of lady-hood" was instituted and insisted upon by the black middle-class in order to "protect" her. Knowing that her "heritage" does not reflect the revised trope of white ancestry, Helga snaps back – "If you're thinking of family, Dr. Anderson, why, I haven't any," but Dr. Anderson, a firm believer in the doctrine of "up-lift" (and clearly in the values attributed to skin color) insists on her obvious "tendencies inherited from good stock. You yourself prove that!" Finally, Helga answers: "The joke is on you, Dr. Anderson. My father was a gambler who deserted my mother, a white immigrant. It is even uncertain that they were married" (55). Thus, Larsen manages to follow established tradition of using the biracial women to question the notions of race while attacking the fictional revisions of the trope itself by black ancestor worshipers. Furthermore, Larsen attacks the revision of the "tragic mulatto" – in this case, Harper's narrative redemption of the figure in Iola Leroy who happily subsumes personal desires for self-less "service to the race." Instead Larsen signifies on the hallmarks of respectability expected in one of Helga's coloring, and the "joke" is indeed on the values Dr. Anderson embraces and expects from Helga's appearance.

Larsen bluntly broaches the topic of sexuality as Helga searches for an identity as a black woman trapped, not so much between races, as between stereotypes. "We might

say that Larsen wanted to tell the story of a black woman with sexual desires," observes Deborah E. McDowell, but was constrained by a competing desire to establish black women as respectable in black middle-class terms." As McDowell points out, Larsen's work expressed the pressures she felt "with the conflicting demands of her racial and sexual identities and the contradictions of a black and feminine aesthetic" (79).

> How could she write about black female sexuality in a literary era that often sensationalized it and pandered to the stereotype of the primitive exotic? How could she give a black female character the right to healthy sexual expression and pleasure without offending the proprieties established by the spokespersons of the black middle class? (80)

Although McDowell argues that Larsen "could only hint at the idea of black women as sexual subjects," I would add that Larsen's textual and cultural dilemma is strategically worked out by "splitting" the myth of the black woman in half. Larsen intimates Helga's healthy sexual nature in her "restlessness," and in her love of the bright colors that Larsen knows are forbidden to respectable black women, but it is in the character of Anne, the respectable "race" woman, where Larsen demonstrates the "sterility" of Anne's sexlessness contained under the mantle of "social value." Married to Dr. Anderson, Anne senses the sexual attraction between the two, and here Larsen lays bare the type of marriage that ends "happily" with two committed souls who dedicate themselves to the "race."

> Anne had perceived that the decorous surface of her new husband's mind regarded Helga Crane with that intellectual and aesthetic

> appreciation which attractive and intelligent women would always draw from him, but that underneath that well-managed section, in a more lawless place where she herself never hoped or desired to enter, was another, a vagrant primitive groping toward something shocking and frightening to the cold asceticism of his reason. (124)

As Anne concludes about her husband ". . . . with her he had not to struggle against that nameless and to him shameful impulse. . . .," but Anne also struggles against that impulse because of the long tradition of separating black women from the myth of their inherent sexuality.

The compromise of halving the myth of black female sexuality contributes to the novel's ambivalent closure. Larsen's textual strategy of "splitting" the myth of the black woman in half, as I suggested earlier, is close to the Lacanian notion of the "post-mirror stage" of childhood development. The text reflects the tension Larsen faces between the nineteenth century images of black women as non-sexual vessels of social value, and the present questioning and challenges to those very same values by black women who were themselves excluded from the models of black female respectability by their skin color and class. But Larsen's ending for Helga best exemplifies Larsen's ambivalent desire of creating spaces in the text that manages to both depict *and* contain black female sexuality.

Larsen brings Helga close to sexual disaster as she shares an unexpected kiss from Dr. Anderson who gives in to the "nameless, shameless" impulse that his wife Anne refuses in herself. But the passionate kiss between Helga and Anderson awakens

unsatisfied desire in Helga: ". . . .all power seemed to ebb away, and a long-hidden, half-understood desire welled up in her with the suddenness of a dream." Later, at a formal tea, Anderson tells her that he wants to see her again. "Alone."

> She had carried away from yesterday's meeting a feeling of increasing elation. It had seemed to her that she hadn't been so happy, so exalted, in years, if ever. All night, all day, she had mentally prepared herself for the coming consummation; physically too, spending hours before the mirror. (135)

But Helga is torn between individual desire, and the imperatives of black middle-class expectations; desire must be contained, the text argues, in order to refute the sexual desires inimical to healthy black marriages like Anderson's and Anne's.

> Eight o'clock had come at last and with it Dr. Anderson. Only then had uneasiness come upon her and a feeling of fear for possible exposure. For Helga Crane wasn't, after all, a rebel from society, Negro society. It did mean something to her. She had no wish to stand alone. But these late fears were overwhelmed by the hardiness of insistent desire. (135)

The final meeting with Anderson, however, is not what she expects, as Anderson apologizes for his boorish behavior - "I could kick myself. It was, it must have been, Tavenor's rotten cocktails." Helga puts a good face on the rejection – "She had even laughed a little." But it is the "after all" in the text that resolves Larsen's textual problem in Anderson's sexual rejection of Helga. "She felt that he had belittled and ridiculed her. And thinking this, she had suddenly savagely slapped Robert Anderson with all her

might, in the face." However, Anderson's rejection does little to solve Helga's – or for that matter – Larsen's struggle to both posit a female sexuality, and to conform to expected societal conventions for single, black women.

The "slap," and Anderson's rejection, allows the text to momentarily resolve the tension between desire and convention, but Helga is not convinced – "She had, she told herself, been perfectly justified in slapping Dr. Anderson, but she was not convinced. She had ruined everything."

> Ruined it because she had been so silly as to close her eyes to all indications that pointed to the fact that no matter what the intensity of his feelings or desires might be, he was not the sort of man who would for any reason give up one particle of his own good opinion of himself. Not even for her. Not even though he knew that she had wanted so terribly something special from him. Something special. And now she had forfeited it forever. Forever. (136-137)

Helga, rushing blindly into the unknown, stumbles into one of the store-front sanctified churches common to Harlem Southern migrants. The working-class worshipers, catching sight of her fancy attire, proclaim her "A scarlet 'oman. Come to Jesus, you pore los' Jezebel!" The interpellation of what she almost became, stirs Helga as the worshipers whip themselves into orgiastic frenzy. "she felt herself possessed by the same madness; she too felt a brutal desire to shout and to sling herself about." Here the text brings back the tension between Larsen's ambivalence apropos black female sexuality, and deposits the female sexual impulse where it belongs: with the black working and lower classes.

Still under the orgiastic sway of the black church: "Little by little the performance took on an almost Bacchic vehemence. Behind her, before her, beside her, frenzied women gesticulated, screamed, wept, and tottered to the praying of the preacher, which had gradually become a cadenced chant." And it is in this state, of what Roland Barthes identifies as *jouissance*, that the male representative of sexual order, the preacher, rescues Helga from that "forever" of sexual negation.

> That man! Was it possible? As easy as that? Instantly across her still half-hypnotized consciousness little burning darts of fancy had shot themselves. No. She couldn't. It would be too awful. Just the same, what or who was there to hold her back? Nothing. Simply nothing. nobody. Nobody at all. (143)

Helga risks all, and succumbs to desire – "After all, there was nothing to hold her back. Nobody to care. She stopped sharply, shocked at what she was on the verge of considering. Appalled at where it might lead her. . . .

> The man – what was his name? – thinking that she was almost about to fall again, had reached out his arms to her. Helga Crane had deliberately stopped thinking. She had only smiled, a faint provocative smile, and pressed her fingers deep into his arms until a wild look had come into his slightly bloodshot eyes. (144)

The preacher offers a life-line which eventually allows the text to resolve itself by containing black female sexuality in the approved manner.

> And so in the confusion of seductive repentance Helga Crane was married

> to the grandiloquent Reverend Mr. Pleasant Green, that rattish yellow man who had so kindly, so unctuously, proffered his escort to her hotel on the memorable night of her conversion. (145)

Helga's moment of sexual *bliss* is already one that subverts the text of female respectability, but following Barthes, the text further disrupts the political intention of the black middle- class who used legal, and lawful marriage as a political weapon in the fight for equal rights. For Helga, following the conventions does not present a happy closure to the dilemma between sexual pleasure and sexual chastity. Helga soon learns the price she must pay for covering her sexuality under legal marriage, as she bears four children in quick succession, and grows to loath her husband even more. As McDowell notes – "Closing the novel on this note, Larsen openly castigates the dual price – marriage and pregnancy/childbearing – that women pay for sexual expression" (87). But we should also consider the text as a re-visioning of the conventional marriage plots of early women writers whose texts discreetly closed around black middle-class up-lift. Black female expressions of sexuality – and Larsen's text has no other place to put it – resides in the culture of the classes below respectable "race" women like Anne and Iola Leroy. Although Larsen's text attempts to solve the tension between a black female sexual autonomy, the text, nevertheless, fails on that score, but it is important to consider the very real challenges Larsen and her fellow writer Jessie Fauset were in contention with during the Harlem Renaissance who because of their class and color were able to express a sexual identity forbidden to black middle-class women.

Showing Their Collective Assess

In many black working and lower-class families whenever children misbehaved, or "acted-out" in public, many black mothers would whip them for "showin' their assess" in front of grown folks. For the rise of a uniquely African American cultural formation "showing ass" became an important constituent of public performance which allowed marginalized black folks the opportunity to show their "black assess" in a form that was in their control. Arriving with Southern migrants to Northern cities, like Harlem, the blues was formed from a black cultural matrix that combined the sacred with the profane, but the thread that linked the two together was that of personal freedom. Angela Davis points out that the blues form "rose to become the most prominent secular genre in early twentieth-century black American music."

> As it came to displace sacred music in the everyday lives of black people, it both reflected and helped to construct a new black consciousness. This consciousness interpreted God as the Devil, religion as the not-secular, God as the opposite of the Devil, religion as the not-secular, and the as largely sexual. With the blues came the designations "God's music" and "the Devil's music." The former was performed in church – although it could also accompany work – while the latter was performed in jook jook joints, circuses, and traveling shows. (6)

Very often, the musical structure and "sexual" emotions were the same as the new blues forms transformed the staid black spiritual into the Gospel, thus, it is not accidental that Larsen depicts Helga's sexual bliss in the midst of a black "sanctified" church. However,

the blues perfectly captured a new found freedom for many blacks wh had cause to celebrate "owning" their own bodies.

"Sovereignty in sexual matters marked an important divide between life during slavery and life after emancipation" (4). As Davis rightly pinpoints, material conditions for former slaves did not improve after freedom, but "it was the status of their personal relationships that was revolutionized."

> The birth of the blues was aesthetic evidence of new psychosocial realities within the black population. This music was presented by individuals singing alone, accompanying themselves on such instruments as the banjo or guitar. The blues therefore marked the advent of a popular culture of performance, with the borders of performer and audience becoming increasingly differentiated. (5)

Rooted in the oral vernacular of the mass of darker-skinned blacks, the blues as a revision of the plantation songs, allowed blacks an oral text in which to convey their experiences in a hostile racial atmosphere. But it was in the personal realm, especially the sexual, that offered an opposing text to the emerging black middle-class text that focused on bodily restraint, sobriety, and Christian piety. The blues text was thus an attractive text for liberatory expressivity, and like the written texts of black middle-class women, the blues became an attractive vehicle for black women to express themselves as sexually, autonomous subjects.

The blues form as it traveled North during the Great Migration in the early 1920s was dominated by two extraordinary women: Gertrude "Ma" Rainey, and Bessie Smith.

First. both women in appearance challenged the prevailing colorist standards of black middle-class female writers; their attractiveness to the millions of dark-skinned black women who were made to feel the unattractiveness of their dark skin and "nappy" hair, was the fact that here were women who placed "them" at the center of their oral narratives. The songs of these blues women gave friendly advice, and not lectures on how to behave in front of white people. Unlike the early narratives of Frances E. W. Harper, and their contemporaries Nella Larsen and Jessie Fauset, in the blues narrative there was no need for "double-voicing." Although the blues was close to the black folkist narratives of another contemporary, Zora Neale Hurston, much of Hurston's work (as fine as it is) in many ways is conscious of its "anthropological" appeal to whites. In the songs of Rainey and Smith, poor women could see their lives reflected in the blues. The important part of the form, significantly, was its collective nature which followed a familiar tradition. "They were the collective property of the black community, disseminated, like folktales, in accordance with the community's oral tradition."

> A blues sung by one person and heard, remembered, revised, and resung by another belonged as much to the second performer as to the first. This socializing character of the blues rendered conscious the shared nature of emotional experience as well as the collective character of the blues form itself. (Davis 136)

However, their marginal status allowed the female blues singer to un-ambivalently project the black woman as a sexual subject, which is what Deborah E. McDowell refers

to as their predicament between black bourgeois morality and the "free love" atmosphere of the 1920s.

In songs like "I'm Wild About That Thing" – "Give it to me, papa, I'm wild about that thing/Do it easy, honey, don't get rough/From you, papa, I can't get enough/Please don't hold it, baby, when I cry/Gimme every bit of it, else I'll die/ Gee, I like your ting-a-ling" – the expression of open sexuality deliberately revised the established trope of black female sexuality – the blues explicitly embraced, and signified on the myth of the black Jezebel in a ways that horrified the respectable black middle and upper-classes. Equally horrifying was the fact that the blues – and the dark-skinned, lower class women who sang them – were increasingly (thanks to the recording industry) noticed by whites eager for something new. By "showing their assess" in public, the lighter-skinned elites wrapped the entitlements of class and color even tighter around themselves as Smith, especially, was vocal on her contempt for light-skinned women in general. The appearance of the female blues singer, thus, allowed black conservative moralists to "dump" the excess of female sexuality directly on the nappy heads of dark-skinned Jezebels.

As Angela Davis argues because the blues were not ideologically bound by the tenets of bourgeois black women's clubs, "they could issue more direct and audacious challenges to male dominance. . . . that refused to privilege racism over sexism, or the conventional public realm over the private as the preeminent domain of power" (42). Rainey and Smith, especially were know to be the "patriarchs" of their families of traveling male and female musicians; Smith, a large imposing woman, was known for her

"colorful" language when crossed, and was not averse to using her fists in physical confrontations with other women, *and* men. Furthermore, the open sexuality of the blues also includes the unmentionable topic of homosexuality. Rainey's audience were well aware of her sexual attraction for women, and for those who did not know, the lyrics of "Prove It On Me Blues" demonstrates just how much of a "wild woman" Rainey was. The point here is that the open contravening of patriarchal order often allowed the disapproval of these women to cross class lines. The community reaction to Shug Avery from The Color Purple is a telling example.

Shug Avery vividly recalls the fierce independence of the blues women whose independence from patriarchal control was seen as a detriment to domestic order, and Christian values. For Celie, trapped in a marriage that treats her as little more than a slave, Shug represents the impossible: a freedom reserved for men. A sick Shug returns home to the community's disapproval: "Shug Avery sick and nobody in this town want to take the Queen Honeybee in. Her mammy say She told her so. Her pappy say, Tramp. A woman at church say she dying – maybe two berkulosis or some kind of nasty woman disease." Thus, the intent is to imply that Shug's sexual independence is the cause of her "nasty woman disease." Accordingly, the minister takes Shug's transgressive body as his text as an example to the other women about falling from patriarchal control.

> Even the preacher got his mouth on Shug Avery, now she down he take her condition for his text. He don't call no name, but he don't have to. Everybody know who he mean. He talk bout a strumpet in short skirts, smoking cigarettes, drinking gin. Singing for money and taking other

women mens. Talk bout slut, hussy, heifer and streetcleaner. (40)

As Davis notes, the female blues singer not only disrupted the strict binaries between the sacred and the profane, but they also "provided a space in which the coercions of bourgeois notions of sexual purity and 'true womanhood' were absent" (44). As their lyrics suggest, the female blues singer in the work of working-class female up-lift directly called into question the unitary model of black womanhood based on sexual chastity. This re-working, however, does not mean that they were not insensible to the effect of slavery on the female body, but the importance of their disruption of the black patriarchal text for female sexual conformity exposed the spaces that allowed them to suggest other options of "true-womanhood."

The legacy of class and color tensions in the cultural products of African American women that I have attempted to outline should be considered as pieces of a quilt that stitches together a variety of "differences" that together make up – or at least indicates – the problems of essentializing the black female experience. The problems of privileging *some* experiences over others on the basis of skin color, phenotype, and economic class position as I have attempted to argue, is a fruitless, and ultimately futile exercise as different groups in the African American community continue to contest the class rights to a black cultural authenticity. This consideration compelled an examination of the oral vernacular of the blues in order to resist marginalizing working-class responses.

The importance of blues forms call attention also to the stylistic differences in black women's creative efforts in intentionality. On the one hand, the written texts of authors of the post-Reconstruction and early twentieth century were readily available,

and often intended for an audience outside of the black community which accounted for their dualistic structure. However, this was not the case for the traditional oral vernacular, a style that can be traced from the plantation to the blues, and ultimately to the works of Walker, Morrison and other contemporary black women writers. This genealogy, in fact, contributes to many women writers who came of age after the Civil Rights Movement to trace their creative heritage to Zora Neale Hurston whose works reflect the agency of the missing voices of rural black women, and captures the oral vernacular dismissed by the cultural elite of the Harlem Renaissance. Although, I have not dealt with the works of Hurston here, this is not an indication that I consider her works less of an important component of my discussion.

Although my concern is not with tracing, or establishing a tradition of women's writing, I hope that I have suggested a variety of strategies that illuminate a thematic trope that calls for a constant re-evaluation of the continued issues of intraracial and intraclass difference based on how black women represented themselves from the late nineteenth-century to the beginnings of the twenty-first.

Chapter Three: Representin' and Frontin': Images in Color

Introduction

As social critic bell hooks explains in Reel to Reel: Race, Sex and Class at the Movies, the movies provide a discursive narrative in which spectator and narrator share a dialogue about the constitutive elements that we believe about "race, sex, and class." For many spectators, the movies provide not only aesthetic pleasure, but "a common starting point" in which we are able to enter a series of dialogues about what we experience through the communal narratives supplied by cinematic fantasy (2). However, shared cinematic experiences are often dependent on the sharers' ways of "seeing" and assimilating images of race and gender, or rather the ways in which we are able to either accept or resist cinematic illusion. "Whether we call it 'willing suspension of disbelief' or just plain submission," explains hooks, "in the darkness of the theater most audiences choose to give themselves over, if only for a time, to the images depicted and the imaginations that have created those images" (3). hooks' clear and thorough analysis provides a working theoretical paradigm for my analysis of the visual images produced by African Americans that, in themselves, reinforce, and re-inscribe intraracial dialogues concerning gender, color, and class from the very inception of independent black filmmaking.

In order to approach color and class bias in African American visual culture, I examine the color-caste system in early African American independent film-making as a response to the negative and demeaning cultural attributes signaled by the dark skin (often whites in black-face) contained in films like The Birth of A Nation. Anna Everett

contends that early black spectators "were able to bring a critical distance to the cinematic texts that featured white actors burlesquing of black people's lives."

> Since these portrayals had so little to do with their real or ideal lives
> And everything to do with the white racial imaginary, it is unlikely
> That early black spectators were subject to the mirror phase of
> Cinematic identification with these caricatures. Rather, the critical
> Distance permitted black audiences to read cinematic texts differently,
> Perhaps even oppositionally. (31)

However, by *opposing* the mainstream stigma of darkened skin early black film pioneers also inadvertently reinforced assimilated values that associated skin color with class position and gender desirability, often highly dependent on the political and cultural values and aims for each black generation. Thus, for example, the light-skin color and class centrality of the Lincoln and Micheaux film companies in the early twentieth century reflected the aspirations of the New Negro, a minute portion of the black middle-class marked by their color, education and white middle-class values that often served to separate them from the darker masses. This is not to say that the black middle-class wished to be white themselves (a charge that comes to political fruition in the early seventies era of the Black Power and Black Arts movements), but the ideology of an American mainstream inclusion based on class behavior was too often preached from a light-skinned, European featured face, or academically trained cultural nationalists who decided what aspects of African American folkways should be mediated through film.

Black Film Is. . . .And Black Film Ain't

The purpose of this chapter is to examine the ways in which African Americans visually represent the black experience filtered through skin color and economic class tensions endemic to the black community as a whole. Although the response to the racism of Hollywood cinema from its lowly beginnings as a "toy,"to the explosion of broadcast and cable television, called for an independent black film praxis in order to refute the racist images parading across movie and (later) television screens, defining an oppositional black visual aesthetic is highly problematic at best. The first problem concerns definitions. What exactly is a "black film?" Black film scholar Mark A. Reid in Redefining Black Film notes the problems of definition shared by white movie and television executives alike, definitions which he finds "faulty or limited."

> Many earlier books that document this area define black film too broadly and presume that any film with black characters is a black film. Other works identify black film as those works written or directed by blacks, and some texts use subjective criteria such as aesthetics or a black perspective to define black film. (1)

However, not *any* film with black characters qualifies as a "black" film. 1972's Sounder based on the book by a white author, and filmed by a white director from a black authored screen-play, and starring an all black cast is considered by many African Americans as a black film classic, whereas many of the films from the Blaxploitation era (released and distributed by white film studios) are considered to be problematic by many black cultural critics as examples of a politically engaged, cultural representation of an

emerging black film oppositional aesthetic. As I demonstrate later, the very term "independent black film" is freighted with multiple meanings that suggest intra-class struggles for black cultural authenticity.

In his (re)definition of black film, Mark A. Reid argues for a distinction between "black commercial film"and "black independent film." The black independent film, he argues, is "a film that focuses on the black community and is written, directed, produced, and distributed by individuals who have some ancestral link to black Africa" (2). Ed Guerrero adds that black independent films "exemplify" the "struggle to render forth-right, nuanced interpretations of black life against the co-opting, homogenizing pressures of the commercial cinema system" (169).Black Film theorist Gladstone L. Yearwood emphasizes a concerted Afrocentric praxis for black independent filmmaking that "gives priority to producing its own expressive paradigms, which redefine the nature of entertainment as a social institution and narrative as a means of encoding the world based on its cultural requirements" (11). Thomas Cripps, however, refuses to make the distinction between commercial and independent film, and defines black film "as those motion pictures made for theater distribution that have a black producer, director, and writer, or black performers; that speak to black audiences or, incidentally, to white audiences possessed of preternatural curiosity, attentiveness, or sensibility toward racial matters; and that emerge from self-conscious intentions, whether artistic or political, to illuminate the Afro-American experience" (357). Although, I would agree with the first half of Cripps' assessment, I would argue that no matter how "curious" whites are about black life, black and white spectators do *not* view the images of blacks in the same way.

Pointedly, James Snead adds that black independent films "since the sixties have the feeling of intimate conversations between filmmaker and audience, and deal with issues *within* the black community, without special regard for a theoretical white viewer" (117).These definitions are all well and good, especially as oppositional representations that refute the one-sided, homogeneous image of blacks in commercial Hollywood films; however, given the intricate and often confusing costs of film finance, a *truly* black independent film making is a perilous undertaking for minority filmmakers.

For many black filmmakers, the issue of financing compromises the label of "independence" as many black filmmakers actively compete for academic, governmental, corporate grants to accomplish their artistic visions. "One can declare one's independence," notes James Snead, "but in film – a particularly collective and capital-intensive art form – true independence is hardly attainable, even in the most modest productions" (108). And many black filmmakers have had their vision modified by the lures of the large commercial studios. Director Spike Lee was famously forced to seek the financial help of influential and wealthy black entertainers in order to finish his vision of Malcolm X (1992) when he exceeded Warner Brothers "skimpy" line-budget for the three hour plus film, and issued their preference "for the Malcolm *after* Mecca, when he stopped calling white folk blue-eyed grafted devils" (Generation X 179). Smaller, and inexpensive black films, notes Guerrero, often have a harder time gaining the financial resources achieved by the glossier Malcolm X. Lee, of course, was no stranger to the lack of financing many black independents face, and recalls the arduous task of financing his break-out film She's Gotta Have It (1986): "I had no money coming in, so I had to hold

off the debtors because I knew if I had enough time to at least get it in good shape to show, we could have some investor screenings" (Diawara 7). Chameleon Street (1989), for example, "was financed and made for around $1 million, largely through his [Wendell B. Harris] efforts at persuading friends, professionals, and community members to invest in the project" (173). Noting that "independent filmmaking causes many people to become poor," Manthia Diawara, points out that: "It takes more than six years for some filmmakers to gather the money for one film. Charles Burnett's To Sleep With Anger, and Julie Dash's Daughters of the Dust came only after arduous years (10) of fund-raising. Haile Gerima has been trying to raise funds for Nunu for several years now" (6).

Along with the difficult issue of financing, moreover, was the arduous task of distribution. Small budgeted films that dealt with the complexities of the black experience, in other words, the black experience unfamiliar to a majority of whites, were often relegated to boutique "art houses," film festivals, and museums in urban areas sophisticated enough to support venues for "alternative" cinema. Further, adds Guerrero, is the matter of marketing at a time (1990) when "much of the black audience is a youth market and as such is action-adventure oriented" (172). Complex, black independent films like To Sleep With Anger and Daughters of the Dust (1990), thus, never reach mainstream markets due to the failure of major film distributors in marketing these films to black audiences[3]. Often films like Daughters of the Dust and Haile Gerima's Sankofa

[3] We must also take into consideration the demise of "downtown" theaters in favor of the suburban multiplex which followed close on the heels of white-flight from the inner cities.

(1993) were specifically marketed by their respective filmmakers through the network of black sororities and fraternities as elite black cultural events. Such marketing strategies, unfortunately, were not conducive to wide-spread marketing through out black urban America . Although some independent black films did manage to break out of the "art house" niche, films like Matty Rich's Straight Out of Brooklyn (1991) and Robert Townsend's Hollywood Shuffle (1987) found success with young, black urban audiences who could relate to the urban grittiness of Straight Out of Brooklyn , and the comedy of Hollywood Shuffle more than they could to the subtle shadings (*and* subtitles) of an intellectually complex film like Julie Dash's elegiac Daughters of the Dust.

However, the late 1990s witnessed the growth of a "true" black independent film-making with the combination of inexpensive digital cameras, and an influx of hip-hop money and hip-hop savvy. These films by-passed white financing, marketing, and distribution by relying on young hip-hop entrepreneurs, rappers, and ex-gangbangers. The bulk of the plots in these straight-to-video productions center on familiar tropes of gang-warfare and the violent world of drug dealers, and were advertised by word-of-mouth and in magazines devoted to hip-hop. As Ed Guerrero notes: "because of audience segmentation, ever-shrinking release times from theater to tape, and a more nuanced and flexible video distribution system, the VCR format encourages medium-to low-budget productions. . . .that mediate the territory between the independent and mainstream sensibilities" (206). However, many aspiring video directors have used these films as additional training ground in order to move to video shoots which in themselves are elaborate mini-movies. With extremely low-budgets, and minimal marketing and

manufacturing costs, films like Belly (1998) – directed by music video director Hype Williams, and with an all-black cast of hip-hop stars – are extremely popular (and un-tracked by white critical institutions) with young, black audiences. Additionally, mainstream Hollywood has taken notice of the cross-over appeal of popular rap artists whose "underground" films have garnered attention,[4]and major distributors and film studios have partnered, for example, with ex-NWA rapper/actor Ice Cube and his independent film company CubeVision to distribute the highly popular (and profitable) Friday and Barbershop franchises.

A new site for independent black filmmaking, curiously enough, is the black church, a traditional critic of black film. Initially, the entrance to black *Christian* dramatic works were through a series of popular formulaic plays that combined black Christian values, comedy, and copious amounts of Gospel music often performed in church, or in rented theaters. Although the level of play-writing skill varies, the plays have failed to attract close critical attention as specific black cultural representations. Currently, Hollywood and white critics have been astounded by the huge box-office success of Tyler Perry's The Diary of A Mad Black Woman (2005) based on his long-running series of plays targeted to black Christian conservative middle-class women. Perry's stage plays[5] are highly profitable precisely because his clever marketing strategy (word of mouth)specifically targets black middle-class churches who enjoy his blend of

[4] Many of these films are distributed by street-corner merchants. Video rental out-lets have also taken notice of these films' appeal – they are usually found labeled as "Urban Hits."

[5] Perry's plays have also enjoyed success on DVD, another outlet for independent black film making out-side of the white mainstream.

African American religious and cultural values that many (especially black women) find missing in mainstream cinema. Ingeniously, Perry's plays are centered around black women, the importance of family and cultural traditions, and generous helpings of broad comedy. Perry's career as black independent producer can be directly traced to black pioneers Oscar Micheaux and his contemporary the Christian film-maker Eloise Gist who unlike Micheaux never had to resort to white financing. But in terms of narrative structure, and thematic material Perry is the spiritual heir of Spencer Williams whose 1941 film The Blood of Jesus "utilizes African American religious iconography and practice as structural and stylistic devices." Although Perry's The Diary of A Mad Black Woman is not as overt in the use of religious iconography, his film does share with Williams' film the use of "African American spiritual music. . . .as an integral formal element of the narration" (Yearwood 36). My point here is that regardless of aesthetic values, these films do manage to fit Reid and Guerrero's definition of an independent black film and further recognition of a black heterogeneity that are over-looked because of a class and cultural elitism practiced by black cultural critics.

Again, turning to Mark A. Reid's narrow definition of a specifically entity labeled "black film," Reid acknowledges the inherent problems in the black independent film as I have outlined. However, he goes further in his definition by separating the "commercial" from what he identifies as "the black independent film." The black commercial film, he states, "is limited. . . .to any feature-length fiction film whose central focus is the Afro-American community."

> This film is written, directed, or produced by at least one black person in

> collaboration with non-black people. Films included in this category are distributed by major American film companies. (4)

Although Reid does point out the benefits for black film-makers who, as he says, "will seize any opportunity to work for a major motion picture studio," because of the commercial studio's structural financial support, there is the implication that blacks involved with the

big commercial studios, no matter how tangentially, are some how less "authentically" black than those who rely on governmental and philanthropic grants and agencies. As he notes, "there are some black filmmakers who resist the calls of fame and increased production budgets."

> Blacks involved with major film studios also receive automatic publicity, which increases their sense of self-importance. . . .a financially and critically successful black filmmaker, such as Spike Lee or John Singleton, gains a discernible amount of control over future projects, crews, and production budgets. (125)

Reid does have a point, but his statement is infused with an elitism belied by his thinly veiled tone about the content of films which he considers proper black film. Implicit in Reid's fulmination against Lee and Singleton is the assertion that true, independent black filmmaking is purer and more authentically black; after all – as he points out – films by talented and brilliant filmmakers like Dash, Gerima, Burnett, and journalist/film-maker William Greaves are important black cultural representations of African American heterogeneity that do not pander to mainstream expectations like the work of Lee and

Singleton. However, the problem in Reid's obvious bias lies in the inaccessibility of a majority of black independent cinema to a wider African American audience who – regardless of what Reid would hope for – find that these films do not speak to them in the same ways that the average Hollywood product does. Thus, Thomas Cripps is partly correct when he points out that "Black film taken in its narrowest sense then consists of only a tiny body of work seen by a coterie of black moviegoers, then consigned to an early death in dusty storerooms, not to be seen again until brought to light in 'white' repositories like the Library of Congress" (358).

Reid is correct, though, when he argues that the black commercial film rarely address issues of race, class, gender, and sexuality directly. But, I would counter that implicit in many black commercial films the issues of class and skin color – especially when it intersects with gender – are indeed explicit in the images produced by blacks *for* blacks. Films like Spike Lee's School Daze and Jungle Fever , and John Singleton's Boyz N the Hood directly and indirectly address the legacy of genderized color and class tensions within the African American community. Singleton's film, in particular, graphically articulates the hopes *and* limitations of class and race as means to ghetto survival, or ghetto escape. School Daze (which I discuss later) satirized the color-struck world of black colleges which earned Spike Lee the accusation of "airing dirty laundry" for the titillation of white spectators. Furthermore, many white critics who became "experts" on black life because they praised John Singleton's Boyz N the Hood (1991), and Allen and Albert Hughes's 1993 nihilistic gangsta' tale Menace to Society were at a critical loss when confronted with the world of middle-class, college educated, and

articulate blacks in films like The Best Man (1999), and The Brothers (2001), or Waiting to Exhale (1995) and 1998's How Stella Got Her Groove Back which combined disturbed their image of African Americans as "different" from their own middle-class values as Entman and Rojecki correctly assess:

> Blacks are prisoners of the widespread acceptance by Whites of what is understood to be the prototypical – the most representative – Black person for Whites, the prototype of the Black person is a lower class or "under" class individual of little economic attainment or status. That means Blacks of outstanding attainment in several of the dimensions will be seen as atypical, as the exception. (53)

However, the films that actively resisted (white) expectations of African Americans (along were immensely popular with black middle-class audiences who could not identify with the plethora of one-dimensional "gangs-in-the-hood" style depictions of black experience, no matter how well done. The critical reception of these films of black, middle-class urban professionals (and this goes back to Cripps' statement about white "preternatural curiosity, attentiveness, or sensibility") by white critics – and most likely a majority of whites – could not "find" the image of blacks that most replicated the images seen on the evening news. The black resistance found in these films does not mean that black commercial film-makers did not utilize the same color-coded signifiers familiar to black spectators. As I argue later, gradations of skin color continue to be used by African American visual artists to communicate class and gender values that are "read" exclusively by black spectators.

Further compounding the problems of financing, marketing, and distribution is the issue of gender, both on camera and behind. Independent film-maker Yvonne Welborn recounts the difficulties of black female film-makers in her documentary Sisters in Cinema (2003) where she interviews a number of black women whose films center on gender and sexuality issues. Significantly, as Welborn makes clear, as we re-discover and re-evaluate the early works of black male film-makers like Oscar Micheaux and Spencer Williams, little is known (or written) about Tressie Souders who wrote, produced, and directed A Woman's Error (1922), or Marie P. Williams who produced Flames of Wrath (1923). The exclusion of both women in black cinema history, again, points to the doubled oppression black women continue to face in a medium controlled by men where women have little access to the means of production, although some have found success in articulating the past and present lives of African American women. Continued limited access based on gender, thus, circumscribes a true picture of heterogeneity in black experience, or as the late Toni Cade Bambara terms black women inclusion:"Afrafemcentric orientation." Heterosexist control over the available images of the black community (as oppositional practice) also negates sexual diversity as black gay and lesbian voices are further marginalized under an increasingly black hetero-normative ideology.

In a way, my argument involves a middle ground between the widely seen black commercial film (and television) and what Mark A. Reid considers an authentic independent black film. As I have pointed out, an all-black film is difficult to define because film-making remains a hybrid entity of available, and technical talent, limited

access to financial avenues, and finally, the important availability of marketing and distribution. As Ed Guerrero suggests labels of "independent" and "commercial" cinemas are not as clear cut as many would have them – and Spike Lee, once hailed as a promising black independent, is a case in point. Hence, my criteria for black film is a film with black talent behind and in front of the camera, and a narrative that speaks to, or reflects *any* aspect of the African American experience. As I demonstrate, the specific aspects of African American filmmaking address issues of skin color and class bias, often implicitly in casting and narrative choices that have historically made attempts to recuperate an image of African Americans. These worthy attempts, I point out, also reflect internal tensions within the community itself as political ideologies conflict and compete for the prize of black cultural authenticity.

Overwhelmed By the Impossible: Early Black Independents

Biographer Richard Schickel writes about the pivotal position of D. W. Griffith in American film history: "It may be argued that his contribution to the development of film technique" –

> a contribution that may be summarized by saying that he had the insight to understand that a technological novelty could be converted into an instrument capable of sustaining complex narrative development, an instrument that partook of some of the qualities of several other arts, yet had its own remarkable language and imperatives. . . .(12)

What Schickel and other mainstream film historians point to, is Griffith's importance to the artistic possibilities of American cinema as a concrete artistic form. This is not to say

that Griffith (as commonly believed) invented the technical aspects of film-making, but Griffith's importance consists in putting together the technology of film-making and American racial ideology that influenced generations of American film-makers (black and white) who came after him. "He borrowed, invented, and learned pacing, strengthened the narrative ability of the medium, and adopted the conventions of melodrama," explains Thomas Cripps, "to the grammar of the film" (27). Although Griffith was not the first American film-maker to depict racial stereotypes to early American spectators – indeed, the issue of "racial difference" was already in evidence at the beginnings of motion pictures as Jim Pines points out. "The black image was inherently useful not just in terms of entertainment value, though this played a highly important part overall, but also, and more dynamically, in terms of its iconic-cultural recognizability" (7). But with one film, Griffith set the iconic standard for the appearance of blackness in film: both as practice, and as oppositional resistance.

In a way, Griffith could be considered (at the very least) a progenitor to African American independent film-making due to the mainstream reception of The Birth of A Nation (1915). Outraged at the film's ugly racism and travesty of historical truth, Northern civil rights groups demanded an end to the film's appearances in American cinemas. "Griffith's picture," recounts Thomas Cripps, "had produced hasty decisions, nationwide protests, and more direct action than anyone in the black leadership had ever contemplated" (71). As with Griffith's film, "It is virtually impossible," asserts Jim Pines, "to find what one might consider a sympathetic black characterization in the fiction film before 1910, and even after this period, the notion of sympathetic racial

images is highly dubious"(10). One remedy was to boycott the film in each Northern city that the film appeared. However, Cripps points out that one alternative response from African American civil rights and cultural groups was "to move toward a cinema, rather than a censorship," which meant a black cinematic response to Griffith's racial libel that would also serve to "up-lift" the black masses who were arriving from a South – glorified in The Birth of A Nation – in record numbers. The NAACP quickly organized a film production, Lincoln's Dream, a planned film which, just as quickly, fell apart due to "their fear of breaking the anonymity of the members and of losing money" (72). Another cinematic response was the African American produced The Birth of A Race (1918) planned by Booker T. Washington and his personal secretary, Emmett J. Scott. However, the ambitious production, like the aborted Lincoln's Dream adeptly demonstrated the pitfalls of establishing a black cinematic praxis wholly independent from white control and the ideological aims of competing civil rights agendas. The results were disastrous due to the mismanagement of scanty financing, and the complete erasure of black interests. The lack of financial backing, however, did not deter other blacks from entering the market, among the most promising black film companies created in the wake of the controversy of Griffith's paean to white supremacy was the Lincoln Motion Picture Company.

According to Thomas Cripps: "By the end of the war there were so many small black companies that overextension and overproduction resulted." Encouraged by the limited success of George P. and Noble Johnson's The Realization of A Negro's Ambition (1915) and The Trooper of Troop K (1916) for their new Lincoln Motion

Picture Company, dozens of hastily formed black motion picture companies appeared to take advantage of, what many hoped to be, a new field for black cultural representations. The advertisements in black newspapers and journals promised lofty ambitions, and glossy brochures reflected a turning point in African American cinematic images produced by blacks for blacks:

> Charlatans and "good race men" competed in the same markets, each claiming "to offset the evil effects of certain photoplays that have libeled the Negro," "to bring about interracial understanding," "to show the better side of Negro life," and "to inspire in the Negro a desire to 'climb higher.'[6] (84).

But, again, burgeoning ambitions for a black motion picture industry to offer up-lifting images of the New Negro were hampered by the lack of financing, and a reliable system of distribution."White companies not only had distribution centers," continues Cripps, " regional exchanges, and bookers, but even while their money was tied up in current releases they could still confidently expect loans from the Bank of America and other staid institutions" (87). However, George Johnson acutely aware of the financial and distribution problems faced by black movie entrepreneurs, coupled by the "frauds" and the "wasteful spreading of meagre (sic) capital," "attempted to build a network of personal friends across the nation to serve as bookers. Later he would move to Los

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[6] Significantly (as Thomas Cripps notes) earlier cinematic productions by African American entertainers Bill Foster (The Railroad Porter-1912), blackface comedian Bert Williams (A Natural Born Gambler), and the special appearance of heavy-weight boxer Jack Johnson (For His Mother's Sake) "went largely unrecorded, even in the black press" (76) most likely because of their "coonish antics." (See chapter 4).

Angeles so they could merge production and distribution under one roof" (79). To their credit, the Johnsons also "created an all-Negro exchange, printed their own advertising handouts to accompany each release, and made their own preview slides" (80). But unfortunately, their independent enterprise was not enough. Compounding the lack of access to mainstream financial investors was the unfortunate fact that there were too many black companies chasing the too few black dollars necessary to sustain a much needed market. As Cripps explains: "To demand loyalty to the race from the black world was an anomaly in the larger American economic system. The plight of blacks seemed to require communal rather than competitive activity. Competition seemed wasteful and debilitating, especially with the market sprinkled with hidden white backers and exploiters" (85).

However, in the eagerness of the Johnson brothers to provide cinematic images that were constructed "to inspire in the Negro a desire to climb higher," the all-black casting of their black dramas of middle-class life set a color precedent endemic to black commercial film-making. Impelled by the revolting racial constructions on screen by white Hollywood early African American film companies (hampered always by the scarcity of funds and distribution) produced motion pictures that showed blacks in sophisticated urban settings, and in dramatic situations that were far from the "plantation" stereotypes of white imagination. Unlike the Hollywood depictions of African Americans where white film-makers preferred their blacks unmistakably Negroid *and* black, the Johnsons (and later Oscar Micheaux) stocked their films with the lightest, European featured African Americans they could find – regardless of acting talent. The

all-black cast movies took pains to provide "up-lifting" stories which many black producers believed represented the new "realities" of black life. Unfortunately, the films of the Johnsons scrupulously avoided *any* suggestion of racial struggle, or racial disparity among its black upper and middle-class characters who appeared to have sprung fully formed as exemplars of the American Dream in a world completely inhabited by African Americans. Produced for the new "race market"[7] many of these films, nevertheless, represented black elite aspirations that could not help but keep intact the elevated status of light-skinned blacks in urban black communities across America.

Thomas Cripps points out, however, that: "The most tangled problem of aesthetics was the need for a mythic figure."

> Critics had already begun to see the larger-than-life mythic quality of the cinema beyond its form and expression as art. Hence, movies presented a sometimes unstated conundrum for black film-makers because whites to one degree or another had assimilated the core values of American life and had developed mythic heroes to symbolize the values. (171)

Thus, many early black films merely tapped into existing mythic images by "coloring" them brown, thus, in "race films" audiences could thrill to a black Sherlock Holmes, or a black Valentino who were *all* lighter-skinned than the majority of audiences who enjoyed – at the very least – non-stereotypical images of African Americans. Oscar Micheaux,

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[7] Early "race" films were also hampered by the fact that many urban blacks lacked the disposable income that would allow them to support black film efforts, either as investors or paying customers. Equally important was the censure of traditional Southern black Baptist churches who viewed movie-going as an immoral frivolity. My maternal great-grandfather, a Baptist minister, forbade his children and grand - children from attending movie houses. However, his daughter relaxed the rule and allowed *her* children to see the "religious films" of Cecil B. De Mille, but forbade any other Hollywood product.

famously, exploited the practice in advertising his own films. According to Donald Bogle: "He modeled his stars after white Hollywood personalities and publicized them as black versions."

> Handsome and smooth Lorenzo Tucker was first referred to as the "black Valentino." Later when talkies came in, he was the "colored William Powell." Sexy and insolent Bee Freeman, a vamp figure, was the "sepia Mae West." Slick Chester, a character actor who played gangster roles, was the "colored Cagney." Lovely Ethel Moses was sometimes touted as the "Negro Harlow." (114)

Furthermore, as befitting his aggressive promotion for his films, Micheaux would often show potential investors for a future film the stills of his "stars" touting their "sale-ability" as familiar Hollywood types. But the utilization of such obvious mythic reversals did not mean that black independent film-makers routinely followed white models of screen heroic image making. Although many of the early "race" films remain lost, from existing stills, screen outlines, and other descriptions, "race" films often addressed issues of concern to the black communities, but in keeping with the color and class standards within the black community, the black faces were as "white" as possible.

"They all thought that I was finished, but I am only started."

Donald Bogle and Micheaux scholar Pearl Bowser both recount the criticism leveled at Micheaux's color and class preferences. "What remains Oscar Micheaux's greatest contribution,"argues Bogle, "is often viewed by contemporary black audiences

as his severest short-coming. That his films reflected the interests and outlooks of the black bourgeoisie will no doubt always be held against him."

> His films never centered on the ghetto; they seldom dealt with racial misery and decay. Instead they concentrated on the problems of "passing" or the difficulties facing "professional people."

What Bogle points out, the impulse to demonstrate class differences in the black community, remains a difficult problem today as the black middle-class continues to grow and turn away from the current mainstream commercial appeal of "hood-life" movies of the 1990s. But Micheaux *did* focus on the problems many new Southern migrants faced in Northern cities in films like The Scar of Shame and Body and Soul, although Micheaux did not dwell on "racial misery," Within Our Gates (1920) with its scenes of rape and the lynching of black men was forced to have its more "inflammatory" scenes cut during a wave of Northern racial violence. However, Micheaux's films did transmit his own color and class bias in his fixation on his light-skinned casts in upper and middle-class settings where, writes Manthia Diawara, he "posits Black upper-class culture as that which should be emulated by lower-class Blacks in order to ***humanize*** [my emphasis] themselves" (Black American Cinema 7). I would argue that what is held against Micheaux is not his emphasis on middle-class lives, but (more significantly) his emphasis on the uniform light-coloring of his casts as the visible sign of ***humanness***. Even Bogle finds some merit in charging Micheaux with colorism, although he makes the charge as palatable as possible befitting Micheaux's stature as a black "first."

> He [Micheaux] was determined to depict blacks as just as affluent,

> just as educated, just as "cultured" as white America. Though Micheaux's films – with their light bright leads and their darker "lower" classes – might embarrass people today, they represent an important part of black film and social history. (115-116)

While I would agree with Bogle's assessment of Micheaux's *intended* purpose in casting light-skinned actors in black middle-class settings, light-skinned elitism was not new in Micheaux's time, nor in the late twentieth-century, Micheaux's colorism does not in anyway erase his status as a black pioneer film-maker. As Manthia Diawara maintains, early black film-makers like Micheaux explicitly opposed the images of white film-makers in their own films where "Black people are neither marginalized as a problem, nor singled out as villainous stereotypes. . . ." (7). This is the lasting importance of Oscar Micheaux. Any "embarrassment" late twentieth-century black spectators may feel about these early examples of black film-making are most likely that the issue of colorism has lasted into the twenty-first century.

Incisive critics of Micheaux's films, Pearl Bowser and Louise Spence in their invaluable and insightful assessment of Micheaux's "color-caste system," claim that although "the question of color is a recurring interest for Micheaux. . . . his is not a simple 'infatuation with color,' nor is it simply a narrative contrivance. . . .it is far more complex."

> Although he was sometimes accused of casting by color, he criticized the color-caste system within the community as destructive social behavior. And although he created a star system of many fair-skinned

> performers. . . .chosen for their "look" and potential appeal to audiences, he didn't necessarily associate these "looks" with certain qualities, such as goodness. (171)

And to support their point, the authors cite the dark-skinned Paul Robeson who plays a dual role (hero and villain) in Body and Soul (1925), and the extremely light-skinned Micheaux regular Larry Chenault who plays a "scoundrel." In addition, Bowser and Spence also cite the inexperienced Carl Mahon who as the "rugged outdoorsman hero, acquires his swarthy complexion with dark makeup" in The Symbol of the Unconquered (1920). But as they report: "Carl Mahon, who did not think of himself as an actor, felt that Micheaux cast him in romantic leads because of his 'exotic looks,' the combination of dark skin and straight hair" (171). But I would argue that these "exceptions" hardly support their discounting of Micheaux's skin-color bias. First, Bowser and Spence do not take into consideration Robeson's stature among African Americans at the time. Secondly, both critics fail to consider the fact that darkness of skin does not weigh as heavily on black men as it does on black women because of a heterosexist culture. Black men could, thus, judge themselves by other attributes while up-holding Eurocentric aesthetics of beauty for black women.

Body and Soul was the cinematic debut of singer/actor Paul Robeson, and Micheaux must have counted himself lucky in order to present someone of Robeson's stature in a role that showcased Robeson's considerable dramatic range[8]. Robeson's

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[8] Robeson, much to his considerable regret, would never again get another movie role that allowed him to exhibit the dramatic range that Micheaux's film offered.

dramatic abilities were also bolstered by his equably superior academic record at Rutgers College (1915-1918), and at Columbia University Law School (1919-1923) at a time when college educated black men were rare, and success at prestigious white institutions was a cause of celebration among the black middle-class. Bowser and Spence even acknowledge Micheaux's practice of utilizing well-known black celebrities as "shared points of identification to build audiences and, by surrounding himself with known people and identifiable names, validating his role as a moviemaker" 45). Even more important, was the fact that dark skin was "acceptable"for black men who were college educated, and/or successful in their chosen fields. A perfect example is the dark-skinned (and self-conscious) African American poet Paul Laurence Dunbar who was embraced by the light-skinned elite because of his cultured manners and wide-spread celebrity as black America's premiere poet. Similarly, the equally dark Micheaux was accepted by the black middle-class as a successful business and "race" man[9]. Dark-skinned women, of course, were not accorded the same type of "pass,"which is reflected in Micheaux's color choices for his leading ladies.

"Micheaux," writes Gladstone L. Yearwood, "calls attention to women in his films through his choice of attractive, light-skinned actresses to play various roles. Yet, the narration does not develop an excessive voyeurism and its attendant sexism" (34). But I would suggest that Micheaux's films do suggest a racial voyeurism in their emphasis on light-skinned women often in intimate settings, or as near victims of sexual assault.

[9] Both men (including Robeson) also followed the expected pattern for dark-skinned successful men by marrying extremely light-skinned women as out-ward symbols of their success.

Although Micheaux's female characters disrupted the familiar trope of feminine whiteness by including a range of female character types (mothers, sweethearts, wives, vamps), nevertheless, the women in a Micheaux conformed to the expected color and straight hair visual requirements. Working against the prevailing racist dogma of the black woman's inherent sexuality, bell hooks argues that the filmmaker "encourages audiences to resist the urge to construct a totalizing vision of woman, one that sees the female as embodying all that is evil, licentious, and morally corrupt" (Black Looks 139). Bowser and Spence tellingly include a sample of Micheaux's casting opinions in his own hand where the director routinely noted the physical attributes ("bright complexion with good hair,""can pass for white") of future players. Although Bogle, Bowser, and Spence (among other perceptive critics) point to Within Our Gates (1920), The Scar of Shame (1928), God's Stepchildren (1938) and other films which condemned white racism, or intraracial color and class bias, I would counter that although the narratives of these films were of concern to African American spectators, it was the *images* and not the story that demonstrated Micheaux's inability to transcend his own color and class bias.

What is clear, even in "race films" created to answer the demeaning images of African Americans in American popular culture, is the fact that the mere *absence* of darker skinned people (especially black women) was too conspicuous to be ignored by a black audience experienced with a long history of skin color and black class values. Jane Gaines in "Fire and Desire: Race, Melodrama, and Oscar Micheaux," concludes that "The jury is still out on Oscar Micheaux," and finds that "there is much to be gained by

an approach to Micheaux that insists upon qualifying his African-American heritage with his class position."

> It has already been well established that Micheaux epitomized the Black bourgeois class, and that his novels as well as his films are thematic tributes to individualism as well as testimonies to the possibility of transcending race and class handicaps. (65)

Thus, Gaines privileges Micheaux's *class* distinctions over the images of skin color, although I would point out that Micheaux is working within a uniquely African American paradigm where class and skin color are often conflated, an indication the suggests the difficulty of separating one category over the other. In this context, the film-maker's color choices may not have been just his personal choices, but also dictated by financial reasons and providential happenstance.

Traveling to black communities in order to advertise his various film projects, Micheaux was often invited into the comfortable homes of the black middle-class whose well-appointed homes provided "movie sets" for Micheaux's limited budget. Shooting in black middle-class homes, complete with photographs of black families, and black icons (such as Booker T. Washington and Frederick Douglass) "add an air of prosperity and sense of intimacy. . . ." As Bowser and Spence correctly point out –

> These small details of characters' lives are not insignificant; they are referential and strategic, establishing the character and a sense of place. They are markers of "authenticity" that provide a comfort zone in this social place where Blacks can see credible images of themselves

and their lives on screen. (130)

Using such locations not only precluded added costs for studio rentals, or set recreations, but became an indelible part of an emerging black "realism" unseen in mainstream productions of rural black "homely" cabins of white fantasy. Since many of the owners of these well-appointed homes were often the light-skinned elite, Micheaux often "invited" them to try their hand at film acting as recompense; still others were approached as future investors. Other cost-cutting measures included "costuming" an expense Micheaux often circumvented by asking performers to provide their own clothing, and placing advertisements in black newspapers for "well-dressed persons" for his scenes of the wealthy at play. By and large, darker-skinned working-class black folks did not have the homes or expensive clothing Micheaux's narratives called for, a fact that most likely contributed to the color-casting. Furthermore, Micheaux as a director needed experienced black actors (certainly a precarious economic occupation for African Americans in the 1920s), and the realities of Jim Crow and the promise of steady work in Northern cities no doubt severely curtailed any acting aspirations of lower and working class blacks. However, as a 1924 photograph of the all-black Lafayette Players (one of the small black acting theatrical troupes of the time) suggests that dark skin and African features were also a bar to the dramatic arts. The use of light-skinned players merely reflected the social realities of African American life, not only for the perpetually financially-strapped film-maker, but also for the black community as a whole.

In her analysis of The Scar of Shame, Micheaux's tale of intraracial caste (class) boundaries, Jane Gaines describes the effects of the film's color-caste system on what she terms "the reader-viewer's space."

> In The Scar of Shame, the stylistic discourse carrying the melos is connected to the aesthetics of skin tone and hair texture played out in light, shadow, and shade. This color scheme or code would be known in its finer gradations and variations only to black audiences – to the group that would read a wealth of significance in the difference between processed and unprocessed coiffure, and would be sensitive to all kinds of hair-splitting along caste lines. (73)

Micheaux's investment in the ideology of racial "up-lift," and his firm belief in "individual responsibility," cite Bowser and Spence, "challenged white definitions of race without actually changing the terms." Bowser, Spence, and Gaines pose a critical question about the reception of the colorism and class bias to the all-black audiences of the "race market" which demonstrates the conflicted ambivalence (and divided political) ambitions many black cultural leaders endorsed for the promise of respectable black image making in the hands of blacks themselves. Class and color tensions were not an early twentieth century phenomena; a history of living with the results of miscegenation, and white favoritism for those who looked closer to themselves was as old as American slavery, and some fortunate blacks soon established themselves as a distinct "caste" separate from the mass of blacks who lacked the physical evidence of "white" blood. And it was those light-skinned blacks who took the reins in establishing beauty and class

standards in the black community by their own ambivalent absorption of white supremacy.

Not all black spectators of Micheaux's films watched them uncritically, as Bowser and Spence report. A striking example engendered a call for a black consumer boycott of 1938's God's Step-Children when many blacks strenuously objected that the film "slandered Negroes, holding them up to ridicule, and set light-skinned Negroes against their darker brothers" (Bowser and Spence 24). Micheaux's color-caste system, however, was not the only criticism the filmmaker received from the black community. Micheaux, like every black cultural producer was charged with presenting the "best" of the Race, an imperative that was at odds with Micheaux's stated goals of telling the "truth" – no matter how hurtful to black self-esteem or black unity. "Not all members of the audience," write Bowser and Spence, "for Oscar Micheaux's silent films were open to his representations of African American life."

> While some people applauded the pictures' "realistic" representations of particular aspects of community life and portraits of situations that needed to be addressed, others objected to seeing the seamier side of their experiences displayed on the screen. What appeared genuine to one segment of the population was repugnant to the idealism of another. (177)

Although Micheaux's grand narrative strategy had always been to make motion pictures that up-lifted the Race in "his own form of social realism", like future black commercial filmmakers, quickly found that "up-lifting" the "brother" was heavy work: "I have

always tried to make my photo-plays present the truth," he answered one black detractor, "to lay before the race a cross section of its own life, to view the colored heart from close range" (Bowser and Spence 183). On the one hand, the "burden of representation" places Micheaux in a difficult position as an African American "truth-teller." Telling the truth about black life came with a price, for the simple fact that the ideology of the time, not only wanted to counter the negative cinematic images of blacks in mainstream film, but also to model "respectable" black living for the thousands of Southern migrants flooding the North. But for an artist, the "burden" also limits choices about reconciling those very same individual choices (and for black filmmakers color and class are minefields of meaning) with the burden of representing an entire race that refuses to acknowledge *all* black voices for the sake of political expediency.

But the color-caste system also created a problem for lighter-skinned blacks as Hollywood turned increasingly to realism – at least in the politically sensitive matter of race. Realism for Hollywood (especially beginning with sound in 1927) meant the end of using white actors in blackface. Although extremely light-skinned actors like Noble Johnson attained work as silent Mexicans, Spaniards and exotic "Others," they were never used in prominent roles, not even as menial butlers and maids. Many light-skinned actors actually worked as maids and handy-men to white Hollywood stars merely to say that they worked in Hollywood, but for many college-trained black actors, the black film companies were their only avenues for employment. But, as Donald Bogle points out, "By the 1920s, the absurdity of the blackface tradition was apparent."

For blacks in films, the talkie era proved to be a major breakthrough.

> In the period 1927 to 1940, the number of Negro parts greatly increased. From the start, Hollywood was aware that talking movies needed sounds – music, rhythm, pizzazz, singing, dancing, clowning. And who, according to American myth, were more rhythmic or more musical than Negroes? (26)

The era of sound, thus, created jobs for blacks who could provide the light-hearted, lackadaisical black, and not for the polished, middle-class (and extremely light-skinned) actors used by the Lincoln and Micheaux companies whose connections with Hollywood were tenuous at best. By 1929, Hollywood wanted the "real thing," and the "real thing" was unmistakably dark-skinned, and throughout the 1930s the color-caste system of Black Hollywood turned up-side down as darker-skinned actors "tommed or jemimaed their ways through scores of bad movies." "No other period," writes Donald Bogle, "in motion-picture history could boast of more black faces carrying mops and pails or lifting pots and pans than the Depression years" (36). But even these performers were hurt by NAACP protests, a new political mood in the country about race, and a changed audience who, by the turbulent late sixties and earlier seventies, looked for a darker, and more militant face to represent black America.

The Badasssss Effect: The Return of the Black Buck

As I argue, the difference between a film like Sounder and, for example, Super Fly (both 1972) are more intricate than the amount of white involvement, or Hollywood studio control. Debates continue to rage on whether or not an African American true independence can viably exist as a commodity without compromising, what I consider,

are shifting definitions of a black aesthetic that functions (or not) as a unified vision of *the* black experience. "Despite the material progress most Americans enjoy," points Gladstone L. Yearwood, " the full promise of American society still eludes significant numbers of the African American population" (2) – a problem which has been extremely problematic for black cultural producers. First, I would argue that the yardstick for black cultural representation owes a great deal to the unresolved tensions around the issue of *class* within the black community and the heavy burden of representation expected from all black cultural producers. Such a burden presents two complicated problems that do not suggest easy answers. On the one hand, there is the impulse to impart to a highly resistant white mainstream the best of the "race," as if the visible fact of a black middle-class would somehow erase the years of racial segregation, and animosity. Early black films, thus proffered a fantasy (at least to a majority of their black spectators) that blacks exhibited the same class attributes of whites, and the implied message – at least to an imaginary white spectator – was that not all blacks occupied the same economic rung in American society. However, even this argument (given the minuscule white audience for "race" films) was wishful thinking at best. Thus, black cultural products begin from positions of opposition and resistance in order to present visualized evidence (so many argued) of a black heterogeneity, although the visual results tended to be one-sided which leads to the second problem.

Although black filmmakers were determined to resurrect the homogeneous portrayals of blacks in mainstream film, for black spectators the issue was complicated because of *whose* black experiences were privileged. Mark A. Reid points to, not only

mainstream attempts at gauging an average African American moviegoer, but also the same type of easy assumptions made by black filmmakers for the simple fact that "black audiences employ different reading strategies based on their class, ethnicity, gender, and sexual orientation" (49). Since the beginning days of black filmmaking, black audiences have overwhelmingly been drawn from the urban working and under-classes, and have alternately seen themselves portrayed through a historical and social cycle as debased, demonized, erased, and validated depending on whose black cultural watch controlled the images. To put it bluntly, by the 1970s class divisions in the black community became more strident and divisive as exemplified by the reactions to what soon became termed the Blaxploitation movie. For years black organizations (most notably the NAACP) agitated and protested the Hollywood image of blacks on screen without taking into *full* account the effects of mainstream visual products on subsequent generational needs of young, black urban audiences, and changing political times. By the 1970s the mood in urban cities turned more toward a more violent political action, more retaliatory and confrontational than the didactic agenda that the older civil rights organizations were willing to embrace – and the Blaxploitation film supplied a vicarious "get whitey" thrill that a respectable film like Sounder could not supply. And no black authored film was more aesthetically problematic than Melvin Van Peebles' 1971 Sweet Sweetback's Badasssss Song, a blue-print for black independent filmmaking in the latter part of the twentieth century.

"In terms of Hollywood production economics and its narrative strategies for representing blacks," writes Ed Guerrero, "Sweet Sweetback was a maverick

breakthrough movie" (86).Van Peebles financial travails in getting the film before an audience have been well documented, and presaged Spike Lee's turning to a coterie of African American entertainers for financial help during his fight over the artistic constraints Warner Brothers placed on Malcolm X (1992). But what is important was the film's impact on black audiences that "brought to the surface of African American discourse the subtle fissures and cracks of class tension, ideological conflict, and aesthetic arguments that had been simmering in the black social formation since the winding down of the civil rights movement" (87). While I would not argue with Guerrero's astute assessment of the film's impact, as I point out in my discussion of Oscar Micheaux's career, these types of intraracial tensions were simmering long before the advent of Sweetback. As Guerrero correctly emphasizes, the contention over the film was best represented by the ideological differences between the film's political and vehement supporters, and its equally vociferous detractors. Thus, in spite of its seemingly technical and narrative flaws, Sweetback perfectly captured the oppositional political stances, and intellectual black thought of the early 1970s. The film was endorsed as "revolutionary" by the Black Panther party (although Van Peebles had a rocky relationship with the party during filming), and an entire issue of the party's paper was devoted to praising the film's black revolutionary ideology. Writes Guerrero, Newton's most sweeping argument is that Sweetback "presents the need for unity among all the members and institutions within the community of victims" (88).

However, not everyone in Newton's "community of victims" was "feelin'" Brother Newton's appraisal of the film's revolutionary politics. "The film was criticized both by

black cultural nationalists who wanted explicitly politicized black films," Frequent contributor to the black middle-class image conscious *Ebony* magazine, African American historian Lerone Bennett viewed Sweetback as the inevitable result of a "black image confusion, that romanticizes the poverty and misery of the ghetto and that 'some men foolishly identify the black aesthetic with empty bellies and big bottomed prostitutes.'" "For Bennett," continues Guerrero, "the film is 'neither revolutionary nor black' because it presents the spectator with sterile daydreams and a superhero who is ahistorical, selfishly individualist with no revolutionary program, who acts out of panic and desperation" (89). Finally, Bennett "caps" his argument by comparing the revolutionary hero/hustler Sweetback with an earlier model of communal revolutionary imaging in Gillo Pontecorvo's superb anti-colonialist film Battle of Algiers (1965) whose ex-pimp hero "turns himself inside out, like a glove, like Malcolm, in fact. And, like Malcolm, he confronts his former companions with the errors of their way" (89). With the screen dedication to "the black community," and his after-the-fact pro-black revolutionary statements to the contrary, Van Peebles' laconic "superhero" is strangely distant from a politically conscious connection with the black community. However, this does not mean that the audience for Sweetback did not find the images "liberatory," but the film merely posits the black community as back-drop to the super-hero's efforts to escape the police.

But the film did connect on a class basis, albeit, not on the terms desired by black nationalists or the black middle-class. There was a different mood after the Watts rebellion in 1965 that Lerone Bennett observed compelled the black lower classes to

view themselves as "counter-counter-contrast conceptions, as the opposite, in short, of what Negroes said Negroes were."

> Clearly, beyond the mid-1960s, lower-class blacks were increasingly dissatisfied with the exhausted black bourgeois paradigm of upward mobility through assimilation and started to identify the black experience with the defiant images and culture of the "ghetto" and hustling street life. (Guerrero 89)

Thus, Sweetback as a heroic, or central figure was not an anomaly to young, urban spectators. Many black critics of the film, like Donald Bogle, pointed out that the character was simply the latest manifestation of the big, bad, bucks, and bad men of African American folklore, a folklore whose literary worth the black middle-class had yet to come to terms with. Moreover, the overt emphasis on Sweetback's defiant sexuality in many ways acts as an antidote to the emasculating roles given to Sidney Poitier the era's biggest African American image of black masculinity. But the landscape of the ghetto with its pimps, hustlers, and black folks just trying to get by, was for many in the civil rights organizations – and the college educated cultural nationalists – a terrain alien (and frustrating) to both groups. For Sweet Sweetback's audience, the up-ward mobility cant was as tired in 1965 as it was in 1905, but equally disdained was the radical intellectualizing of their position in American society by the Maoist spouting Black Panthers and the Black Arts Movement.

While deploring the film's politics, a more even-handed understanding of the *reasons* for the film's popularity with image-starved black audiences came from a cadre

of black film students of UCLA's film school who, by 1971, "recognized cinema as a site of struggle."

> A declaration of independence had been written in the overturning of the film school curriculum and in the formation of student-generated alternatives. . . .and off-campus study groups. Some of Sweetback's techniques and procedures were acceptable to the insurgents, but its politics were not. (Bambara 118)

The group included: Charles Burnett, Hailie Gerima, Julie Dash, and Clyde Taylor among other young black filmmakers who would become the most innovative and visionary black independent filmmakers whose "thematic foci" by 1977 became, notes Toni Cade Bambara "family, women, history, and folklore." The group, continues Bambara, "engaged in interrogating conventions of dominant cinema, screening films of socially conscious cinema, and discussing ways to alter previous significations as they relate to Black people. In short, they were committed to developing a film language to respectfully express cultural particularity and Black thought" (119-120). According to the new Black Aesthetic, the function of art was political and liberatory: "The aesthetic function of African American protest art," sums up Gladstone L. Yearwood, is to visually embody the political message of the black consciousness movement. Inspiring black unity and dignity, articulating the black community's needs and embodying the experiences and potential of blacks through art. . . ." (47). However, as worthy as their independent films were in their inclusiveness of the varied strata of black life (as I

discuss later) their films were considered too "arty" for mass distribution, and lacked the marketing strategies employed by the self-promoting Van Peebles.

Equally troubling was Sweetback's gender politics (not at all helped by Van Peeble's assertion that in order to receive distribution the film had to be disguised as a "porno flick") where the hero, as Lerone Bennett bluntly terms it, "fucks his way to freedom." "Fucking will not set you free," exhorts Bennett, "If fucking freed, black people would have celebrated the millennium 400 years ago" (Guerrero 90). Similar to the same self-justifications of "artistic vision" – from Oscar Micheaux to Spike Lee – Van Peebles became his own worst enemy when confronted with his denigration of black women at the expense of a true black communal impulse. To a question about the means a black revolutionary must undertake to finance "his vision," Van Peebles answered: "Put a couple of chicks on the block, raise the money and make a film" (Guerrero 91). Guerrero points to the hero's initiation into the sex-business as a hungry, homeless ten-year old by a black prostitute who christens him "Sweetback" for his early sexual promise – a scene disturbing on *many* levels. According to Guerrero, Panther Huey P. Newton views the "initiation" as a blending of black spiritual and black nationalist rite of black passage that "baptizes the young boy into his true manhood,"and "demonstrates the importance of unity and love between Black men and women" (88). "People who look upon this as a sex scene," blasts Newton, "miss the point completely, and people who look upon the movie as a sex movie miss the entire message of the film" (Reid 80). Bennett, however, correctly calls the incident what it is: "the rape of a child by a 40-year-old prostitute." Moreover, Sweetback's graphic "revolutionary" resistance to "the man"

also includes the rape of "a black woman at knifepoint" which can not help but recall Eldridge Cleaver's confession that he refined his skills as a rapist of white women by first practicing "on black girls in the ghetto."

Significantly, Guerrero notes that black critics of the film's gender politics never, " really addressed the fact that beyond their crude sexual objectification, the film contained no complex female portrayals."

> This structured absence of black women's perspectives on Sweet Sweetback can be explained, at least in part, by scholars and critics who point out that a politicized black woman's agenda was generally submerged under a male focused black nationalist discourse aimed at rediscovering and articulating the mystique of a liberated "black manhood". . . .(91)

Furthermore, as the opposing *class* positions of Newton and Bennett clearly indicate, a possible black feminist critique would, given the times, be subject to a foreclosing by black nationalist views of "female liberation" as a white, middle-class counter-revolutionary agenda. Because black women were *publically* silent about the film's misogyny, their silence did not mean a wholesale embrace of the black revolutionary masculinist dismissal of black female subjectivity – as the ground-breaking black feminist anthology The Black Woman (1970) demonstrated. The hyper-masculine imagery and narrative structure of Sweet Sweetback's Badasssss Song, however, fit the "political" mood of the times, especially with young, black inner-city males who equated revolutionary fervor with a fantasy of themselves as having one hand on their dicks and

the other around the trigger of a gun. And Sweetback (portrayed by the filmmaker[10]) provided the realization of the black macho fantasy by aiming both weapons at white institutions, and the assimilated white values of the black middle-class. Thus, the emphasis on the "criminal" enterprises of many Blaxploitation heroes, to the delight of an audience traditionally shut-out from legitimate employment, and the dismay of blacks who "made" it out of the ghetto.

The Blaxploitation film was a cinematic argument compellingly seductive to thousands of marginalized black youth searching for an identity of manhood outside of the parameters of the typical well-mannered (read: emasculated) Sidney Poitier heroes foisted on them. Michele Wallace in "Race, Gender and Psychoanalysis in Forties Film," strenuously deplores the film's continued popularity, and its canonization by young, black male filmmakers, and refuses to excuse the film's misogyny (260). Van Peebles' demonization of black women, for example, is evident in Boyz N the Hood and other male authored films during the nineties. Director Spike Lee pays homage to Van Peebles as an important influence on representing the black experience (completely dismissing Oscar Micheaux) in his work, and the retro-seventies idealization of pimp culture in the videos of Snoop-Dog are evidence of the hustling life extolled by the film and the novels of Donald Goines. As cultural critic Nelson George notes in Buppies, B-Boys, Baps & Bohos: Notes on Post-Soul Black Culture, the seductive imagery of black women as manhood defining objects, and gun-play violence continues to resonate with late

[10] Clearly by portraying the eponymous "hero" himself, Van Peebles not only saved money on hiring an actor, but he also doubly thumbs his nose at the gate-keepers of the means to filmmaking, *and* who gets to present the black image in visual media.

twentieth century under-class black male youth as they re-discover, not only Van Peebles' film, but an entire realm of black macho films from the era that provided models for black female denigration that continues to live on in VHS and DVD formats.

But my point in examining the effect of Sweet Sweetback's Badasssss Song is to illustrate the problems of defining the term "black film," and defining who the audience is for "black film." The genre of blaxploitation film is a case in point, as Gladstone L. Yearwood points out, and film critics continue to be divided over whether of not the films should be regarded as "black filmmaking,"or even black independent filmmaking. As I suggest, many black critics make the distinction by measuring the amount of *white* control involved in bringing a black aesthetic vision to market, and even Mark A Reid dismisses Sweetback as a "black film" because of its white distributor."Blaxploitation films compromised black cultural signification," argues Yearwood, "because they were contemporary white productions in blackface."

> These films were produced by whites (and some blacks), featured black casts and were set in black communities. Economic exploitation of the black audience was the principal reason for their existence. After the success of Sweetback (1971), Shaft (1971), and Superfly (1972), the industry moguls snapped to attention and began to turn out exploitation films with startling regularity. (43)

Yearwood is correct, but many popular black action films of the era were, nevertheless, written, produced, and directed by African Americans and starred such black action icons as Fred Williamson and Jim Brown who became important visual images for urban

audiences starved for their own Clint Eastwood, or Charles Bronson; "for older members of the black intellectual community," writes Donald Bogle, the films offered "not direction but a daydream of triumph." (236). Some of the films had surer artistic hands at the helm, like Gordon Parks' Shaft (1971), Superfly (1972), Raymond St. Jacques' Book of Numbers (1973), and Bill Gunn's Ganja and Hess (1973), but the point here is that the black heroes of these films were unmistakably black – both in their darker skin color and in their "ghetto"politics of swift retribution against the usual predators of the black urban community.

Finally, I would argue that the lasting importance of the Blaxploitation era is its visualization of the protests begun by writers Langston Hughes in "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain" (1926) and Richard Wright's "Blueprint for Negro Writing" (1937). Together with the "black consciousness" movement of the 1960s and 1970s, the Blaxploitation genre visually articulated the intra-class war between opposing ideologies for the rights to a black cultural authenticity where the new black militancy firmly rejected the ideology of the black bourgeoisie who had been vigorously "policing" the contours of black cultural products since Reconstruction. The new "black aesthetic" now viewed the black middle-class attempts at cultural assimilation as cultural and racial suicide, and "romanticized" the black urban poor as authentic signifiers of "blackness." In short, "the tenements as well as the talk, the mannerisms, and the sophistication of the streets. . . ." were all taken as a badge of "being real."As Donald Bogle argues, "Eventually, poverty and ghetto life (sometimes the very degrading constraints imposed on Black America by White America) were frequently idealized and glamorized" (236).

Further, Bogle suggests what the cultural nationalists, and the black bourgeoisie could agree on about the appeal of Sweet Sweetback's Badasssss Song, and that was the accusation that Van Peebles' film merely pandered to the un-educated sensibilities of the masses.

> With the glamourization of the ghetto, however, came also the elevation of the pimp/outlaw/rebel as folk hero. Van Peebles played up to this new sensibility, and his film was the first to glorify the pimp. It failed, however, to explain the social conditions that made the pimp such an important figure. At the same time, the movie debased the black woman, depicting her as little more than a whore. (236)

Although the criticisms of the film are not wholly without merit, there is still the implication from the critics of the Blaxploitation genre (and the champions of independent black film) that the masses do not posses a critical sensibility, and have to be *led* to what is good for them, and the general consensus about Van Peebles' film is an elitist point of view that continues to dictate the terms of cultural authenticity from the top down.

The Buppie Effect: Spike's Joint

The career of Lee straddles the line between Reid's admiration for what he terms the authentic black film which addresses black community issues, and the compromised commercial black film which ignores relevant black content for wide mainstream appeal. I would argue, that Lee should be considered, at the very least, as a "semi-independent"

producer because his emphasis on African American issues makes major financing (see the problems with Malcolm X)[11] an iffy proposition for major Hollywood studios who prefer comical images of blacks, or black/white "buddy" action/adventure films for maximum cross-over appeal. But Lee was something new; for the new demographic of black urban professionals Following what Wahneema Lubiano describes as "the Spike Lee Discourse," Mel Watkins succinctly notes a critical problem with Lee's narrative strategies as a black filmmaker: "Perhaps one of the most striking aspects of the Spike Lee Discourse," Watkins argues, "is that the filmmaker oftentimes mistakes putting a social problem on cinematic display for a form of critique in and of itself" (143). As Watkins, and other black cultural critics have pointed out, Lee's narrative style (especially in the early commercial films) has remained largely "critic-proof." Lee arrived at the right time in commercial cinema when very few African American visual cultural makers actually received mainstream attention, or garnered financial support at the box-office. More importantly, for middle-class blacks, Lee was a third generation Morehouse "man,"thus, Lee became saddled with the "burden of representation." With 1989's Do the Right Thing, Lee addressed simmering urban racial tensions in what he described as cinematic "truth-telling," a claim that catapulted him as *the* black voice for African American racial representation among a majority of white critical assessment who were, no doubt, bowled over by Lee's melding of African American vernacular styles in his use of popular rap, glossy color, and kinetic editing. Do the Right Thing was

[11] Financing was not the only problem Lee encountered. Donald Bogle reports: "Poet Amiri Baraka, spokesman for the group the United Front to Preserve the Legacy of Malcolm X, was quoted in *Newsweek* as saying, 'We will not let Malcolm X's life be trashed to make middle-class Negroes sleep easier. I'm horrified of seeing Spike Lee make Malcolm X" (351).

a heady mix, and Lee, through a careful positioning of himself in interviews, and college speaking engagements, became a self-appointed (with white critical backing) as the truth-teller of the black experience.

However, as a black film-maker, Lee continues to be a contentious (Reid prefers *tendentious*) subject for many black cultural critics who question his "black authenticity" as a black independent film maker. Wahneema Lubiano in "But Compared to What?: Reading Realism, Representation, and Essentialism in School Daze, Do the Right Thing, and the Spike Lee Discourse" directly challenges the filmmaker's claim to an essential "black reality." Lubiano argues that Lee's "lock" on the black experience is not contextualized (compared to what?), or for that matter closely interrogated as oppositional practice "within the constraints of Euro-American film discourse." Drawing on what Gayatri Spivak identifies as "doing one's sample[12]" as "interventionist political cultural project," Lubiano finds Lee's sole status as "official black truth-teller" highly problematic, in part, because of the dearth of black heterogeneous visual representations Lee's wholesale embrace forecloses.

> The problem of Spike Lee's "sample," his place in the sun, is that his presence, empowered by Hollywood studio hegemony and media consensus on his importance, can function to overshadow or make difficult other kinds of politically engaged cultural work, not because

[12] I would counter that Lee engages in a specific form of "sampling" that is an integral part of hip-hop production. For scores of black urban youth who lacked "musical skills," putting together "samples" in order to make a coherent "whole" that spoke to an audience of equally marginalized black youth was an oppositional art form in itself. Lee's genius is in intuitively tapping into a "new" art form by "sampling" iconic black images, music, and clothing styles.

> it is impossible for more than one African American filmmaker to get attention at a time, but because of the implications and manifestations of the attention given to his work. (99)

Although it is hard to tell whether Lubiano's anger is directed at Lee, or the mainstream critical acceptance of Lee as "truth-teller," the central issue appears to be Lee's stature (at the time of Lubiano's writing) as a black voice of authenticity – although I am not dismissing Lee's own complicity in his self-crowning as the sole voice of black truth. But part of Lee's stature owes a great deal to the legacy of black cultural production when it does get noticed by the mainstream: there *is* only room for one black voice that attempts to essentialize the black experience for mass consumption as James Baldwin brilliantly argued.

As Lee himself has argued, Do the Right Thing with its treatment of racism as mass entertainment, was his attempt at "truth and righteousness." "It will be told from a Black point of view. I've been blessed with the opportunity to express the views of Black people, who . . . don't have access to power and the media" (Reid 105). But the question many black critics want to know, especially reflected in Lubiano's critique, is whose truth is exactly expressed in Lee's films? "The climatic racial confrontation," writes Donald Bogle about the film, "powerfully filmed and edited, endowed the action with meaning and political power. It was also precisely what caused such a critical uproar" (322). Astute black cultural critics quickly identified Spike's "class issues" in the skillful way the film manipulates boundaries between the "real," and cardboard posturing. "Mookie's character," points out bell hooks in Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural,

"has particular fascination for viewers who realize that he is both a character in the film and the filmmaker."

> Part of the new wave of avant-garde, up and coming young black university-educated filmmakers and artists who constitute an elite group (even though many of them came from underprivileged class backgrounds or were raised in poor black neighborhoods), Lee brings to film a self-consciously Afrocentric aesthetic. He reveals the ins and outs of life in an urban underclass black neighborhood. (174)

But, as hooks adds, Lee's mise-en-scene has nothing "real" about it. "Little details remind us that this is fiction (the always-clean designer clothes worn throughout the film by most characters irrespective of their role, the often noted absence of drugs, etc.[13]). Finally, hooks accuses the filmmaker of "posturing": "Rather than inviting the audience to escape, it compels them to stay at a distance like Mookie, to observe, to be non-participatory. Brilliant cinematography and great music create an intimacy that the narrative does not allow. Inviting the audience to maintain distance keeps separate the events shown on the screen and the viewer's daily life" (174-175). Although, hooks is correct about the studied "prettiness" of Lee's shiny ghetto – and it seems to me that critics who take Lee's urban iconography to task – are looking for a documentary realism beyond the director's scope. The point is (Lee's political posturing to the contrary) that

[13] Lee later made up for the charge of "no drugs" with 1995's Clockers, but this may have been the director's response to the new breed of black directors – John Singleton and the Hughes brothers whose grittier tales of the hood threatened to eclipse the power of Do the Right Thing. The acclaim these films engendered – Boyz N' the Hood and Menace II Society clearly proved that they were "doing the right thing" in giving a voice to a generation that Lee did not, and could not connect with.

Spike Lee's films are ultimately *fiction* (the archetypes who stand in for characters are a pointed example), but Lee adds to the fiction by glossing over uncomfortable truths about gender constructions, and the privilege of the black bourgeoisie who deign to "speak" for an entire community.

If Do the Right Thing "reassures white viewers that the 'lunatic' violence erupting in 'segregated' black communities finally hurts black people more than anyone else,"argues hooks, then what aesthetic pleasure does the film affirm for "underclass urban black people?" As the film does not engage in a critical examination of class and power politics, "Poor folks can look and long," and hooks argues that Lee merely commodifies the "real" lived experience of black urban life as self-appointed spokesperson for those who "lack the means of production."

> Traditionally, the black middle class or a privileged intellectual elite has drawn on the life experience of lower-class black people to make aesthetic products which do not challenge the racist system of domination that creates oppressive economic circumstances exploiting essentialist notions of an authentic black experience that is colorful, sensuous, lively, etc., images that obscure the reality of pain and deprivation. (178)

Black cultural critics routinely attack Lee as a middle-class interloper, often betraying their own mixed feelings about class and who gets to represent what. Mark A. Reid recounts the black conservative Stanley Crouch's denouncement of Lee's images of lower-class blacks (Lubiano notes that these images drove "Crouch to froth at the mouth

in print.") where he accused Lee of the "appropriation of black idioms to create a racist vision of American justice" (105). But Crouch, instead of viewing the film as an attack on white racism (as faulty and unsatisfying Lee's project is) accuses Lee of fomenting violence directed toward whites by ghetto blacks: "It [is] irresponsible when a successful, middle-class guy. . . makes a movie in which he essentially tells. . . the. . . black lower-class, 'Well, you're not going to get justice. They are out there to get you. It's you versus them" (Reid 105). Amiri Baraka chides Lee specifically on his lack of class consciousness in a Marxist polemical that, unfortunately, equates black authenticity with the black proletariat, a sensibility that Baraka charges is lacking in Lee's films. Thus, the criticism of Lee hinges, not only on the burden of representation for black artists (and Lee's egotism does not help), but also on the deep class conflicts endemic to the struggle for a black cultural representation rooted in oppositional practices.

"Spike Lee expresses for me a recognizable type," Amiri Baraka writes, "and trend in American society."

> He is the quintessential buppie, almost the spirit of the young, upwardly mobile, Black petit bourgeois professional. Broadened, he is an American trend. Emerging as an indication of social and class motion, his development is expressed as a political economy, culture, and history. (146)

Baraka suggests that a black cinematic aesthetic, an aesthetic located in the black working and under-classes, should be *the* privileged black experience an ideology that arose during the 1920s in opposition to the cult of middle-class respectability. In many

ways, Baraka appears frozen in the Black Arts movement of the sixties, especially when he views Lee (and other black urban professionals) as traitors to a movement that ultimately "failed" to win support among the very "class" Baraka and others in the movement artistically sought to represent..

> There is a whole successful school of Negro theater and film personalities whose fundamental identity is as caricaturists of the Black revolutionary politics and art of the 1960s, as if Black consciousness and political activism, and even the most historic and spontaneously creative aspects of the African and African-American culture, are merely Mantan Moreland cartoons. (147)

Aside from his blanket condemnation of the black middle-class, Baraka's "problem" with Lee, on the face of it, appears to be that Lee's films lack a black political agenda, and that they are "commercial" because they make a profit. Even Ed Guerrero finds a troubling, albeit, an expected paradox in Lee's pursuit of "studio financing, bigger production venues, and broader-based consumer markets."Although I would agree with Baraka that Lee's constant shilling for his films – such as the store (Spike's Joint) in Brooklyn that sells promotional merchandise for his films[14], and the "making of" books that follow each film – border on the offensive,[15] and skirt the line of self-promotion; in defense of Lee,

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[14] This also includes hawking X Potato Chips for his biographical film Malcolm X

[15] Many older blacks were appalled at Lee's lack of black history when young blacks began sporting "gimme caps" emblazoned with an X to promote his film biography of Malcolm X. Lee's blatant promotion led to charges that he had "commercialized the memory of Malcolm, especially after many X cap sporting young hip-hoppers had no idea who Malcolm X was.

one could counter that given the long history of black independent filmmaking, and the lack of access to marketing and promotion, Lee follows in the foot-steps of the Johnson brothers and Oscar Micheaux.

In his castigation of Lee's lack of "class consciousness," however, Baraka would do well to remember that the Black Arts Movement is also guilty of the same type of culture grabbing that the black radicals of the 1960s fought against. "Although some film commentators have attempted to acknowledge the disparity between the aesthetic values of black audiences and the aesthetic values of filmmakers and critics," points out Tommy L. Lott, "film criticism generally tends to adhere to a top-down view of aesthetics, as though audiences have no role to play in the determination of aesthetic values."

> How can we best understand the fact that films which aim to present a more authentic black aesthetic are largely ignored by and unknown to black audiences, while being extremely well-received in elite white circles? Despite their admirable political orientation, such films seem to have achieved the status of art-for-art's sake, with mainly an all-white audience appeal. (47)

Lott perceptively addresses a problem that has plagued the black community for generations.: the intraracial class war for black cultural authenticity. While Lott points to the difficulty of mass distribution of many black independent films that take on the "burden of representation," too many of them, as Lott suggests, fail to connect as aesthetic pleasure to mainstream black audiences expecting standard Hollywood fare, especially the films of the blaxploitation genre specifically targeted at young black, urban

audiences. Clyde Taylor notes the film school training of young black directors like Lee when he observes: "The conspicuous body of Black independents has been called, not without reason, intellectual filmmakers. It helps to see this description as one half of an antagonistic dialogue over intellectual versus populist Black cinema, that has gone on, quite uninspired, for many years" (434). In addition, Mark A. Reid notes that the wide acceptance of "black action" movies by black audiences was a reality deplored by both black "cultural nationalists and blacks who espoused middle-class values" (90). As cultural critic Nelson George astutely points out: "Not in the African-American art mainstream and not accessible to the masses, black independent films stood at a strange angle to the community they tried to reflect. And to be completely honest, many of the films were slow going" (46).

As I pointed out earlier, many black critics have not reconciled the often huge gulf between their critical evaluations of black cultural representations, and the embrace of what they consider negative representations by the masses. Jacqueline Bobo correctly calls for a "collaboration" between "the makers, the critics, and the audience." In fact, Bobo states, the black audience needs further analysis, and she outlines three tasks to forward a harmonious relationship between black cultural critic and black mass audience. "Although the most important part of gleaming information about how Black people watch films is interacting with the audience, the first work of the critic is just to get the word out" (68). And what Bobo refers to here is the lack of advertising and marketing for black independent film, and the lack of advertising directly to black audiences is changing due to the Internet and web sites devoted to African American interests. The

use of the Internet has been especially favorable to films by black women and black gays and lesbians shut out of mainstream marketing and distribution avenues. However, the fact remains that Internet access still remains out of reach for millions of African Americans who may only find these films by browsing the shelves of the local video outlet.

"The second task confronting the critic," continues Bobo, "is preparing the audience to watch. A third task, and perhaps the most important work of the critic, is to develop a better understanding of the Black film audience" (69). How does the critic go about "preparing the audience to watch?" Bobo makes some assumptions about general black audiences, that regardless of her calls for "collaboration," or even her suggestion that the black critic should know the black audience, her assumptions still suggest a cultural elitism that wants to *tell* a black audience what they should watch and support.

> Black people watch a lot of television and spend a lot of money going to see commercial films. And these may not be films that they find particularly useful, or that they even enjoy. Consequently, I believe that if more works produced by black film and video makers were available, the Black audience would cultivate the habit of watching, and watching critically. (69)

Thus, Bobo insists that if the mass (lower-class) black audience had access to a film like Bush Mama (1976) then the obvious deficiencies of a Superfly would be readily apparent. In her article, Bobo uses the example of Steven Speilberg's film adaptation of The Color Purple (1985). Amid all of the controversy over black male bashing,

mainstream Hollywood money, distribution, *and* a white director, added to the contentious fight among black cultural critics was the invented musical scene that reconciled the blues shouter Shug Avery with her Baptist preacher father as the juke-jointers wend their way to the church, and blues music seamlessly gives way to gospel. Bobo found that in interviews a majority of black female spectators responded favorably to the scene. "That many Black women stood firm in their stated positive engagement with The Color Purple in the face of enormous public criticism of the film demonstrates that audience members are not the unthinking pawns, manipulated at will by the mainstream media, that many critics make them out to be" (73). Bobo finally acknowledges that even *she* misread her respondents, especially in recognizing the role of black Christianity which her respondents did not see as "caricatures" of their lives. Bobo's experience partly explains the animosity of black cultural critics toward the work of Spike Lee. Do the Right Thing was popular because Lee understood *his* audience who saw through the aesthetic flaws of the film at an essential truth that reflected their lives.

The appearance of Spike Lee's She's Gotta Have It (1986) was seen as a breaking-away from the blaxploitation cinema disaster foisted on the black community (much to the critical dismay of the black intelligentsia), but the critical attention the film garnered did little to dispel the suggestion of black class boundaries which point to the "choices" Lee inevitably makes. The film attracted the attention of young, black intellectuals, college graduates, and a new bohemian sophistication shared by the film's creator. "Outside the theater," recalls Nelson George, "was a long, lively line of beautiful African-Americans. The peers of Nola, Greer, and the crew (but too many Mars) were all

lined up to see themselves" (81). The theater, Cinema Studio, was a long time haven for independent and foreign films popular with New York's sophisticated, movie elite – not the type of home to the popular Rocky and Rambo cartoon configurations popular with young, black male audiences. But more disturbing is George's class biased assertion that in the crowd to see the film were "too many Mars."

Mars Blackmon, (Black Man?) a character in the film was the essential B-boy, street-wise, Nike-wearing member of the trio of men hovering around the central character Nola. The character (played by Lee himself) was later used as a shill to sell Nike's basket-ball shoes to *real* street-wise young blacks like himself, but the point is that the figure of a jive-talking, gold-name-plate wearing street player like the Mars character (Ed Guerrero calls him an "economically marginalized urban black youth") does not belong among the black urban professionals flocking to "see themselves" at one of New York's cinema art houses. Although George cites the film's constructions of class and age differences "tapped some of the complexity of my generation, what was new and funny, unfocused and old-fashioned about us, better than any film before or since," George's observations may give weight to Baraka's criticisms about Lee's class consciousness, but more specifically, George defines a new generation – Baraka derisively calls them buppies – of what novelist/screenwriter Trey Ellis terms "today's cultural mulattoes."

In his 1989 essay "The New Black Aesthetic" Trey Ellis articulated the characteristics of a new generation of young black artists. "For the first time in our history," Ellis writes about black America, "we are producing a critical mass of college

graduates who are children of college graduates themselves" (266). In a salvo greatly reminiscent of Langston Hughes, this new generation, Ellis argues, "all grew up feeling misunderstood by both the black worlds and the white."

> Just as a genetic mulatto is a black person of mixed parents who can often get along fine with his white grandparents, a cultural mulatto, educated by a multi-racial mix of cultures, can also navigate easily in the white world. And it is by and large this rapidly growing group of cultural mulattoes that fuels the NBA {New Black Aesthetic]. We no longer need to deny or suppress any part of our complicated and sometimes contradictory cultural baggage to please either white people or black. (264)

The New Black Aesthetic was a blending of the old – the Black Arts Movement – and the new: "We're not saying racism doesn't exist," Ellis quotes Terry McMillan, "we're just saying it's not an excuse," and neither were they concerned with up-lifting the race with one-sided positive portraits. "The New Black Aesthetic says you just have to *be* natural, you don't necessarily have to *wear* one."

> No longer are too many black characters either completely cool and fearless (Sweet Sweetback's Badasssss Song) or completely loving and selfless (Sounder). Says Spike Lee, "The number one problem with the old reactionary school was they cared too much about what white people think." (266)

Noting that "many other members of the NBA are the children of Civil Rights workers or black nationalists (Amiri Baraka's daughters were active NBA'ers), Ellis does note that a "telltale sign of the work of the NBA is our parodying of the black nationalist movement. There is now such a strong and vast body of great black work that the corny or mediocre doesn't need to be coddled. NBA artists aren't afraid to flout publicly the official, positivist black party line". (265) And Spike Lee's work was an integral part of the NBA.

Although astute black critics praised Lee's She's Gotta Have It, many pointed to the filmmaker's troubling misogynist view of a supposedly sexually liberated black woman. However, critic Reid states quite baldly that the film "is a denigrating portrait of black womanhood. . . ." (94). "The film narrative," continues Reid, "fails to create an image of a sexually independent black female protagonist who is comfortable among women as well as with men who have no sexual desire for her."

> If Lee intended Nola to embody a sexually independent attitude, then his film fails. This failure reflects a badly written script and the filmmaker's propensity to objectify women for the sexual liberation of certain types of men. Most likely the film's failure results from the shortsightedness of any young filmmaker who spends more time manipulating black urban idioms than developing an equally novel statement. (98)

Many critics have noted Lee's penchant for undeveloped characters, but Lee's NBA discourse remains staunchly heterosexist in its denigration of women and gays – even Trey Ellis and fellow NBA critic Nelson George acknowledge the unfortunate hold-over from the previous generation. Adds Todd Boyd: "Though noble in their aspirations, the

NBA and its bourgeois underpinnings can transcend the culture only in ways that bring individual success, but cannot address group elevation" (17). Many black feminist like bell hooks, Wahneema Lubiano, and Toni Cade Bambara have written incisively about Lee's rampant sexism and homophobia (a charge he acknowledges in front of critical black college audiences, but seems unable to untangle himself from) which I argue, is a powerful sub-text in School Daze (1988).

Lee's first studio financed film, 1988's School Daze was purportedly constructed as an uncompromising critique of the insular world of black college life, but drew even more attention for its class privilege, masculinist posturing, and the overtly sexist images, and empty caricatures of young, black women. In its sexist depiction of black women, the film engendered the type of cinematic portrayals (betrayals) to come in future Spike Lee Joints. The film fails to explore the deep divisions between black men and women, or the divisions of class and color with any form of constructive dialogue. "The film narrative," sums up S. Craig Watkins, "presents the African American social world as a fragmented and contested sphere composed of numerous hierarchies and conflicts that operate somewhat independently from spheres of interracial conflict" (139) Thus, the film was accused of doing the same type of intraracial exposé that earlier black cultural products attempted from the earliest part of the twentieth century – that of "airing dirty laundry."

> In fact, one of the primary criticisms leveled at the film and its director was that it put on display many of the tensions that historically have created deep divisions and antagonisms within the African American

community. (139)

Although many mainstream critics viewed School Daze as a type of tan-colored college musical, the truth is that whites most likely did not know what to do with Lee's stated agenda of attacking intraracial class and colorism. But, as with many of his film's cluttered thematic structures, School Daze , according to Nelson George, was "not a sweet blend." Wahneema Lubiano finds the film (along with Do the Right Thing) "engaged with problems of race and racism (external and internalized) in the context of a nation where race *as a construction* is not much talked about outside academic circles and where the idea of racism as intellectual, systemic, or concrete individual practice is cause for far more anger than theory, more recrimination and defensiveness than focus" (100).

Lubiano correctly assess the problems of Lee's narrative structure for the film as "sloppy but complicated." in its simple reduction of identity politics. Although Lee's stated purpose was to *satirize* what he saw as black intraracial practices that are detrimental to African American political identity, ultimately the film trades visual aesthetics for a trenchant political critique. In other words, the film "samples" (Ellis would consider it "parody") black identity politics that ultimately lays the film (and Lee) open for what Baraka sees as a lack of *real* political consciousness in a series of "male-oriented, internationally focused political practices such as protests, marches, or rallies" which, continues Lubiano, makes the men in the film (and Bobo's uncritical viewer) "participants in the aesthetization of these practices."

The film, unfortunately and myopically, presents aesthetics as formal

> matters of physical appearance in which women only participate. Men *do*; they dance the beautifully choreographed Greek stomps, or the fellas' clever parody stomp, or make careful selections of political posters and other room decor items, and arrange that decor for sexual trysts. (116)

As Lubiano correctly observes about the film: "Men *do*. . . .," but what do they do exactly? On the one hand, the narrative satirizes the activities of traditional Greek fraternities without *saying* anything critical, and the film's aesthetic framing of the traditional African American Greek stomps acted as real life college boosters as interest in HBCUs increased. Class differences are also a matter of decor that reflects their class position: Da Fellas' crowded, ramshackle rooms come with the requisite political posters, and their means of transportation is a run-down car. Combined with their "political" marches against the college, the film attempts to convey their "authenticity" as opposed to the "in-authenticity" of the Gammas whose members live in "a spacious fraternity home, drive foreign cars, and wear stylish clothing." What the spectators observe is that Da Fellas are "ghetto" while the Gammas are "bourgie," but the film also argues that it is possible to maintain ghettoness (black authenticity) under middle-class surroundings.

What School Daze does *not* critically argue is an incisive look at class divisions, or an approach to come to terms with class attitudes. "Perhaps one of the most striking aspects of the Spike Lee Discourse," opines Watkins, "is that the filmmaker oftentimes mistakes putting a social problem on cinematic display for a form of critique in and of itself" (143). Thus, a critique of class differences consists of a series of angry confrontational tight-shoots were nothing is solved, or critically engaging. For example,

every confrontation between the middle-class Julian "Big Brother Almighty" Eaves (Giancarlo Esposito) and the working-class Dap Dunlap (Larry Fishburne) descends into mere name-calling, but the confrontation between the Fellas and the group Lee derisively terms Local Yokels in the script (and here Lee hypocritically hides his own class bias from his audience) disturbingly sputters out as the *real* working-class confronts the Fellas on their ostensible embrace of Pan Africanism that stops at the college's borders. In an angry exchange between Dap and Leeds (Samuel L. Jackson) about real issues between the college and the black residents of the town, Dap resorts to name-calling when his "blackness" is questioned:

> Leeds: I said are you black?
> Dap: Don't ever question whether I'm black. In fact, I was gonna ask yo' country BAMA ass, why you put those drip-drop chemicals in your hair?

As Watkins states the confrontation "repositions" the Fellas: "From the Local's perspective, there is no difference between Mission College students: they are all disdainful of poor and working-class blacks" (144). Although the film posits a Pan African unity (Da Fellas' main activity, besides getting laid, is agitating for South African divestment by the college trustees), in Lee's cinematic aesthetic their embrace of African unity, the film suggests, is merely a "pose" of black political involvement. The cinematic non-engagement of the film's narrative structure contributes to the film's purported satirical intent as an expression of the New Black Aesthetic seriously problematic as the images compete, and ultimately, disrupt political intent.

Further, S. Craig Watson adds: ". . . .while Lee's politicization of popular film represents an important form of intervention, his cinematic imagination generally tends

to privilege the experiences of men over women. In this microcosmic black world, Lee fails to represent the experiences of women in ways that break from prevailing gender discourses and render them problematic" (145). Like the men in the film, Lee's women are two armed camps – the dark-skinned Jigaboos led by Rachel (Kyme) and the light-skinned Gamma Rays led by Jane Toussaint (Tisha Campbell). Both groups end up in emotionally unsatisfying, contentious scenes over class and color – or as the film strenuously depicts – hair and color. bell hooks adds that "Merely exploiting the issue, the film is neither critically subversive nor oppositional. And in many theaters black audiences loudly expressed their continued investment in color-caste hierarchies by "dissing" darker-skinned female characters" (179). Instead of a useful critique of the long, legacy of the color-caste system at HBCUs, the film merely stages the controversy as a series of angry tirades and a big, glossy production number[16]set in the familiarity of a beauty salon, a traditional site for urban female bonding which Lee subversively turns into a battle-ground. According to cast memories, the color and caste separation spilled over into real life as the dark-skinned female actors complained about the extra attention given to the "Wannabees." "It seemed that the interest of the males really did lie in the lighter-skinned women. The men were running after the Wannabees," recalls Joie Lee, "as if they were the last women on earth" (87). In representing the typical black college, Lee fails to contain any scenes that would indicate female bonding, or a concerted black feminist response to the patriarchal heterosexism typical on black college campuses. In

[16] Lee for some reason (and the film's admirers concur) that the film is a "musical," or a subversion of the typical Hollywood musical. However, I would argue that one big production number hardly qualifies as a musical.

many ways the women seem to be frozen in a type of ahistoric limbo, only waiting around to be recognized for their anti-womanist tirades, and doin' Da Butt for the voyeuristic fantasies of male spectators.

Designated damningly as "Jigaboos" and "Wannabees,"the women serve no other purpose than as handmaidens in the construction of black manhood – even Rachel accuses Dap of being with her *only* because she is dark-skinned in order to prove his black political authenticity. One of the rituals established by the Gamma men for inclusion requires that all their pledges be *men*; they will not accept virgins or half-men, and the script suggests that an enforced heterosexuality is needed to keep the onus of homosexuality away from all-male group bonding rituals which Da Fellas parody in a counter-stomp: "You say Gamma, I say Fag!") Thus, "Half-Pint" (an incomplete male suggested by his name, and played by Lee) is forced to find a woman to prove his maleness and proper sexual-pedigree – and not just any woman but a "sexual freak" willing to initiate his fellow pledges into Gamma manliness. The "sexual freak" calls to mind the early eighties Rick James hit "Superfreak" – "a very kinky girl who is never hard to please – not the kind of girl that you take home to mother" – a dance hit, states Patricia Hill Collins, that "catapults the term 'freak' into popular culture" (119). In a series of jump cuts we see Half-Pint "rapping" to several women who he tries to "trick" into going back to the "Bone Room" where she will be expected to "get her freak on" with several of the Gamma pledges in order to "prove" their heterosexuality. When he is turned down by a number of women, "Big Brother" Julian helps out by "offering" Jane to

Half-Pint. For Big Brother Julian, Jane has become "tiresome," and he lets the Gammas know that she is now fair game.

Writing about Lee's female characters in general, Jacquie Jones in "The Construction of Black Sexuality" observes that "the central female characters are powerless and, in one way or another, abused. The abusiveness of the treatment itself removes the women in Spike Lee's films from the status of participant, and relegates them to that of victim" (255). Jane reluctantly agrees to have sex with Half-Pint, as Julian convinces her as a "test" of her love for him, and in a room full of male cat-calls she makes Half-Pint a Gamma Man.("It takes a real man to be a/ Gamma man because only a Gamma/man is a real man."). When Jane returns to Julian – mission accomplished – Julian turns on her:

> Jane: I did what you said.
> Julian: What is that?
> Jane: I did it with Half-Pint.
> Julian: What?
> Jane: You told me.
> Julian: The hell I did. You gave
> it up to Half-Pint? How
> could you? I thought you
> loved me. Now you're boning
> my own frat brother. My own
> frat brother.

Lee's published script is interesting here. He writes: "At this point Jane is gone. She loses it. She's on the express to a breakdown" (320). It is an ugly, misogynist scene, and then after serving her purpose in the script, Jane disappears. I would argue, that because of the un-even narrative structure the audience does not quite know how to respond to Jane's "rape" for the simple fact that she is constructed as an unsympathetic "type." The film's

parodic, and light-heartedness is at the expense of black women who are (as Jane is portrayed) un- natural "freaks" and must be punished. Although School Daze resists the temptation to attribute the mythic, out-sized sexual nature of black women on the darker-skinned Rachel instead of Jane, I would suggest that his failure to do so is in part simply because he is not that interested in them as subjects. Thus, the narrative is un-clear about Jane's punishment. We know nothing about Jane except for the superiority she wields because of her color; but at the same time the film validates her light-skin color. Is she punished because of her "non-blackness?" Or because she has validated the assumptions black men have about the sexuality of black women?

Hot, Bitchy, and Out of Control

For African Americans, the problem of the twentieth century may well be the color-line between black and white predicted by W. E. B. Du Bois, but in terms of black produced popular culture the problem has also been, and continues to be, the intraracial color-line. "People of color", points out historian Eleanor Alexander, "were taught that they had been enslaved because God had cursed them. Dark skin was a sign of the curse, and it made them inferior to whites" (41). Needless to say, intragroup color bias – an insidious result of Euro-supremacy discourse – has been more effective than the physical coercion aimed at devaluing the black body. Working, and rightly so, to correct the demeaning, vicious portrayals of blacks in print and visual popular culture, black creative efforts continue to struggle with what Hazel V. Carby terms "a crisis of representation". For African American women, however, the "crisis" exists in the ways they are represented in a popular culture that has become increasingly visual. "Much has been

said and written about the racial stereotyping of Blacks in the media," write the authors of The Color Complex, "but less attention has been paid to the role of skin color."

> Yet look closely at the Black women who play romantic leads in films: they nearly always have light skin and long hair. Light-skinned Black women with classic European features also predominate in beauty pageants, music videos, and the world of modeling. In our media-driven culture, print and visual imagery inevitably mirror and promote the same color prejudices that are found in our larger society. (135)

The same type of color prejudices, of course, have been assimilated by many African American filmmakers, hence, I argue that the darker-skinned black woman in the hands of African American male cultural producers are cast according to a valued phenotype in order to "fit" the needs of black male spectators from a shared male perspective. In terms of presenting the black female subject, black male filmmakers ambivalently resorted to the available female archetypes from mainstream commercial filmmaking while maintaining the substance of a black cultural aesthetic.

In terms of film iconography, the medium plays with light and dark; with characters, such play allows the filmmaker to short-cut narrative exposition in order to better associate certain character traits with a shared set of meanings about light and dark. Thus, in classical Hollywood tradition the good guys in Westerns, for example, wear white hats and ride white horses. For women, on screen divisions between "good girls" and "bad girls" can be as simple as lighting effects, and a female character's brunette or blond hair. In her description of Oscar Micheaux's "subversive stylistics" – a space of

deference and antagonism – in The Scar of Shame, Jane Gaines offers a useful frame in which to discuss the attributes of light and dark attributes of black women by black male filmmakers. "In The Scar of Shame, the stylistic discourse carrying the melos is connected to the aesthetics of skin tone and hair texture played out in light, shadow, and shade."

> This color scheme or code would be known in its finer gradations and variations only to black audiences – to the group that would read a wealth of significance in the difference between processed and un - processed coiffure, and would be sensitive to all kinds of hair-splitting along caste lines. (73)

I would suggest that a color code is used by some black filmmakers that signal certain attributes about black women to black male spectators. Light-skinned women with European phenotype (or close to it) often signal desirable characteristics determined by a black phallocentric gaze. Dark-skinned women, on the other hand, are usually scolds, ultra-demanding, and sexually voracious. For example, Eddie Murphy and Reginald Hudlin used color-coding effectively by casting "bad girl" Robin Givens against "good girl" Halle Berry in 1992's Boomerang, not only signaling to the audience that men preferred non-sexually aggressive women as mates, but only light-skinned women were "lady-like." John Singleton used this paradigm effectively in Boyz N the Hood (1991) where dark-skinned women are coded as pathologically "bad single-parents."

Boyz II Men: Baby Mama Trauma Drama

Boyz N the Hood opens with young Tré getting into a fight with another boy while the white teacher stands by helpless. When the teacher telephones Tré's' mother Reeva (Angela Bassett) she "assumes" Tré, like all angry, young black children does not have a father, and Reeva Styles is just another ill-educated, irresponsible single black parent. Angry at the white teacher for her assumptions, and angry at her son, Reeva calls on Tré's father Jason "Furious" Styles (Larry Fishburne). "The basic assertion in this sequence – and the film in general – ," argues S. Craig Watkins, "is that women are unable to teach young boys how to be responsible, productive male adults" (223). This is an argument that holds weight with the film Antwone Fisher that I discuss later. Thus, the first black woman we see is an angry, dark-skinned woman "abandoning" her child for a career. "When he [Furious] meets his former wife at an upscale restaurant, he also subtly suggests an underlying resentment of her success and upward mobility. Here," suggests Donald Bogle, "he gets at an emotional truth of *certain* African American males, uneasy with a successful educated black woman" (363). Although Watkins finds this "alternative reading of Furious" as "far less favorable," the fact remains that there is something "emasculating" about independent black women who abandon traditional gender roles. But on the other hand, stay-at-home-mothers are not necessarily the answer.

Although as Bogle correctly assess about the fear of "*certain* African American males, uneasy with a successful educated black woman" what are we to make of the dark-skinned mother of Tre's friend Doughboy (Ice Cube)? Mrs. Baker (Tyra Ferrell) clad in dingy house-coat and pink rollers is introduced to the spectator as a loud-mouth

parent who yells at her oldest son Doughboy: "And you ain't shit. You're just like your daddy." Mrs. Baker an unmarried mother of two sons by two different fathers lives with both sons, *and* the mother and child of her second son Ricky. As head of the household, Mrs. Baker, the narrative suggests gets by on welfare, and the presence of high-school Ricky's family indicates Moynihan's generational dependence on the resources of *decent* taxpayers who raise their children in traditional families. But unlike single black fathers, single black mothers – more often than not – at the poverty line, are always singled out as *the* number one societal problem. As Mark Anthony Neal points out: "A derivative of the welfare mother has been the "welfare queen," which implies that some welfare mothers have exploited the welfare state to the point of living in fairly *luxurious* [my emphasis] circumstances[17]."

> Because the popular press often equated intense poverty with "blackness" and the quintessential welfare recipient with a woman, the terms *welfare mother* or the more insidious *welfare queen* have functioned as non - racialized monikers of social deviance and dysfunction. (74)

And screen-writer Singleton provides the images of Mrs. Barker's "social deviance and dysfunction." Although the Barker home is neat and tidy, the two Barker boys lack male guidance and supervision; Doughboy runs the streets and becomes a gang-banger, and Ricky (the good son) lives under his mother's roof with his girlfriend and their baby. Thus, Singleton's images construct the model of the social deviance who does not parent

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[17] The term "welfare queen" was used successfully by Ronald Reagan. Only white power-brokers beholden to rich, white corporations could possibly (without a trace of irony) apply the term *luxurious* to the types of housing available to poor black women and their children.

her sons while collecting government money, community censure comes from the light-skinned mother of Brandi who warns her well-cared for daughter to "Stay away from those nappy-head niggers." As S. Craig Watkins explains, Singleton's purpose in presenting alternative models of masculinity maybe laudable, but "many of his core thematic ideas comply with the patriarchal assumptions of social conservatism" (222). But the social conservatism displayed in Boyz N the Hood, is also shared by many conservative blacks of the middle-class who have had a history – even before the Moynihan Report – of blaming black mothers for the ills of the black lower classes.

In Search of: The Black Middle Class Family

In 2002's Antwone Fisher, directed by actor Denzel Washington, and based on the harrowing memoir Finding Fish, the filmed version of the memoir follows the traditional trope of African American autobiographical writing. As a commercial Hollywood film, Finding Fish was an attractive property that, in mainstream terms, could apply to non-whites as well with its broad Horatio Algeresque outline of poor-boy- makes-good, but as a visual spectacle Fisher's tale becomes a space for contestation on the nature of black motherhood. Similar to the images of dysfunctional black motherhood in the earlier Boyz in the Hood, Antwone Fisher demonizes single black mothers by encasing the *film* version in middle-class values that are reminiscent of the black middle-class spectacles of Oscar Micheaux. Fisher, at the time of the book's publication, was an aspiring screen-writer and security guard at Sony Entertainment, and was encouraged in his career goals by his employers. An American mainstream audience – largely white – were first acquainted with Fisher's story by his numerous talk-show appearances which helped to

publicize and sell the book which gave the book the type of white endorsements appended to early slave narratives. Fisher appeared before white middle-class audiences as a studious, extremely telegenic dark-skinned young man at a time when many of his peers either appeared on American television screens as "kill-whitey-rappers," or as shackled crack dealers on the way to prison. Since the issue of "race" was not central to his memoir, and clearly he had "up-lifted" himself from the ghetto, Finding Fish lent itself easily as a commodity for mainstream consumption.

On the one hand, Antwone Fisher is the harrowing tale of an abused child who turns his life into the standard American success story. While I do not doubt Fisher's veracity, or his finely tuned emotionally powerful writing, I do want to emphasize Fisher's refashioning of his story that results in a different text on the screen. At a time when the national conversation returned to a re-entrenchment of the mythic cultural and family values of the "traditional"nuclear family, and the abandonment of post-industrial inner cities , the ghost of the 1965 Moynihan Report (first strenuously opposed by many in the black political community) ominously appears over films like Boyz and Antwone Fisher. But the Moynihan Report had its successors as Elaine Brown recounts: "The image of the black girl as seductive predator and bearer of 'illegitimate' offspring dates, of course, from the slave era, evolving in the post-Emancipation decades into a number of mutations."

> By the 1960s she had come to be Daniel Moynihan's "black matriarch," then Ronald Reagan's "welfare queen," and later Bill Clinton's "unwed teen mother." Thus this vilification of black girls has become so in -

grained in the culture that it influences sweeping public policy. (101)

The central conclusion of Moynihan's and the successive reports on the black, lower-class female-headed family was the same: the ills besetting the black family was the lack of "morals", and absence of a traditional father figure, or as Hortense Spillers paraphrases in "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book": the black family "has no Father to speak of – his Name, his Law, his Symbolic function mark the impressive missing agencies in the essential life of the black community, the 'Report' maintains, and it is, surprisingly, the fault of the Daughter, or the female line" (258). In other words, black-on-black violent crime, the saturation of gangsta rap, drug dealing/addiction, and the increasing incarceration rates for young, black men were the fault of single, black female parents. Thus, poor black mothers (and Moynihan's report explicitly blamed *them* for the absence of fathers) were an easy scapegoat for whites in control of the agencies that doled out support. Furthermore, many middle-class black organizations increasingly added their own socially conservative voices to the blame game.

Antwone Fisher's personal narrative opens with the clearly troubled naval seaman Fish (Derek Luke) ordered by his fatherly captain (James Brolin) to seek psychiatric help for his emotional problems. While the narrative includes one confrontation that Fisher concludes is racial, the narrative consciously stays away from race in the egalitarian embrace of the United States Navy, itself a "patriarchal substitute" for young black men lacking the Law of the Father. Ultimately, it is the Law of the Father that forces the troubled adult Fisher to seek "help," and the Law of the Father that guides him to

wholeness as a man. Fisher is assigned to Dr. Jerome Davenport (Washington) who impels the troubled young man to reach back into his past as a key to unlocking his present day problems which, in a series of alternating flashbacks, we learn the source of Fisher's anger. The flashbacks provide important iconic images that contrast the middle-class, patriarchal values of the bourgeois life-style of the Davenports (and here screenwriter Fisher invents a suitable wife for the black doctor) with the dysfunctional living space of his working-class foster home where the young Fisher sleeps in the basement of the Tate home.

For Fisher, the life the Davenports present is similar to the dream he recalls as a child, endlessly dreaming of the unattainable mother. The film includes a dream-sequence, where the young Fisher comes upon a huge family waiting to embrace and nurture their lost "flesh" at a table laden with food. The scene is filmed as a traditional black "homecoming" which is replicated twice more in the film: the Thanksgiving celebration where he is "welcomed" by the large family of Berti Davenport's, and at the end when he finally finds his paternal relatives. At the Davenport's table, Fisher has the perfect model of patriarchal family values presented: Berti provides maternal physical and psychological nourishment, while Father Davenport provides advice, discipline, and patriarchal stability. The film directs the spectator's gaze to the spectacle of the well-appointed middle-class home as the site of well-ordered domesticity, a sharp contrast to the chaotic dis-order of the black working-class home of the foster parents. Hence, the connection with traditional middle-class roles are contrasted with the dysfunction of his foster home where the gender roles are reversed, and the nurturing aspect of food is

absent. The alternate flashbacks, thus, contrast the Davenport home with the Tates' where Mrs. Tate dominates the acquiescent Rev. Tate who fails to be a "man" in protecting the foster children from Mrs. Tate's abuse.

I would suggest, however, that what makes the film attractive to mainstream audiences is the misconception that Antwone Fisher is not about "race" in the overt manner of Spike Lee's Do the Right Thing, or even John Singleton's Boyz N the Hood. Although Antwone fails to overtly address the racial injustices that would lead to his anger, (and to the author's credit his narrative does not shy away from the problems of black children living in a racist society) but screenwriter Fisher compromises the "truth" of a black experience for a white-washed "feel-good" movie that argues that black dysfunction is not the result of systemic racism, but the fault of blacks themselves. And the fault is laid at the door of "irresponsible black mothers" whose children, as Elijah Anderson states, "come up hard." Sociologist Anderson provides an apt description of young men who "come up hard" as a result of circumstances not wholly the fault of single-black mothers, a description that fits the young black men of Boyz and the adult Fisher:

> They often learn to fight at an early age, using short-tempered adults around them as role models. The street-oriented home may be fraught with anger, verbal disputes, physical aggression, even mayhem. The children are victimized by these goings-on and quickly learn to hit those who cross them. (49)

The film's narrative suggests this condition as Fisher strikes out angrily at any suspected slight from his ship-mates which is why the captain orders him to seek counseling, but the source of Fisher's problems, the film finally argues, is the result of the apparent dysfunctionality of black motherhood. However, I would suggest that the *visualization* of the women in Fisher's film tells another story where the function, or dysfunction of black motherhood is mediated through the stratifications of class and color.

Fisher's physically and mentally abusive foster mother Mrs. Tate (Novella Nelson) teaches him to hate his dark skin color by repeatedly fawning over the light skin and "good hair"of another foster child who is bi-racial. Thus, Fisher receives his first lesson in the value of light-skin which is barely touched on in the film except in the implicit visual differences in skin color. However, the camera centers on Mrs. Tate's sneering mouth as she frequently refers to her male foster children as "black niggers,"and their missing mothers as "trash." The irony is that Mrs. Tate, as the matriarchal figure in the home, also insists on the boys calling her "mother," an irony not missed by the spectator as the past -images of Mrs. Tate's abuse are inter-cut with the present-day motherliness of Berti Davenport. However, I want to point out the matter of casting where not only the *class* position of these women are signified, but also their skin shade. The nurturing, middle-class Berti Davenport is extremely light-skinned with Euro-centric facial features, while Mrs. Tate is a medium-brown skin older woman with definite Afro-centric features. Antwone, played by actor Derek Luke, matches the deep-dark complexion of the author, and the discerning black viewer cannot help but notice the acceptance of Antwone by Berti, and the rejection of him by the color-struck Mrs. Tate.

Furthermore, Mrs. Tate confirms the myth of the cheating Welfare Queen, as she reproduces (takes in more children) in order to supplement her income from an indifferent welfare system. In addition to exploiting the foster care system for monetary gain, Mrs. Tate, the film also suggests, is an "accomplice" of Nadine (Yolanda Ross) who sexually abuses the child while ostensibly providing the household her services as an occasional baby-sitter. If Mrs. Tate is the converse of Berti Davenport in class and color, then Nadine, the dark-skinned, sexually voracious Jezebel is cinematically contrasted with the chaste, light-skinned middle-class Cheryl Smolley the adult Fisher's romantic interest. By comparing the sexual abuse of the young Fisher with the chaste romance with Cheryl, the film suggests the powerful image of the sexual deviancy of the darker-skinned Nadine. Furthermore, the relationship between Fisher and Cheryl directly mirrors the relationship between the Davenports as a corrective to the dysfunction of non-traditional relationships. Like Furious Styles in Boyz, Jerome Davenport serves as a role model for the young Fisher, especially in combating the negative images of sexually irresponsible black men who are "trapped" by black Jezebels like Nadine. Hence, both films construct the traditional role of the Father to beat back the dark influence of sexually irresponsible lower-class black women.

But who is *ultimately* responsible for the years of psychic and physical abuse Fisher endures? It is the dark-skinned, unwed black woman who abandoned her child after giving birth to him in prison. In the film's ending, Eva May is found living in ghetto poverty, a beaten-down, forlorn dark-skinned woman who is barely responsive to the accomplishments of her son. However, the film fails to address the multitude of societal

pressures that caused Fisher's mother to give him up in the first place; it is as if the darkness of her skin is some how enough explanation for her abandonment of motherhood, or to put it bluntly, her existence as some baby [sic] mama. "Whereas the welfare mom/queen has largely been the creation of media outlets and political elites," explains Mark Anthony Neal, "the baby mama has been a creation of black communities themselves. Generally speaking, the baby mama can [be] seen as an attempt by various and sometimes competing black communities to mark those black female bodies that remain outside 'mainstream' black culture."

> "Uneducated," "impoverished," "lazy," and "undisciplined," such bodies are seen by some in the black community as threats to nearly a century of attempts to sanitize the most negative perceptions of black life and culture. (75)

I would argue that the invention for the screen of the middle-class Davenports and Cheryl Smolley are attempts to contain another compelling story: that of Eva. Why the change in emphasis? Mark Anthony Neal offers a very persuasive and apt reason for the adult, screen-writer Antwone Fisher to modify his past: ". . . the baby mama also serves as a particular sign within contemporary black male discourses that are connected to black male desires to be seen as competent and meaningful players within social and political spheres perceived as the white male domains of capital and material accumulation" (75). So Eva's inherent dysfunction must be muted in order for her son to join the ranks of respectability. As the story limns, the importance of fathers are clearly more important in raising black men to "handle their bizness,' and middle-class fathers are more equipped

than the depraved indifference of irresponsible baby mamas. As Patricia Hill Collins notes: "Black bitches are one thing. Black bitches that are fertile and become mothers are something else."

Hot, Bitchy, and Out of Control

For too many young, black filmmakers dark-skinned women (in all black casts) are constructed as either angry black "bitches,"or as a combination of the mythic Jezebel/Sapphire sexual figure as defined by historian Deborah Gray White. "As a stereotype," explains Deborah Gray White, "Sapphire is a domineering female who consumes men and usurps their role" (176).

> Her persona is not sexual but is as indomitable as Jezebel's and equally emasculating in effect. While Jezebel emasculates men by annulling their ability to resist her temptations, and thus her manipulations, Sapphire emasculates men by usurping their role. . . Sapphire is as tough, efficient, and tireless as Mammy. Mammy operates, however, within the boundaries prescribed for women, while Sapphire is firmly anchored in a man's world.

If the respectability of black women could reside in black women who were lighter-skinned, or were closer to white phenotypical ideals, then her opposite was constructed as a darker-skinned malevolent (at least to male dominance) creature of deviant sexual appetites. Thus the Amazonian exhibitionism of Blaxploitation female icon Pam Grier who could titillate many male spectators while simultaneously giving a wink and a cursory nod to an emerging black feminism as cinematic images as a "Black Bitch."

Patricia Hill Collins discovers that the term "bitch" configured by black women is subject to active contestation like the term "nigger" embraced by hip-hop culture; thus, "not all bitches are the same."

> Among African American Studies undergraduate students at the University of Cincinnati, the consensus was that "bitch" and "Bitch" referenced two distinctive types of Black female representations. all women potentially can be "bitches" with a small "b." But the students also identified a positive valuation of "bitch" and argued (Some, vociferously so) that only African American women can be "Bitches" with a capital "B." Bitches with a capital "B" or in their language, "Black Bitches," are super-tough, super-strong women who are often celebrated. (123-124)

Grier's characters may be called black bitches by the villains in her films, but she routinely kicked ass without sacrificing her femininity. "She becomes a "Bad Bitch" (e.g. a good Black woman), when she puts her looks, sexuality, intellect, and/or aggression in service to African American communities" (124) However, the Blaxploitation genre was hardly an acceptable representation of black women to the leaders of the middle class civil rights movement, and proved to be too threatening to the male adherents of the New Black Aesthetic who came of age after the feminist and gay and lesbian movements of the 1970s. Although, not all African American male filmmakers color-coded black female actors according to the Jezebel/Sapphire/bitch configuration, nevertheless, it is important to remember that this post-Soul generation have also inherited a world where

interracial dating and marriage is not as uncommon for them as it was in the days of their parents and grandparents, and as forward thinking as they *believe* themselves to be, the use of dark-skinned, overtly sexual predatory black women becomes a useful short hand for black film-makers to express their suspicion of sexually aggressive, and independent black women.

Black actor and independent film maker Bill Duke cast dark-skinned Robin Givens as the predatory Imabelle who seduces a sexually naive Forest Whittaker in A Rage in Harlem (1991). Based on the urban novels of Chester Himes, the novelist's description of Imabelle: "She was a cushioned-lipped, hot-bodied, banana-skin chick with the speckled-brown eyes of a natural-born *amante*" (6) fits the archetypal black Jezebel. But Givens' skin-coloring, and "sexy" persona gives the film a different perspective, and director Duke no doubt approved her casting based on her real-life reputation as celebrity eye-candy and second-generation "gold-digger." Nelson George lauds her performance in the film, while acknowledging the "tabloid-baggage" that informed her character. "Overcoming the bad publicity generated by her controversial marriage to heavy-weight champ Mike Tyson, she gave an incredibly sexy, profoundly troubled, and fascinating performance" (113). Givens' was also used as the prototypical "black bitch" gold-digger in 2003's Head of State where she spurns local politician Chris Rock until he becomes a viable presidential candidate.

As part of a criminal gang, Imabelle routinely scolds the inept men in the gang, as she verbally holds her own in the company of men who secretly lust after her, but are afraid of her "toughness." The film wears its mistrust of black women as sexual

predators (Jezebels) and emasculating shrews (Sapphires) blatantly up-front as it argues the "unnaturalness," and black "bitchiness" of the black woman. Imabelle is the sexy Jezebel/Sapphire who cannot be trusted; Jackson's landlady Mrs. Canfield (Helen Martin) is the "black bitch who verbally emasculates him; and the deceased Mama Jackson(bitch mother) insures his chastity by her disapproving image over Jackson's bed, the scene of his coming of age as a man. Finally, there is Big Kathy (Zakes Mokae) who in the book impersonates women as part of a con-game, but screenwriter John Toles-Bey turns Big Kathy into the gay-cross-dressing Madam of a black brothel – thereby underscoring the sexual deviancy of black women. All of the women (including Big Kathy) – except for Mama Jackson – are dark-skinned. But in spite of her color, Mama Jackson is also de-feminized by a running gag through the film when everyone who sees her portrait thinks she is a man.

The film posits the violent Slim (Badja Djole), Imabelle's lover/partner in a con game, as the only man "man" enough to keep her in her place, and the reasons for Imabelle's double-cross of Slim and the gang (Slim of course, does not trust her) is because he physically abuses her. But the film's narrative does not invite sympathy for Imabelle because of her construction as a greedy, conniving "black bitch,"furthermore, Imabelle uses her body to "rob" men of their reason which firmly places her in the other familiar paradigm for black women: the Jezebel. Quickly seizing on the hapless non-aggressive, Christian devout, mother's boy Jackson as a "patsy" in her elaborate con to swindle Slim, Imabelle usurps male prerogative by seducing the virgin Jackson who, quite naturally, falls in love with Imabelle because she finally makes him a "man."

Jackson is not a man, the film argues, because he *allows* his emasculation by the Sapphire-character of his landlady who keeps up a running commentary about Jackson's lack of "women," and his devotion to the injunctions of a long-dead mother. Jackson sleeps under the eye of his, saintly dead mother whose picture stands guard over his bed. Thus, the religious Jackson is watched over by Mama Jackson – a stout, formidable, and extremely light-skinned woman whose portrait glowers at any one approaching her baby, and on the other side, a picture of the white *sissiefied* Jesus. Every morning Jackson prays to both: "Dear Lord, thank you for letting me wake up in my right mind, and keeping me from women." It is assumed from the film's narrative that Jackson's "un-manliness"and unassuming manner comes from the parenting of his dead mother, and an impotent Christianity.

Where'd the Black Women Go?

In the last hour of the PBS/BBC documentary – America Beyond the Color Line – scholar Henry Louis Gates, Jr. spoke with a group of aspiring black female actors about the role skin color plays in casting black women in commercial film. All of the women agreed that the preferred skin color is beige. As the group of dark-skinned women pointed out, women of their color are rarely – if ever – chosen for romantic leads, even by African American casting directors. The problem, points out actor Nia Long, isn't so much "racism," but what mainstream (white) audiences are comfortable with: "Light-skinned women playing romantic leads opposite white actors are less threatening," she explains, "they are more identifiable as white because (if they are bi-racial like Halle Berry) then they have one white parent which counts." In "The Real Taboo? Hollywood,

Race, and Romance," Tom Grayman finds that the real problem is a "reluctance toward depicting romance between black men and *black* women."As Grayman notes, actor Denzel Washington, "the most popular black film actor in American history – has been romantically paired with a black woman lead exactly once" – although he has appeared as a married man in John Q and Antwone Fisher, but in a traditional romantic structure, Grayman points to The Preacher's Wife where Washington's romantic interest is played by Whitney Houston. Mainstream American filmmaking, many black women note, accepts black men paired with non-black female actors more readily than casting two black leads, or even, black women and white men as romantic leads.

However, I would suggest that in matters of casting, Hollywood casting choices depend more on the target audience than anything else. Actor Halle Berry has appeared in so many films with non-black leading men that many in the black community feel that she refuses to appear opposite black male leads, but Berry has been marketed as the long-suffering Tragic Mulatto which attracts an older, educated, middle-class white audience. On the other hand, Denzel Washington and Julia Roberts were not allowed a romance in The Pelican Brief a film directed at the same type of age and income demographic as Berry's films. Films targeted to the youth market, like O (a hip-hop version of Othello) and Save the Last Dance, I would argue, are more amenable to interracial romantic pairings, in part due to the cross-over appeal of rap which in commercial Hollywood translates to the belief that young people are more tolerant of interracial romantic pairings. But, again, these films insist on black male/white female pairings – and the reasons (and excuses) vary. Black and white males in the industry cite a long, list of

reasons, from the old Shibboleth of Southern attitudes (as if racism stopped at the Mason-Dixon line), to the supposed non-acceptance of interracial couplings in the international market (international means Europe, and Europe does not have any black people), the fact remains that in an industry where standards of beauty are controlled by men, black women as romantic subjects opposite white men threatens the supremacy of white female beauty.

In the March 14, 2005 edition of *Newsweek* columnist Allison Samuels notes a new trend in Hollywood movies starring bankable black male actors: ". . . .there's something strange going on in such films as the recent Will Smith blockbuster "Hitch": these days African American leading men tend to be cast opposite Latinas instead of black actresses." Samuels' article, "Why Can't a Black Actress Play the Girlfriend?," touched a nerve as black women discussed the confirmation of what they already knew about the erasure of black women at a time when mainstream Hollywood appeared to embrace racial diversity. "Hollywood's recent multicultural casting certainly broadens the appeal of its pictures," notes Samuels, "and is meant to reflect – perhaps even to flatter – a society that increasingly sees itself as multicultural"– although mainstream Hollywood has yet to produce a romantic film with Latino leads.

According to Samuels, casting Latina female leads reflects a growing Hispanic market: "businesswise, it's a no-brainer," but oddly enough, as black female actors point out, the same multicultural casting does not apply to black women. The absence of dark-skinned women as romantic leads was one thing, and now even the lightest-skinned black women are not light enough. However, following the casting choices of Hollywood,

black directors have followed suite in order to keep the paradigm of "good girl" "bad girl" colorism intact while tacitly following the cultural agenda of racial diversity. "When conservative black filmmakers make movies," observes bell hooks, "the images of blackness they create are often in keeping with the status quo, as informed by internalized white supremacist aesthetics as images created by unenlightened white and other non-black filmmakers" (Reel 72).

A perfect example of combining genderized colorism and racial diversity for mainstream audiences is Out of Time (2003) directed by Carl Franklin who began his film career as a black independent filmmaker. In the film, Denzel Washington juggles his estranged wife Alex (Eva Mendes) a Miami detective and an affair with ex-high school lover Ann Merai (Sanaa Lathan). Lathan plays the stereotypical gold-digging, black Jezebel who uses her sexuality to scam the local sheriff Matt Whitlock (Washington) into stealing confiscated drug money for a bogus cancer treatment. In an elaborate ruse concocted with her husband Chris (Dean Cain). The success of the scam, thus, depends on the good-guy decency and guilt of Whitlock who is still in love with his estranged wife. In addition, Ann and her husband stage an elaborate scene where Whitlock must "save" Ann from Chris' physical abuse. What is disturbing about the film is not only the trope about the deviant sexuality of the black woman, but the fact that her husband, in effect, agrees to "pimp" her out for monetary gain. Or, since the instigator of the plot is not clear, one could assume that the money- grubbing Ann Merai "fucks" for money.

Since Whitlock is estranged from his wife Alex (Mendes) the two do not have any overtly sexual scenes together; Washington's steamy sex scenes are with Lathan which

establishes the difference between the two. Furthermore, Ann Merai's out-of-control sexuality compromises the expected love plot between Whitlock and Alex who – the narrative suggests- are still in love, and only the black Ann Merai stands in the way of traditional marriage. In the end Ann Merai murders her husband and injures Whitlock who tries to reason with her about giving back the money. But as the deviant black woman, she remains *unreasonable* as she tells Whitlock that the con wasn't all an act: "But I can't live broke. Life ain't shit when you're broke"– tries to murder him again, and is in turn, shot to death by Whitlock's estranged wife Alex. Once the evil, destructive "black whore" has been executed for her sins, Whitlock and his wife can be reconciled. Thus, the answer to columnist Samuels query: Why Can't a Black Actress Play the Girlfriend? – is yes, but only if she dies in the last reel.

Reckless Eyeballing: Interrogating the "Gaze"

In her Black Looks: Race and Representation cultural critic bell hooks explains the intricate set of "black looking" relationships between the reality of African American life and the fantasy which appears on American movie screens. As she and other critics have theorized, the conscious act of "looking' back at visual images uncritically is not a passive activity in which blacks accept a version of their Otherness. In fact, argues hooks, "In resistance struggle, the power of the dominated to assert agency by claiming and cultivating 'awareness' politicizes 'looking' relations – one learns to look a certain way in order to resist" (116). However, the "gaze" is not limited to the critique of racial images in a medium controlled by whites. Within black filmmaking praxis there are several intersecting sites that lend themselves to a variety of intraracial responses, or

"looking" relations as oppositional contestations to mainstream cinematic practices. Todd Boyd correctly points out that since "African American life is not monolithic, so it should be represented broadly so as to accommodate its broad dimensions. We must accept that as we proceed into the next century, the reconfiguration of Black identity will be informed by a myriad of possibilities, including gender, class, and sexuality" (23). To achieve these goals is an ambitious one, and under the constraints and compromises black filmmakers face in order to present their vision to a wider, and diverse black audience, a more representative inclusion appears to be an up-hill struggle. But as film distribution technology increases in the forms of Internet access, and direct-to-video and DVD forms have proliferated, many marginalized voices from women and gays and lesbians, at least have a better chance to have their voices heard. As I have argued, the struggle to define a unified black cinematic aesthetic depends (rightly or wrongly) too often on competing black political ideologies, essentialist intra-class divisions, and a system of genderized colorism that reflects the masculinist control of a medium that has yet to achieve parity in the means of production for all in order to express the full heterogeneity of the black diasporic experience so that no one will have to ask: Am I black enough for you?

Chapter Four: Are We Not Men?: The Image Problem

Introduction

The intent of this chapter is to examine the ways in which African American men were forced to create new images of themselves in order to refute the racist discourse of mainstream post-Reconstruction America. I want to consider the cultural landscape that brought together competing claims for black political and cultural autonomy during a time described by many historians as the "nadir of race relations" in American history. There are compelling reasons to consider for situating an examination of a construction of black masculinity at the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century. As David Levering Lewis and other historians of the post-Reconstruction era note after the notorious election of 1877 – "Henceforth, the white South would take care of its black people and the North would take care of most of the nation's business. *The Nation* had said starkly what President Hayes had no need to say publicly about the African American: "Henceforth, the nation, as a Nation, will have nothing more to do with him" (163).

In this racially charged political climate we need to keep in mind two relevant and interconnected events that hardened in the aftermath of Reconstruction. First, there was the virulence of the scientific racism that attacked the humanity of African Americans on two fronts: politically in the form of Jim Crow physical violence, and culturally in the equally psychological violence to African Americans in American popular culture. Historian John David Smith points out that – "From 1882, when statistics began to be collected systematically, until 1903, white mobs lynched 1,941 blacks." Moreover,

during a time of entrenched racial attitudes, Jim Crow laws, and a return of semi-bondage for black men, the sadistic rituals of lynching specifically revolved around the unnatural, and hyper-sexuality of the black male toward the wholesale sexual assaults against "pure" white women. "After 1890 Jim Crow laws," writes Smith, "in one southern state after another locked blacks into a truly separate and unequal world. Frightened by the thought of "social equality" and economic competition with blacks, white southerners employed all manner of racial violence to keep African Americans generally landless, uneducated, and powerless" (xiv).

The second pertinent event was the appearance of a distinct African American culture whose influence forever changed the contours and definition of *American* popular culture as a whole. The plantation culture of millions of slaves reflected a melange of African folk customs that were retained through the traumatic experience of the middle passage to the New World. While historians and some cultural nationalists may still debate whether or not the origins of a distinct, unitary African culture survived to come into contact with a European culture, is a debate that I do not consider here. But the culture of plantation slaves was creolized from the first as blacks came into contact with different ethnic groups and adapted different customs for a new way of life as disparate African ethnic groups became "seasoned" as a unitary racial group. As a group categorized by race and status, however, the slave culture was characterized by similar relationships with religion, music and language. It was in these areas that blacks were perceived as culturally *different* from whites as their folk ways suffered in comparison to high European culture. At a time when European aesthetics were divided and valued as

either "high" – the hallmarks of civilization, or "low" – the lack of civilization, slave culture was at the bottom of a racial hierarchy that evaluated blacks as creators of nothing of civilized value.

In Figures in Black: Words, Signs, and the "Racial" Self, Henry Louis Gates argues a connection between the Harlequin figure and his possible origins as an African slave. Gates suggests that contained in Harlequin's black and white mask lay the two characters of minstrelsy – "the masks of Tambo and Bones." Gates, pointing out the *negroid* face of illustrations between 1783 and 1870, persuasively demonstrates the link between Harlequin and American minstrelsy which makes the figure extremely suggestive of the "critical signification" between white and black relations, and between white and black texts. Noting the play between "figures of light and darkness in the works of Hawthorne, Melville, and Poe," Gates sees this same trope in a signification relationship between these American Romantics, slave narratives, and the Confederate romance (50). I want to borrow this concept as the controlling trope in the works of Paul Laurence Dunbar and Charles W. Chesnutt as signifying tropes of resistance.

As Joseph Boskin explains in Sambo: The Rise & Demise of An American Jester, the life of the black Sambo, that Africanized version of the Jester or Fool, "began with the early colonization efforts in the seventeenth century, if not considerably earlier" (7). Indeed, as the trade in West Africans evolved in the New World, the figure became connected to the black as a badge of his inhumanity. The connections between Jester-black-Sambo are murky and tangled at best, as Boskin relates, but Boskin points to two strong possibilities for the popular appellation. Boskin points to the name's etymology

that points to both African (sam bo) and Hispanic origins (zambo). Boskin points to the Hispanic origin as the most likely source of connecting the term with blacks, a connection I consider useful for this chapter. A zambo, explains Boskin, "refers to a person who is bowlegged or knock-kneed. In short, a 'zambo' is a type of monkey." The name, Boskin notes, has almost identical meanings in both Spanish and Portuguese.

> It is conceivable that the Spanish and Portuguese slavers mocked the Africans by calling them "zamboes." It is not going too far to suggest that that English translated "zambo" into "sambo." In fact, it is possible that the West Indian slave traders had already begun the practice. (38)

Regardless of the name's origin, Sambo in the American South became the entertaining slave, and a character of fun that out-lasted slavery well into the twentieth century. But there were two different readings of the "slave as entertainer"which complicated the search for an authentic black cultural expressivity by blacks themselves.

"Characterizing blacks as sambos meant they were carefree buffoons," points Ellis Cashmore, "devoid of the kind of sensibilities of whites. They grinned a lot, danced a lot and sang a lot" (27). But what troubled whites more than singing and dancing (which they considered natural to the African nature), describes Boskin, was their robust, raucous laughter (what one white listener characterized as "the peculiar hearty negro guffaw") of whoops, screams, and hollers that still perplexes whites to this day.

> Blacks giving themselves to the moment, to frolic when their status was the most demeaned, both angered and intrigued whites. That slaves, or even poor free blacks, for that matter, were not depressed

> and sullen but extremely lively and merry confused whites. (53)

Adds Cashmore about the scenes of "happy" slaves – "A little evidence goes a long way: this was meant to prove that they were all happy with life and totally committed to their masters."

> Never mind the backbreaking daily toil in the fields, the habitual lashing of the bullwhip, the wrenching away of loved ones and the total denial of anything resembling a life; blacks were happy in their social and moral void. Just look at them. (27)

I will leave for the moment the acts of resistance in the subterfuge, mis-direction, and signifying nature of black cultural response to slavery in order to consider the very real social meanings embedded in the character of black Sambo.

As cultural critics and perceptive historians have noted, whites *needed* the psychological meaning of Sambo. First, Sambo was used as ammunition in the war of words between the slave holding South and the righteous scorn of Northern abolitionists. Knowing the effect of the tales of runaway-slaves, slave-owners could counter the gruesome images with the dancing, singing, and laughing Sambo. Sambo was good "public relations" as many recollections left by Northern visitors attest as grinning slaves were lined-up to refute the lies told about their ill-treatment. How could they sing, dance, laugh, and tell jokes if slavery was such an evil? Cashmore follows Jan Pieterse argument that calls the Sambo a " cultural talisman through which masters 'sought to choreograph reality'" (27). Sambo was the magic figure to ward off the increasing divisiveness that would later rip the country apart over the issue of slavery. Not a few slave holders no

doubt feared that the end of slavery was an inevitability, but there was another reason to believe in the "magical" powers of Sambo, and that was to ward off the very *real* possibilities that at any time the numerous Sambos would stop grinning and force the issue by violence.

The second reason for Sambo's importance is in his relevance for keeping control of former slaves in the messy work of nation-building after the South's devastation. If Sambo was a "cultural talisman," and a "dramatic evasion" before the War, as Ellis Cashmore insightfully argues, then his figure proved to be just as useful as a dramatic *possibility* during Reconstruction. The social meanings of Sambo under slavery were just transferred to a mainstream public North and South eager for white reconciliation, and equally weary of war *and* blacks.

> The slave system afforded slaves a structured environment, which might appear to those who do not know it uncomfortable, though not unbearable. Slaves themselves, however, are quite at home. So went the slaveowner's logic. (27)

The argument that blacks needed, indeed *thrived* in a structured environment resulted in the agreement to end the experiment of Reconstruction. Structured environment meant Sambo did not need to be taxed with the stress of self-government, or any civil rights at all. Structured environment meant that Sambo needed forced labor under harsh sharecropping arrangements, and even harsher prison camps."Sambo was too content, too dim and probably too lazy to challenge existing arrangements."

The images of black males as the wide-mouth grinning Sambo permeated every aspect of American visual and print culture in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. "His style filled the literary field in novels, short stories, children's tales, dime novels, essays, pamphlets, and leaflets" (Boskin 11). In the plantation tales of Joel Chandler Harris and Thomas Nelson Page, Sambo became Uncle Remus and Uncle Mose through out mainstream popular culture, and in combination with the minstrel show "sold" whites an image – often contradictory and always illogical – of black men as docile, lazy, born liars and thieves of chickens and watermelons, and forever child-like in nature. "It would not be exaggeration," adds Boskin, "to say that Sambo was the first truly indigenous American humor character throughout the culture, transcending region and ethnicity" (8). Sambo with his magnified "darky"features, malapropisms of speech, and legendary musical abilities was perfect for America's first form of popular entertainment. But it was a form controlled by whites and for the entertainment of whites who were afraid of the alternative.

Within this cultural matrix, I want to consider a narrative discourse that combines the attributes of both Harlequin and Sambo as black male writers deliberately transgress and signify on the images of the uncivilized "savage," as signifiers of "blackness" and "whiteness" in the construction of masculinity. As popular authors who depended on a white readership, Dunbar and Chesnutt were forced to hide behind masks of subterfuge, and misdirection typical of Harlequin's masking qualities of misdirection in order to challenge the existing perceptions of the black male. But I also want to stress the act of signifying as a trope rooted in an African American tradition that comes out of the slave

"entertainment" performed in front of whites. Hence, Dunbar and Chesnutt aware of dual audiences "perform" dualistic acts of signification, acts which suggest Bakhtin's premise of the double-voiced nature of speech acts, or what W. E. B. Du Bois recognized as the "double-consciousness" of blacks rooted in a culture that supported the image of Sambo.

With Paul Laurence Dunbar (1872-1906), I am concerned with his mediation on language in his poetry as he contests Sambo's use of language as "gibberish" – black dialect – and how the image of Sambo's lack of language is hidden behind the mask of Dunbar's poems in "standard" English. Dunbar's novel. In turn, Dunbar's poems in "the master's tongue"signifies on the attributes of his color, and revises the image of Sambo as incapable of language outside of mimicry. Such an act should be considered as an inter-textual revision of what has been derisively termed the "Mockingbird School,"where clever "Sambos" were mere parrots. The Sport of the Gods offers an especially pertinent moment to "read" the novel as signifyin' directly on the color and class bias within the African American community by "calling out" the racist ideology ambivalently assimilated by the black community.

Chesnutt's method of "dramatic evasion"(to use Ellis Cashmore's premise) is to challenge what Cheryl I. Harris terms the "properties of whiteness" in the character of John Walden in The House Behind the Cedars. Although every black writer in the act of cultural formation is forced to contest the exclusion from a property of whiteness – the acquisition of language and the perception of Sambo's inability to expressivity in arts and letters which I take as a given – I consider Charles W. Chesnutt's signification on the genre of the tragic mulatto as John Warwick, like Gates' Harlequin "points to one of the

black patches on his suit"(his return to his black family) and becomes invisible in the text. Chesnutt also challenges the stability of race by highlighting the fluidity of racial categories bound, not only by biology, but also by geographic space. For a black readership, however, Chesnutt's imagery of black masculinity remains an ambivalent gesture as Chesnutt posits two faces to refute the Sambo, but is incapable of separating himself from intraracial attitudes of color and class. Thus, Chesnutt's "dramatic evasion" of releasing John Walden from the text, suggests a dual reading of black masculinity.

Since James Weldon Johnson's The Autobiography of An Ex-Colored Man actually has *two* dates of publication – anonymously (masked) in 1912, and again with Johnson's name attached as author in 1927 – I want to consider the novel as a thematic bridge between the earlier texts of Dunbar and Chesnutt's and Wallace Thurman's The Blacker the Berry (1929) and Claude McKay's Home to Harlem (1928) as they both challenge earlier examples of black masculinity and class as hetero-normative subjectivities. Although I treat Thurman's and McKay's works out of chronological order, I consider Thurman's novel closer in inter-textual relationship with Johnson's for my purpose. Again, Johnson's work presupposes a dual audience as he challenges racial categories. Johnson also signifies on the slave narrative as he suggests a post-modern theme on the performative nature of race, gender, sexuality, and cultural commodification. I want to suggest that Johnson's text also begins an intraracial conversation that posits a connection of skin color with sexuality, and in combination with the Thurman and McKay texts, presciently capture the late twentieth century

masculinist political Manichean thinking that equates "femininity" with white, or light skin, and authentic black masculinity in dark skin.

Hence, Thurman's The Blacker the Berry , inter-textually continuing the opposition to colorist supremacy in The Sport of the Gods, implies the inherent moral rot and degeneracy of the light-skinned male in Alva and Braxton which explicitly connects their arguments to the political imperatives of the 1960s. McKay furthers the argument by focusing on the black cultural authenticity of the black lower classes, and the intersections of gender, skin color, and male sexual desire. In my readings of these novels, the consideration of dual racial audiences is not my explicit concern, rather, I am interested in a black audience split of class and sexuality, and the ways in which these texts act as phallophores in their contestation with Sambo.

The Caged Bird Sings the Master's Tongue: Chesnutt and Dunbar

While Chesnutt signified on the sentimentality of the plantation "darky" by slyly subverting the genre with his Conjure Tales, his novels suggested an American inclusion for blacks based solely on the visible properties of "whiteness." Although on the surface, novels like The House Behind the Cedars (1900) and the un-published Mandy Oxendine appeared to plead for an inclusion of black men as civil equals, Chesnutt instead offers a compromise on the issue of race by a substitution of class. SallyAnn H. Ferguson observes that Chesnutt's works about the color-line, fails to overtly attack white privilege by arguing that the privileges of whiteness should instead be shared by blacks who *visibly* share a resemblance with whites.

Indeed, a great deal of Chesnutt's work promotes his futuristic vision of

> a nonthreatning, miscegenated American citizen who, as his first 'Future American' essay states, will look 'predominantly white,' call himself white, and be molded by the same culture and dominated by the same ideals.' (8)

However, for a sympathetic white readership who expected the fantasy of harmless old black "uncles" and old black "aunties," non-dialect speaking, educated young, virile black men who could ostensibly "pass" as white presented a cognitive dissonance to proper racial hierarchy. This dissonance, of course, was reflected in Chesnutt's book sales as he moved beyond the plantations tales of "conjure," and slave cultural retention to a more dangerous narrative that focused on the racially ambiguous position of race-mixed blacks. Although novelist/critic William Dean Howells admired the black author's tales of life on the color-line, as critic William L. Andrews notes: ". . . other reviewers were put off by his unapologetic inquiries into topics considered too delicate or volatile for short fiction. . ." Chesnutt soon found that he could not sustain a profitable living with his novels of black "Future Americans" who threatened to upset the racial balance in works like <u>The House Behind the Cedars</u> , <u>The Marrow of Tradition</u> (1901), and <u>The Colonel's Dream</u> (1905) whose sales, notes biographer Frances Richardson Keller, were "negligible."

About Charles W. Chesnutt, William L. Andrews correctly points out the fact that: "No black American writer before Chesnutt showed either the interest or skill necessary to attempt a fiction of manners concerned with light-skinned, middle- class African Americans" (xiii).What makes Chesnutt a compelling cultural figure is his historical and

literary placement between the black male authored slave narrative and the literary creativity of the Harlem Renaissance. As Dean McWilliams points out Chesnutt: "understood the unique moment in which he lived and the challenges it posed" (57). The challenges facing Chesnutt were the entrenchment of racism in the fictions of American racial custom which were irrevocably legalized under the *Plessy* decision of 1896. In an era of hysterical racial fear and violence, the body of the black male was, by all accounts, central to the national debate on race. Hoping to enter the debate on "race" on a more critical level, Chesnutt faced what Eric J. Sundquist correctly states "was perhaps the most pressing racial question of the era: Could the race advance culturally or ever be accorded equal political and social rights without discarding the traces of its enslavement and African origins?"

> The post-Reconstruction years put African American culture under intense pressure as the work of preservation and historical legitimation was set against the eroding forces of suppression. Corresponding to the question of civil rights, then, was another: What life and what historical memory were "authentically" black? (291)

Countering, and rightly so, the negative images of the black male – either as submissive *old* Uncle Tom and Uncle Remus, or the young black bucks of racist imagination in the works of rabid racists like Thomas Dixon. Although Chesnutt's works addressed the very real results of slaveholding miscegenation (and Paul Laurence Dunbar's parents were former slaves themselves) Chesnutt and Dunbar as representatives of a rising, educated black middle-class were, thus, highly conscious of the explosive nature entailed in

depicting black males that ran counter to prevailing white stereotypes. Chesnutt, especially, vowed to do more in fiction and non-fiction than his contemporary white peers by reflecting a narrative of black male progress as he and his caste knew it.

Although the older Chesnutt outlived his younger literary rival Paul Laurence Dunbar, both men shared similar objectives in attempting a new cultural voice for African Americans, and both met with resistance from a white readership when they both left the genres that gave them initial fame. Searching for a greater sense of authorial control and individuality, like Chesnutt, Dunbar poured his genius into the hugely popular plantation genre, and was hailed by the influential literary critic William Dean Howells for his sympathetic and skillful rendition of black plantation life. As the foremost critic of early twentieth American fiction, Howells spoke with authority to that portion of a white readership enamored by the charming plantation tales of Joel Chandler Harris and Thomas Nelson. However, the selling point of Howells critical evaluations was that the dialect rendered plantation tales and poetry by Chesnutt and Dunbar were the works of "genuine negroes," and thus had the ring of black cultural authenticity. In the hands of black writers the use of black dialect often marked the difference between class groups in the African American community; between those who could linguistically "pass," and those who could not. At the turn of the century, the use of standard English by African Americans over-turned the racial anxieties and myths about black intellectual abilities, and their status as equals in American political and social life. Although the uses and abuses of the African American vernacular have been covered by critics Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and Geneva Smitherman, African Americans continue to debate the

value of a black vernacular that for many should remain (if at all) for "private" use. Nevertheless, Howells insistence on "race,"and the linguistic attributes that black skin implied, meant that neither Dunbar or Chesnutt would be able to escape the matter of their individual coloring. Similar to the "excuses" made for the oratorical and literary skills of the race-mixed Frederick Douglass, sympathetic whites were convinced that the fact that Douglass and Chesnutt could even be logical and *thinking* men were evidently a result of their infusion of European blood. However, in his earliest forays into the realm of white publishing, Chesnutt did *not* reveal his race, or as I discuss later, Chesnutt unconsciously *masked* his legal "race" as part of his literary agenda on the un-stability of racial boundaries. Whereas Chesnutt's coloring (he termed himself as "a voluntary Negro) was no different than the color of the average white man, Dunbar's coloring was unmistakably black.

Reviewing Dunbar's first collection of poetry Majors and Minors (1895), Howells praised the volume highly which made Dunbar an instant celebrity, especially among the small book-buying black public starved for *any* cultural images of black men that did not involve dialect speaking buffoons, or the vicious caricatures typified in the novels of Thomas Dixon, and the racial warnings of anti-miscegenation pamphlets. But Howells' praise came at a psychic price for the proud poet who was self-conscious, and conflicted about his African features and his abilities to create an art according to European cultural standards. Historian Eleanor Alexander writes that Howells "emphasized that Paul was obviously an African American, judging from the volume's enclosed photograph of the poet. His point was to inform the audience that Paul's intellect was *so very unusual* [my

emphasis] because he appeared to be of 'pure African blood'" (39). Alexander provides the telling portion of Howell's review which bears repeating here.

> The face which confronted me when I opened the volume was the face of a young Negro, with the race traits strangely accented: the black skin, the woolly hair, the thick out-rolling lips, and the mild, soft eyes of the pure African type. One cannot be very sure of the age of these people, but I should have thought that the poet was about twenty years old; and would have been worth, apart from his literary gift, twelve or fifteen hundred dollars under the [slave auctioneer's] hammer. (Alexander 39)

Notwithstanding the casual racism of the time, Howell's critical acclaim for Dunbar's work is muted by the decidedly linguistic terms that highlight two important problems for African American writers who undertake the cultural tensions of utilizing the "master's tongue" for black cultural expression.

Significantly, there is the fact – suggested by Howells' own cultural, and patently paternalistic position and linguistic control – that Dunbar's facility and artistry is as startling an achievement as if the volume of poetry came from a monkey, or any other non-human species. Glossing on the oft repeated Hegelian concept that equated the trope of "blackness" with an absence of the properties of European humanity, (i.e. rudimentary reading and writing skills) Henry Louis Gates, Jr. in Figures in Black: Words, Signs, and the "Racial" Self exquisitely and succinctly sums up Howells' critical assessment, equally applicable to Chesnutt and Dunbar as creative *beings* instead of imitative parrots.

> Without writing, there could exist no repeatable sign of the workings of reason , of mind; without memory or mind, there could exist no history; without history, there could exist no 'humanity,' as defined consistently from Vico to Hegel. (21)

Howells certainly alerts his readers in tones of *wonderment* that any prose coming from some one without the "excuse" of white blood appears to the critic as doubly astonishing. Gates refers to Howells' evaluation as "a correlation between a metaphysical blackness and a physical blackness" (22). But, as with the critical assessment of the dialect tales of Chesnutt, the *repeatable* sign in this case is the authentic blackness signaled by both writers use of African American vernacular. As the sales of Dunbar's dialect poems out-sold his poems in standard English, a similar condition experienced by Chesnutt, the trope of a repeatable blackness not only refuted the myth about African inferiority, but the trope also trapped both writers as they sought to *write* a new African American into a life of genteel art.

The second problem, slightly related to the first, concerns the problem that hovers over all black cultural representation : that of demonstrating the African American's humanity through the acquisition and mimesis of European cultural forms. In Majors and Minors Dunbar's implicit aim is to expose the myth of black inferiority, his exposure of the myth is evident in the poetry written in standard English which were never as popular as his dialect poems with white (or, for that matter, middle-class black readers) and Dunbar was forced to face the fact that white readers and critics refused to release him from a cultural-linguistic position as a "black" poet. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. refers to this

position as "a curious dialectic between formal language use and the inscription of metaphorical 'racial' difference." Thus, the use of his mastery in the use of dialect, taken as one of the irrefutable signifiers of blackness was judged to be Dunbar's natural position. Indeed, critic Howells over-praised the dialect verse to the detriment of Dunbar's verse in Standard English form ("Mr. Dunbar writes literary English when he is least himself.") much to Dunbar's dismay: "Mr. Howell's has done me irrevocable harm, " he confided to friends, "in the dictum he laid down regarding my dialect verse" (Alexander 40). The speech patterns of dark-skinned rural blacks, many of the lighter-skinned black elite firmly believed, at least publically, was a sign of the lack of educational opportunities for the millions of African Americans hampered by the stringencies of Jim Crow law and custom – a matter that many hoped would be resolved as more and more African Americans signed on to the ideology of education, and other middle-class values as a way out of grinding poverty and racial injustice.

In spite of what, the light-skinned elite proclaimed publically about the vernacular and rural folk customs of the black masses, privately the feeling was that "darky dialect"was just another one of the stigmas that inscribed the black body as inferior, a belief informally (and formally) disseminated through out Afro-America. "For some blacks," explains Willard B. Gatewood, "there was a close link between the crudities of the lower classes and the passage of discriminatory legislation." During the debate over enacting a Jim Crow law in 1900, one elite black Virginian felt called upon to remind the racist legislators that a discriminating class of blacks existed who had "no communication" with the lower black orders. Thus, "it was a gross injustice to humiliate

the genteel Negro because of the shortcomings of the few" (Gatewood 192). The black "genteel" reaction was, in part, due to the most odious caricatures of black Southern speech as the mainstay of "darky" plantation tales and minstrelsy. Along with what they saw as black pretensions to decorous dress, culture, and manners, Southern newspapers deliberately constructed what they believed were black "speech"patterns in order to further denigrate African American aspirations to civil equality and dignity. As I discuss later, the language and speech patterns of rural blacks in the hands of racially ambivalent authors like Chesnutt, Dunbar and later James Weldon Johnson were utilized in order to mark, not only the difference of skin coloring, but an intraracial class system that remained intact until the younger members of the Harlem Renaissance begin a re-evaluation of the black vernacular as a distinct African American folk formation.

A Blues Book Most Excellent: *The Sport of the Gods*

Conscious of his dark coloring among the class and color-struck black elite, (who gave him a "pass" because of his celebrity in the white world) Dunbar grew to despise the very work that furnished access to the black upper-classes. If Charles W. Chesnutt tried to trump race with class, Dunbar worked even harder to trump race with artistic talent. But as hard as tried, Dunbar could not erase the color of his skin in a race-conscious world, and more importantly, among the light-skinned elite who made him the most famous black man in America. But celebrity was not enough. In a letter to his mother, Dunbar wrote wistfully: "I am the most interviewed man in London. . . . At tea with Henry Stanley. The French waiter in London took off his cap to me. . . . I am entirely white." If not in fact, Dunbar could be, however, white in literature by

concealing his blackness through white surrogates. Dunbar's little known four novels, with the exception of his last The Sport of the Gods (1902), were all centered on white characters. The themes of these novels in white-face are, writes Addison Gayle, Jr. "based upon freedom as opposed to restraint, the individual as opposed to the group, preference for the small town over the city, and the influence of fate/destiny in man's achievements occur in each work"(49). However, his criticism no doubt tempered by the Black Arts Movement of the 1970s and an active proponent of the Black Aesthetic, Gayle views Dunbar's "individualism" as anti-black community: "Dunbar not only identified with whites emotionally, intellectually, and spiritually; all too often he sanctioned their evaluation of Blacks" (52). But Gayle does not take into consideration Dunbar's frustration with the racial custom that deprives him of individual manhood, or Dunbar's conflict over his own skin color.

Interestingly, Addison Gayle, Jr. reserves his most vitriolic attack on Dunbar's seemingly self-hatred for the one novel that Dunbar devoted to the condition of post-Reconstruction blacks. Although Gayle praises the novel The Sport of the Gods as the first African American novel to address "the purported sensationalism of black life," nevertheless, Gayle argues that the failure of young Joe Hamilton is a "failure. . . primarily because the author is unable to believe in equality between Blacks and whites, incapable of believing that black survival was not dependent upon white patronage and benevolence" (56). I use Gayle's assessment, in part, precisely to illustrate the critical dangers of asking a work to do the impossible. This is not to say that Gayle's critical judgements are irrelevant (and Phyllis Wheatley also falls under this dicta), but after the

modern Civil Rights Movement, the Black Power and Black Arts Movements, critical expectations of black artistic representations were judged on the basis of their responses to white racism, and Gayle finds Dunbar lacking in black power hyper-masculinity. Critic Houston A. Baker, Jr. directly takes issue with Gayle's dismissal of Sport of the Gods under a mis-application of historical context: "Gayle is bent on answering the question: Was Dunbar's authorial response to a determinate set of historical circumstances in accord with *my* (Black Aesthetic) interpretation of Afro-American history?"

> Some critics have almost automatically assumed that during the nadir of race relations in turn-of-the-century America and unaided by sophisticated literary influences and opportunities enjoyed by his successors, Dunbar *could not* have produced literary works that deserve serious attention by today's scholars. (118)

Baker, instead situates the novel in its historical context at the moment of historical change for African American popular culture. Dunbar's novel, he persuasively argues, is a perfect melding of Southern black vernacular, and urban rhythm. "It relies for social efficacy," writes Baker, " on the 'ordinary language' and traditional historical grounding of a human community" (116).

While I would agree with Baker that the novel is situated in what he terms "the blues matrix," I want to also suggest another alternative reading that I argue is Dunbar's response to the black political image of masculinity that reflects the supremacy of the educated, light-skinned elite. Dunbar was deeply conflicted by his own race and skin color, especially as a conspicuous member of an elite class of African Americans who

embraced their "white heritage" while holding those who looked like Dunbar as figures for derision. In response, Dunbar was equally conflicted over the values of the light skin he simultaneously desired and loathed. In spite of his apparent conflict, however, Dunbar's The Sport of the Gods presages the criticism of the colorist and bourgeois values in the works of Claude McKay and Wallace Thurman that come later during the Harlem Renaissance. As I argue later, Charles W. Chesnutt's light-skinned heroes were created in part to combat the virulent racism of the time. On the one hand, blacks were child-like, docile beings of plantation fantasy, lost without the benevolence of superior whites. On the other hand, black men were lustful hyper-sexual predators waiting for the next defenseless white woman. However, the mulatto, or "racial hybrid"presented an unstable quantity in racist discourse: one stream of nineteenth century racial theory attacked the "mixed-race" person as "less prolific," prone to degeneracy and moral corruption. Dunbar's novel explicitly adheres to this notion of "mixed-blood" moral instability as an equally unstable stage for a new black masculinity.

The popular literature by whites, especially the works by Thomas Dixon, routinely portrayed them as cringing, cowardly types, hell-bent on polluting the blood of whites. Chesnutt's novels attacked this racial premise in his fiction by sacrificing the status and humanity of the darker-skinned (non-mixed) black man. However, I would suggest that Dunbar tacitly *accepted* the view of visibly "mixed-race" men by directly challenging their elite status within the black community. Moreover, entering the debate over blood heredity and environment, Dunbar's novel problematizes the debate even further by his own inability to completely argue one side other the other in the way that Chesnutt does

in his last novel The Quarry, hence his own ambivalence ultimately weakens the novel's structure. Nevertheless, The Sport of the Gods is more of a response to intraracial color supremacy as a divisive threat to black communal values, black values which Black Aesthetic critics argued Dunbar lacked. Even in her discussion of the black novelists who severely critiqued the centrality of a "mulatto elite," Judith R. Berzon's 1978 Neither White Nor Black: The Mulatto Character in American Fiction does not mention Paul Laurence Dunbar or any of his works, although Berzon does examine the racial ambivalence of Chesnutt's color-line characters. Although Gayle is more sympathetic to Dunbar's fiction in his 1971 biography of the writer, Oak and Ivy, critical attitudes like Gayle's and Berzon's, thus, impel a reconsideration of Dunbar's fiction.

Briefly, The Sport of the Gods relates the tale of ex-slaves Berry and Fanny Hamilton who reside in "a homely cottage" on the estate of the white Oakleys. Berry, writes Dunbar, ". . was one of the many slaves who upon their accession to freedom had not left the South, but had wandered from place to place in their own beloved section, waiting, working, and struggling to rise with its rehabilitated fortunes" (18). Berry and Fanny are hired by the Oakleys as butler and housekeeper, and raise their children Kit and Joe in relative comfort. But the Hamiltons are proud; proud of their light coloring and proud of their class standing in the small black Southern community. After Berry is falsely accused of stealing money from his white employer, he is convicted and condemned to ten years in prison, and the family is turned out of their Southern home. Dunbar records the reactions of the darker-skinned community to the misfortune of the Hamiltons that reflect the very real animosity between light elites and dark masses in the

African American community. But it is Joe Hamilton who bears the weight of Dunbar's unconcealed, and ambivalent animosity toward the light-skinned elite. Through the figure of Joe Hamilton, Dunbar implies that Joe's moral degradation comes about because of an inherited moral degeneracy that is exacerbated by the lures of city life.

Before Berry's humiliation, Joe is employed as a barber in a shop that caters exclusively to white gentlemen. Young Joe assiduously copies the manners and superior airs of his white customers, and keeps a social distance from his black peers who are not unpleased at the Hamilton's social fall. But Joe loses his place after his father's conviction and finds that he must turn to the black barber shops in town in order to support his mother and sister.

> This was something of a condescension for Berry Hamilton's son. He had never yet shaved a black chin or put shears to what he termed "naps," and he was proud of it. He thought though, that after the training he had received from the superior "Tonsorial Parlours" where he had been employed, he had but to ask for a place and he would be gladly accepted. (60-61)

Joe's belated sense of community is derided as too-little-too-late by the people who now turn their backs: ". . .you're a white man's bahbah.

> We don't shave nothin' but niggahs hyeah. W'y, I hyeah you say dat you couldn't git a paih of sheahs thoo a niggah's naps. You ain't been practisin' lately, has you?. . .Oh, yes, you're done with burr-heads, are you? But burr-heads are good enough fu' you now. (61)

Rebuffed by the black community because of their sense of superiority, the family reluctantly settles in Harlem where the family – away from the moral values of pastoral life – easily succumb to the faster, and more sophisticated values of Harlem.

In many ways, The Sport of the Gods follows the traditional city- as- site- of- corruption cautionary tale familiar to black *and* white readers. Arlene Elder argues that the novel posits "fate and environment" as equal causes for the downfall of the Hamiltons enmeshed in the lures of city life. In Oak and Ivy, Addison Gayle, Jr. praises the novel for making city environment "the novel's chief villain."

> The city is portrayed as the center of evil, vice, sin, and corruption. Into this hellhole falls the family of Berry Hamilton, a victim of the southern plantation system, whose daughter and son are ruined by this hostile environment. (151)

However, Dunbar's tale also reads as a specific caution to young black men like young Joe who find in City life: ". . .the consciousness that already he was coming to be a man of the world. . .One might find it in him to feel sorry for this small-souled, warped being, for he was so evidently the jest of Fate, if it were not that he was so blissfully, so conceitedly, unconscious of his own nastiness."

> Down home he had shaved the wild young bucks of the town, and while doing it drunk in eagerly their unguarded narrations of their gay exploits. so he had started out with false ideals as to what was fine and manly. He was afflicted by a sort of moral and mental astigmatism that made him see everything wrong. (83)

Dunbar makes it quite clear that models of white manhood – either physical or assimilated – lead to "moral and mental astigmatism." Thus, in contradiction to what Addison Gayle, Jr. finds as Dunbar's "failure" to believe in racial equality, I would argue that Dunbar is suggesting a more radical thesis of African American individual masculinity based on black, at the very least, models rooted in black communal values. Although it can be argued that Dunbar's City models of black masculinity are one-sided portraits of con-men, drunkards, gamblers, and cheap hustlers these portraits are an attempt by Dunbar to add a black voice to the contemporary genre of "realism" which will not be seen again until the Harlem Renaissance. Moreover, Dunbar's rendering of a black "under-world" bluntly critiques the one-sided "cult of respectability" promulgated by the black, light-skinned elite whose ideals he obliquely attacks in his last novel.

In the aptly titled chapter *Frankenstein*, Sport details the complete moral ruination of the Hamiltons after five years in Harlem: "It may be true that the habits of years are hard to change, but this is not true of the first sixteen or seventeen years of a young person's life, else Kitty Hamilton and Joe could not so easily have become what they were." Mother Fanny lets herself be convinced that Berry's incarceration is in fact a "divorce," and lives with an abusive gambler; Kitty, trading on her "white-skin," and pleasant singing voice takes to the stage; and young Joe becomes a "sweet-man" ("He did not work, and yet he lived and ate and was proud of his degradation.") to the older and affable "blues-shouter" Hattie Sterling. Dunbar points out that the change in Joe only took a short time:

> He was so ready to go down that it needed but a gentle push to start

> him, and once started, there was nothing within him to hold him back from the depths. For his will was as flabby as his conscience, and his pride, which stands to some men for conscience, had no definite aim or direction. (149-150)

In the end, Dunbar offers a complicated "happy ending." Berry released early from prison, thanks to the *deus ex machina* of a sympathetic white investigator reporter who brings to light the perfidy of the white Oakleys, reunites with Fanny after the murder of the abusive gambler. Kitty goes on the road with a musical comedy troupe, but even Berry's "white-skinned," virginal daughter, Dunbar suggests, has not escaped the changes caused by the City: "She had had experiences, and her voice was not as good as it used to be, and her beauty had to be aided by cosmetics" (162). But it is Joe who fares the worst: in a drunken haze Joe murders Hattie, who for the last time finally "throws him over." "Drunk half the time and half drunk the rest. Well, you know what I told you the last time you got 'loaded'? I mean it too. You're not the only star in sight, see?" She laughed meanly and began to sing, 'You'll have to find another baby now'" (151). Found with Hattie's body, a stupefied Joe ("The first impression he gave was that of a man over-acting insanity.") is given a life sentence for Hattie's murder.

According to Gayle, such scenes of Joe and Kitty's degradation and ruin "are designed to appeal to a white audience. No matter how oppressive conditions in the South, there, the black man is healthier – physically, mentally, and morally" (Gayle 56). Gayle misses the fact that the North, even at this late date, was never the panacea for ill-treatment in the South, and the North as racial refuge for this particular family is not

Dunbar's project. And the catalyst for the Hamilton family's leaving the South is the false accusation of black male criminality which Gayle in his eagerness to charge the novel with a political backwardness somehow overlooks. In many ways The Sport of the Gods adheres to the narrative structure identified by Farah Jasmine Griffin in "Who Set You Flowin'?": The African-American Migration Narrative: "Although there are different reasons for migrating, in all cases the South is portrayed as an immediate, identifiable, and oppressive power. Southern power is exercised by people known to its victims – bosses, landlords, sheriffs. . ." (4). However, to the catalyst of white oppression Dunbar adds black community censure, as pre-Fall the Hamilton's embrace their light-skinned superiority and racial *otherness* over a common racial collectivism. Their children now irrevocably lost to them, Berry and Fanny return to the Southern home: "New York held nothing for them now but sad memories. . .so they turned their faces southward, back to the only place they could call home" (188). This return South for the chastened elder Hamiltons, is equally problematic for Gayle, but Griffin rightly sees the South, not only as the site of terror and violence, but also as a "site of the ancestor."

> If, on the other hand, the early Southern sections stress the significance of an ancestor, or the blood of any recently deceased black person, then the South becomes a place where black blood earns a black birthright to the land, a locus of history, culture, and possible redemption. If the South is thus established as a place of birthright, then the ancestor will be a significant influence in the migrant's life in the North. (5)

I would argue that Dunbar intuitively returns the Hamiltons to what he ambivalently locates as the site of black ancestral cultural and communal structures. Although at times, Dunbar indicated that he had a strong dislike for black people in personal letters (especially to his light-skinned wife Alice), and Gayle is certainly correct about Dunbar's racial ambivalence. Nevertheless, Dunbar contributed to the mainstream commodification of black folk culture as a cushion for black migrants facing the difficulties of urban life. Moreover, Dunbar directly confronts the color of masculinity as configured in the novels of Charles W. Chesnutt.

Blood Will Tell: Masculinity and Race

In a letter to George Washington Cable, Chesnutt bemoaned the literary depictions of these stock black characters – although he did acknowledge that they did exist to some degree in black America – "Such characters exist. . ." –

> I notice that all of the good negroes (excepting your own creations) whose virtues have been given to the world through the columns of *The Century* have been blacks, *full-blooded*, [my emphasis] and their chief virtues have been their dog-like fidelity and devotion to their old masters. . .But I don't care to write about these people; I do not think these virtues by any means the crown of manhood. (122)

Chesnutt's letter prompts several intriguing observations regarding black manhood and skin color. Although on the surface Chesnutt's ire appears to be directed at the white constructed *behavior* of these literary portrayals, the language and tone of his letter suggests a curious ambivalence about his own belief in the properties of race and blood.

As a self-proclaimed "voluntary Negro,"Chesnutt distances his own "white"masculine body from the taint of "full-blooded" blackness which he equates with a modern view of black masculinity. Although Chesnutt's fiction and non-fiction repeatedly challenged the racial discourse of his time, I would argue, that Chesnutt imbued with the assimilated color prejudices of his own class consciously reflected a face of an idealized black masculinity modeled on the contours that defined mainstream notions of a genteel masculinity shaped by patriarchal middle-class aspirations. However, this is not to say that Chesnutt lacked black literary models from which to work from – namely the three autobiographies of Frederick Douglass.

Frederick Douglass' 19th century refashioning of himself as a *man* and not a *thing* was presented "in a way that high-lighted the values and character traits most respected by white men: courage, nobility, rationality, and physical strength" (Rooks 14) and as America entered the twentieth century, a "new" cottage industry of scientific racist and anti-immigrant textual polemics reflected the fears of white Americans about the hordes of "dark bodies" invading white America. White American manhood, the majority of these writings suggested, was under-siege by black men, especially, who lacked an agreed upon set of masculine traits. Thus, slavery proved the absence of manhood because Africans *allowed* themselves to be enslaved, lacked the nobility to protect their women and the courage to confront white men on the field of combat, or as rational thinkers and participators in government. Lacking these traits, African American men were judged politically and socially as "non-men;" black men were expected to be submissive and docile, traits relegated to women. Hence, black male submission was

enforced, often by violence. But in popular literature, as Chesnutt, observes, the perception of blacks was "feminized" by insisting on their child-like qualities exhibited by their un-rationality and child-like "gibberish." Keenly aware that whites feared young, virile black men, and that many were convinced that mixed-raced individuals deliberately chose to mimic the values of the higher race over those of the lower, Chesnutt chose instead to plead for a color and class based inclusion of black masculinity as factors in the racial debate over black manhood. Chesnutt deliberately constructed a new black male in novels like The Marrow of Tradition and The House Behind the Cedars; however, it is in The House Behind the Cedars where Chesnutt's embrace of the properties of whiteness collude with his own ambivalence over race, class, and the color of masculinity.

Chesnutt's novel The House Behind the Cedars was not a best-seller for a white readership who embraced his authentic plantation tales in dialect; although Howell's praised Chesnutt's stories of life on the "color-line," House contains a dangerous and uncomfortable text for whites anxious about the possible racial pollution of white blood. The text is specifically about the conscious acts of concealment in which Chesnutt embeds his tale of racial and class ambiguity, but Chesnutt stops short of the possibility of race contamination. As Arlene A. Elder notes: "Chesnutt's tragic octoroon is trotted forth to run her precarious course, suffer the discovery of her racial mixture, and consequently, die" (175), hardly a major difference in the standard plot of tragic heroines trapped between white and black. Instead, I argue that the tragic story of the "mixed-race" Rena Walden is itself a racial sleight-of-hand, a racial misdirection in the sense that

the novel is actually about the "mixed-race" male figure John Walden. Charles Duncan also notes this misdirection: "John's disappearance becomes an act of double passing, both textual and social. He fades out of the scope of the novel's plot while, more subversively, he disappears into (*not* out of) the culture at large. . ." (15). As the novel opens, it is John Walden/Warwick who has accomplished the "racial pollution" that white readers fear, and not the threat of the white-skinned heroine. It is John, Rena's brother, who has married a white woman – not for love – but for material gain that would be out of his reach under his "legal" racial status.. Thus, the cedars that hide the maternal home of John and Rena, also hide the uncomfortable truth about the masculine side of life on the color-line.

The problem of the color-line and the shaping of black masculinity points to the racialized ambivalence in Chesnutt's work. I am interested here in the ways Chesnutt reconfigures a new image of black masculinity where the admirable traits of "black" masculinity are dependant also on the properties of whiteness and their assimilated attachments to class and skin color. I would argue that these properties are central to Chesnutt's project of defining black masculinity based on the properties of "whiteness" rooted in the economic system of chattel slavery. Cheryl I. Harris argues that: "Slavery as a system of property facilitated the merger of white identity and property."

> Because the system of slavery was contingent on and conflated with racial identity, it became crucial to be 'white,' to be identified as white, to have the property of being white. Whiteness was the characteristic, the attribute, the property of free human beings. . .(279)

Chesnutt's ostensible narrative for black equality is concealed beneath his own assimilated beliefs about the properties of white manhood. "Becoming white," explains Harris, "meant gaining access to a whole set of privileges that materially and permanently guaranteed basic subsistence needs and, therefore, survival. Becoming white increased the possibility of controlling critical aspects of one's life rather than being the object of others' domination" (277). Assessing Booker T. Washington's own strategies of black emasculation, Donald Gibson writes: "If 'man' is defined in terms of the freedoms and prerogatives belonging to white males politically, socially, and economically in nineteenth-century postbellum American society, then blacks who do not aspire to such power. . . are content to accept as their own the status then currently belonging to women" (97).Using the advantages of skin-color to attain the properties of whiteness/masculinity is key to Chesnutt's tale of racial passing, but it is also central to his own racial ambivalence. Significantly, the author modeled his fictional male characters on himself in his novels about the problems of those who lived on the color-line, and in an 1875 journal entry he notes: "Twice to-day, or oftener I have been taken for 'white.' . . . I believe I'll leave here and pass anyhow, for I am as white as any of them" (Journals 78). Chesnutt's description of himself is replicated in his description of John Walden: "His playmates might call him black; the mirror proved that God, he had been taught, made no mistakes, – having made him white, He must have meant him to be white" (107).

Although Chesnutt makes a conscious decision to remain in the black community, his alter ego accomplishes what Chesnutt does not : passes as a white man, and prospers

as a "white" man in a white world. But racial passing is not only a dangerous act of concealment, but passing contains an equally dangerous psychological impasse – the total erasure of the source of blackness. In John's case, this means the erasure of his black mother Molly Walden. Molly, notwithstanding her status as "free-born," or her light coloring is legally black under the law, but complicating her status even more is the fact that she is the mother of two visibly "white" children. Mis' Molly's non-whiteness is also suggested by her dialect speech, although she draws the class line between herself and "pure" blacks like the Fowlers[18]. According to racialized domestic custom, this arrangement makes Molly's position analogous to the traditional black female caretaker of white children under American slavery. As Ann Laura Stoler points out about white colonial families, many white families worried about the moral effects of the closeness between their white children and their black care-givers, who many families believed, were a immoral source of class contamination. "The social grammar of prescriptions for making a child into a bourgeois adult rested on distinctions that affirmed the virtues of whiteness and the moral highground of bourgeois civilities. . .For becoming adult and bourgeois meant distinguishing oneself from that which was uncivilized, lower-class, and non-European" (151). Thus, in order to become a real "man," John must separate himself from the barrier that Molly's blackness presents in order to become other than "being the object of others' domination."

Donald B. Gibson notes that Chesnutt's fictional attitudes about race and class uncomfortably reflect "the mythology built up by defenders of slavery. . ." "Time after

[18] The passing mulatto Mandy Oxendine, however, does speak in dialect in Chesnutt's Mandy Oxendine.

time he refers to the "blood" of his characters and seemingly believes that the character of individuals is determined by who their ancestors are. . . There is much in the novel to suggest that Chesnutt literally believes that social class matters and not money alone. The "Best" people belong to the higher classes *and* they have money. (House xx) Moreover, Gibson appears to be unconvinced of Chesnutt's adoption of racial Darwinism, and points out the author's glaring ambivalent gestures regarding race, class, and social determinism. When Chesnutt writes about John's *reasons* for challenging the artificiality of race laws and customs, he is clear on where the racial lines should, indeed, be drawn. Chesnutt, clearly aware of the matrilineal law applied to white-skinned blacks, argues for a return to patrilineal racial descent, although his reasoning for following the patriarchal line can only apply to those *visibly* "white" enough to escape detection as non-white. Chesnutt knows that such a legal re-definition would not apply to blacks in general because, regardless of the historical mixing of "races" in America, skin color and European features would be prima facie evidence. But John's father is white, John is visibly white, and John claims the "white" inheritance of his father's blood. "The blood of his white fathers, the heirs of the ages, cried out for its own, and after the manner of that blood set about getting the object of its desire" (109). Hence, John *becomes*, not a fractured self between "races," but a full "white" subject before the law. Gibson argues about this passage:

> Such an observation, with no hint that such belief as expressed here is held by the narrator or by the character and not the author, leads unfortunately to the racist and untenable conclusion that whites are

indeed superior to blacks. (xx)

I disagree, however, with Gibson's *apologia* for Chesnutt's assimilated racism; Chesnutt's novels plea for understanding that some blacks are equal to whites by mirroring the racism of sympathetic white readers, who he hopes, will trade the stigmas of race for the shared racial attributes of class. As to whether or not these attitudes can be attributed to Chesnutt, or his character, I would suggest that in many ways, John presents one logical path – but not taken – considered by the youthful author in 1875.

Chesnutt's reliance on the infusion of white blood in black communities, in many ways, suggests a passing down of respectable bourgeois masculinity through the blood-line of the white father. Although John Walden is legally black in North Carolina, to regain the patrimony of his white father he must conceal his legal status; to not do so would put him in the same lowly economic class and racial position with the black Frank Fowler. Although on the surface Chesnutt constructs a sympathetic image of dark-skinned Frank, he does make it clear that Frank by his race, and skin color cannot achieve the properties of white masculinity. Frank is the son of two ex-slaves previously owned by the white father of John and Rena Walden, and "willed" to Mis' Molly who makes the class distinctions between the two black families abundantly clear. Frank, against the wishes of his father Peter, remains subservient to Mis' Molly which further makes Frank's position antithetical to Chesnutt's definition of manhood. However, Frank is secretly in love with the "white" John Warwick's equally "white-skinned" sister Rena, and Chesnutt conceals the color-caste problem beneath one of thwarted romance. Although Donald B. Gibson prefers to regard House as more *class* conscious than *race*

conscious, I would counter-argue that the novel *is* about race, especially as it shapes and reflects the intraracial class and color attitudes among Chesnutt's black middle-class peers; in fact, Frank Fowler, in spite of his "dialect" is literate whereas Mis' Molly, even in her non-blackness, is not. This fact suggests that Mis' Molly's class standing is indeed "borrowed" from her "white" children, and the expected attributes associated with skin color in the black community. Hence, Mis' Molly – herself not quite as "white" as her children – considers Frank an unsuitable match for her daughter: "The idea of her beautiful daughter riding home from the end of the world with Frank, in a cart, behind a one-eye mule, struck Mis' Molly as the height of the ridiculous. . .Her daughter was going to live in a fine house, and marry a rich man, and ride in her carriage. Of course a *negro* [my emphasis] would drive the carriage, but that was different from riding with one in a cart" (27).

Following her brother to South Carolina, Rena begins a romance with John's white friend George Tryon, and faithful Frank keeps her secret because he is willing to sacrifice anything for Rena. Chesnutt structures the action of Frank's sacrifice as one of "true love," but Frank's "love" suggests the plantation fantasies of the devotional ties between former slaves and their masters. "She'll be better off wid me out'n de road. She'll marry dat rich w'ite gent'eman, – he won't never know de diffe'nce, – an' be a w'ite lady, ez she would 'a' be'n, ef some ole witch had n' changed her in her cradle" (86). Chesnutt implicitly places Frank among the non-threatening plantation blacks by encasing Frank in the double trap of black speech, and the "backwardness" of black

superstition[19]. But within the structure of the romantic plot Chesnutt explicitly counters Frank's non-valued blackness with the valued whiteness of John Walden's. Since Frank does not possess the *visible* signs of "whiteness," he cannot expect, or persuade a change in custom (or law) from his racialized position under the category "negro." Since John Walden/Warwick establishes his manhood under the patriarchal rights of "whiteness," I would argue, that Chesnutt's narrative structure must contain the threat to the white normative family structure presented by the blackness of Frank Fowler.

As argued earlier, part of John's strategy of claiming his white patrimony means the erasure of familial contagion (the black mother). But John, as a "white" man, must also enforce white heterosexuality by maintaining the white family, so he "rescues" Rena as a replacement for his dead white wife, and a suitable care-giver for his "white" child who "has a good enough nurse, as nurses go. But the nurse is ignorant, and not always careful. A child needs some woman of its own blood to love it and look after it intelligently" (16). Following the argument of Ann Laura Stoler about the putative racial contamination of black care-givers, the nurse is black, and John, under the property entitlements of masculine whiteness, confers "whiteness" on Rena in order to maintain his own white family. Thus, he "rescues" his "white" sister from his black mother. But what of the devoted Frank? Chesnutt also "rescues" Rena from the black Frank Fowler by erasing/emasculating Frank from the romantic plot with the more "public" love affair between Rena and the white George Tryon. Only Mis' Molly – as a legally class and

[19] Even Mis' Molly speaks in dialect as another sign that she cannot "racially" follow her children. Molly is too dark to pass as white.

color conscious black – considers the *possibility* of Frank as a suitor for her daughter's hand, however, the possibility never occurs to her son because to do so would be to admit his own blackness. Furthermore, to do so would be tantamount to including black Frank in the code of masculinity reserved only for white men. Mason Stokes suggests that in typical Southern "romance novels," like Thomas Dixon's The Leopard's Spots (1902), Chesnutt follows a typical trope of the genre. "In the novel's (The Leopard's Spots) larger allegiance to the conventional romance plot, a white woman is given from white man to white man in marriage, a move that ultimately consolidates white male political power at the expense of both white women and black men, dramatizing the extant to which white supremacy is more properly understood as white-male supremacy" (134). John, thus, demonstrates his own "whiteness" as he "gives" his sister to his white friend George Tryon thereby maintaining racial superiority of the white family – " He *knew of no man* [my emphasis] whom he would have preferred to Tryon as a husband for his sister" (49) – and eliminates the *possibility* of admitting Frank's black manhood in the bond under the properties of whiteness between real men.

After Tryon finds out the truth of John and Rena's race, he cannot find it in him to contaminate his future "white" family with Rena's black blood-line. "A negro girl had been foisted upon him for a white woman, and he had almost committed the unpardonable sin against his race of marrying her" (96). However, the bonds of white masculine brotherhood are stronger between George and John, under Chesnutt's argument, than those within the "race" between John and Frank. The bond of white brotherhood is demonstrated in the letter George sends to his "white" friend John

regretfully "renouncing any pretensions to Miss Warwick's hand," but George assures his friend "that I shall keep your secret as though it were my own[20]. Personally, I shall never be able to think of you as other than a white man,
as you may gather from the tone of this letter. . . ." (103). As Samira Kawash states "For passing," (and this is what John and Rena attempt) "someone must recognize it as passing; hence, the necessity of a knowing spectator."

> Narratively, such a spectator may be provided within the framework of the episode of passing, or alternatively the reader her-or himself may serve as the knowing spectator who witnesses the effects of passing on the dupe. Thus, there is always passing within the text and passing between text and reader. (145)

As I suggested earlier about the text, Chesnutt misdirects the readers attention away from the expected plot of miscegenation by focusing on Rena Walden which allows the reader to focus on the "dupe" of George Tryon. However, Frank provides the textual spectator of George's near duping presented by John and Rena. But in keeping with the conventions of the "tragic mulatto" plot, Rena dies, thus, erasing her as a threat to the white family; but Chesnutt's narrative of death before white dishonor also circumvents a suggestion of a healthy black family presented by a possible union between black spectator Frank and white participant Rena who is unmasked and finally returned to the black community. Thus, Frank is further denied a patriarchal black manhood under the

[20] It can be argued that under the circumstances, as a white man, George would not want his near escape to be known.

terms of white masculinity which remains undisturbed as John Walden "escapes" the narrative of textual blackness under the guise of "whiteness."

Remembrance of Things Past : The Autobiography of An Ex-Colored Man

As many critics of The House Behind the Cedars have pointed out, John's final disappearance into whiteness foreshadows the racial predicament of the anonymous black narrator of James Weldon Johnson's The Autobiography of An Ex-Colored Man first published anonymously by Johnson in 1912. Charles Duncan notes that Chesnutt, by centering the narrative of House on John Walden, "anticipates the radical evocations" of the theme of racial passing in Johnson's text. Samira Kawash points out that the novel traverses the boundaries of black and white as geographical space: "He is perpetually homeless, traveling light, following at a whim whatever opportunity or adventure fate brings him. He is never so much *in* a place as he is, to turn a phrase, passing through" (139). Johnson's novel is also indebted to Paul Laurence Dunbar's The Sport of the Gods in its evocation of the City, especially the impact of black urban space on the formation of a distinct (although, hybrid) African American culture as black geographical patterns turned increasingly North. The Autobiography, indeed, reflects all of these tropes, but the novel also contributes, to what I suggest, begins a deeper exploration of black male sexuality that anticipates the issues of black male sexuality in the works of Jean Toomer, Countee Cullen, and Claude McKay. In my reading of the novel, I examine the close intersections of racial and sexual passing with the properties of white heterosexual masculinity.

From the beginning, the anonymous ex-colored man informs his reader that he is letting the reader (Kawash's *knowing spectator*) in on "a practical joke on society."

> I know that in writing the following pages I am divulging the great secret of my life, the secret which for some years I have guarded far more care fully than any of my earthly possessions; and it is a curious study to me to analyze the motives which prompt me to do it. (1)

What the reader learns, by the end of the novel, is that the narrator's most prized possession is his "whiteness." The son of a light-skinned black mother and a white prosperous father, the narrator as a young child learns the connections between masculinity and the properties of whiteness. In their modest Southern home, the narrator recalls their only visitor: the white father whose whiteness brings the early connection with wealth – even the occasional letter. ("I know, too, that at least once each month she received a letter. . . .I knew later that they contained money. . .").

> I remember that his shoes or boots were always shiny, and that he wore a gold chain and a great gold watch with which he was always willing to let me play. My admiration was almost equally divided between the watch and chain and the shoes. (3)

Great store is put into the fact that when the father "walks" into the lives of the narrator and his mother, he receives "a bright coin, which my mother taught me to promptly drop in a little tin bank." The emphasis on money suggests the power of white masculinity, especially in the right to buy and sell the bodies of black people as non-human commodities. However, it is the tactile, male-on-male connection of white father, "white"

son, and the powerful physical properties of whiteness that remain with the narrator after the passage of time.

> I remember how I sat upon his knee and watched him laboriously drill a hole through a ten-dollar gold piece, and then tie the coin around my neck with a string. I have worn that gold piece around my neck the greater part of my life, and still possess it, but more than once I have wished that some other way had been found of attaching it to me besides putting a hole through it. (3)

Quoting Jeremy Bentham, Cheryl I. Harris points out that "property is nothing but the basis of expectations consisting in an established expectation, in the persuasion of being able to draw such and such advantage from the thing possessed" (280). The advantages here are obvious, as the narrator, expects the desire for *father* to be fulfilled, but also the monetary benefits the father represents – the "established expectations."Moreover, there is the explicit suggestion that the whiteness of the father leads to properties (tangible, and intangible) denied to the black mother, who like Chesnutt's Walden family lives with her "white" son in a type of "genteel colored ghetto" without connections to a visible black community.

The autobiographical structure of the text functions as a method of reconciling the present *I* who stands at the end, and the memory constructed *I* who travels between the binary of race throughout the narrative in what Samira Kawash terms a "temporal split." In many ways this split reifies the legal properties of whiteness against the non-properties of blackness, or rather, the political and social stigmas of inherited blackness. As in all

autobiographical recollection," asserts Kawash, "the narrator is split between present and past, between the *I* who experiences the event and the *I* who narrates it."

> Yet here that temporal splitting is explicitly marked as a displacement Along the color line. The original whiteness of the narrator is necessarily inauthentic because it can emerge narratively only as already contaminated by the knowledge of not-whiteness. But the narrator is no more originally black than he is originally white. His blackness is also a copy, a specular image of the blackness he observes in others. (140)

"Sometimes it seems to me that I have never really been a Negro," the narrator states, " that I have been only a privileged spectator of their inner life; at other times I feel that I have been a coward, a deserter, and I am possessed by a strange longing for my mother's people." Thus, the concealed "colored man" who enjoys the properties of "whiteness" at the end of the narrative offers, not a text of racial regret, but one that supports the "correct" racial choice through the blood inheritance of the white father. "It is to my children that I have devoted my life. . . .there is nothing I would not suffer to keep the brand from being placed upon them." Furthermore, the narrator textually erases the tension, or split between black and white by bequeathing the properties of "whiteness" to his son, the mirror image of his white wife, who is, hence, "whiter" than himself.

The connections between money and his visible "whiteness" are made even clearer when the narrator finally makes the decision to be an ex-colored man:

> I had made up my mind that since I was not going to be a Negro,

> I would avail myself of every possible opportunity to make a white man' success; and that, it can be summed up in any one word, means 'money.' (141)

Passing as "white" – or in this case – "crossing over," was often done by fair-skinned blacks for convenience in order to get around the social embarrassment of Jim Crow; but for those who could, "crossing over" was nothing more than accepting a heritage of economic privileges denied under their legal status as "black." In a passage that recalls his earlier memory of the intersection of white father/monetary gain, the narrator unconsciously invokes "the little tin bank" of his childhood:

> What an interesting and absorbing game is money-making! After each deposit at my savings-bank I used to sit and figure out, all over again, my principal and interest, and make calculations on what the increase would be in such and such time. Out of this I derived a great deal of pleasure. (142)

Although in these passages the narrator connects his new found "pleasure" in the economic advantages of "white prosperity," the issue of "race" intrudes on his text as he denies himself the pleasures associated with his "colored" past that reflects the temporal split between the present and past *I* (my/self). "I denied myself as much as possible in order to swell my savings. As much as I enjoyed smoking, I limited myself to an occasional cigar. . .Drinking I cut out altogether. . ." On the day that he realizes a thousand dollars, he experiences "a pride and satisfaction which to me was an entirely new sensation."

> In my gambling days and while I was with my millionaire I handled sums running high up into the hundreds; but they had come to me like fairy godmother's gifts, and at a time when *my conception* [my emphasis] of money was that it was made only to spend. Here, on the other, was a thousand dollars which I had earned by days of honest and patient work. (143)

The unconscious split between black and white, thus, relegates class defined "vices" – smoking, drinking, and gambling with the myth of lower-class black masculine irresponsibility; *thriftiness* (one of the precepts of the black middle-class) the narrator suggests, is inherently impossible for the – in this context – darker black male who cannot take advantage of "white" skin. As a young, "black" male among other black men, he recalls: "I was a hail fellow well met with all of the workmen at the factory, most of whom knew little and cared less about social distinctions. From their example I learned to be careless about money. . ." He learns how "to take a drink occasionally," which he blames on his male companions: "I can't remember that I ever did anything disgraceful, or, as the usual standard for young men goes, anything to forfeit my claim to respectability" (60-61). The alignment with middle-class values is not accidental here, Booker T. Washington (who the narrator admires) advocated black male responsibility, and class respectability as the corner-stone to building healthy, patriarchal black family life. Although, he does mention the fact that he knew there were black families "worth a hundred or so thousand dollars each," still he "did not become acquainted with a single respectable family" (83). In other words, thriftiness is *white*, thus, a value to be emulated

while unthriftiness is a black valueless vice. Hence, to save himself from black male dysfunction, the ex-colored man must become "white," and contribute to the white masculine heterosexual imperatives of white nation building.

It is significant that like Chesnutt's John Walden/Warwick, the anonymous "ex-colored man" accepts the privileges of white masculine patriarchy by forming the white family, and then textually erasing the white wife. I would suggest that the impulse – and emphasis – on the economic gains attached to their visible "whiteness," suggest another more subtle reading of both texts in refashioning a black masculinity. Although The House Behind the Cedars does not explicitly interrogate the question of John's sexuality (Donald Gibson does note an uncomfortable sexual attention on John's part toward Rena) part of the text's misdirection is the conflating of any sexual desire on John's part to his desire for the economic opportunities presented by white masculinity. Although John's marriage to a white woman is clearly for economic advantage, the "ex-colored man's" marriage (seemingly "tacked" on at the end of the narrative) suggests more than an acceptance of the economic advantages of "white" skin. But both texts also erase the black mother who represents the embodiment of the sin and the indeterminate consequences of "un-lawful"(i.e. miscegenation) sexual desire.

In Forever England: Reflections on Masculinity and Empire, Jonathan Rutherford offers an astute analysis of the mother/son bond in the shaping of masculinity, first by critiquing the Freudian father/son rivalry as instrumental to healthy heterosexuality. "In Freudian psychoanalysis," he argues, "the mother is incapable of nurturing her young son

into independence. She becomes the potential gorgon who will deny men their potency and autonomy and turn them to blocks of stone. . ." As Rutherford rightly states, this situation resulted in a the simultaneous "patriarchal demonisation and idealisation of mothers."

> The patriarchal demand on a small boy to break his maternal attachment derives from a cultural pathology, born of an anxiety to wean sons away from the influence of their mothers. Consequently, a small boy's bond with his mother is frequently broken before he is ready to cope with its loss. What feels lost in this premature separation is not his actual mother but the feeling of her aliveness inside him (what is termed the maternal object), and with it an inner sense of his ontological security. (21)

Although John Walden separates himself mentally from his black mother at fifteen, and physically leaves the Walden home at eighteen, Chesnutt does not indicate great feeling on the part of John for his absent mother except for a lingering filial devotion that entails a short visit. After Rena's death, John presumably leaves the narrative (and Mis' Molly) forever. On the other hand, the ex-colored man remembers in lavish detail the special bond between mother and son: "My mother dressed me very neatly, and I developed that pride which well-dressed boys generally have. She was careful about my associates, and I myself was quite particular" (4). What the passage indicates is the lack of division between the feminine domestic order, and the outer-world of masculine space. Under the precepts of the time, according to Rutherford, the male child cannot take his rightful place in the world of masculine heterosexuality unless the child travels outside of the feminine confines of domesticity. The issue of the mother's race, as I argued earlier,

further problematizes the mother/child bond as the "white" child seeks masculinity in the absent white father. The maternal bond, under Victorian era codes of an racial and gendered space, thus, had to be broken in order for the male child to recognize himself as masculine. Thus, the idealized domestic bond of the narrator and his mother is abruptly disrupted when the narrator encounters the rough, homosocial world outside of his mother's space..

According to Eve Sedgwick in Epistemology of the Closet "Enduringly since at least the turn of the century, there have presided two contradictory *tropes of gender* through which same-sex desire could be understood" (87). The first trope has to do with the cultural attributes attached to gender. As Sedgwick, Rutherford, and Lane point out the late Victorian era thinking on gender differences designated restrictive spheres for men and women and a concerted detachment to the domesticating influence of women. An attachment to the "arts," for example, was rigorously replaced with an emphasis on "manly" pursuits, such as outdoors life, and the rugged activities of sports and games. By presenting his fondness for music and the domesticating influence of his mother, the narrator appears to "suggest" the reasons for his later male attachments. "Often when playing I could not keep the tears which formed in my eyes from rolling down my cheeks."

> Sometimes at the end or even in the midst of a composition, as big a boy as I was, I would jump from the piano, and throw myself sobbing into my mother's arms. She, by her caresses and often her tears, only encouraged these fits of sentimental hysteria. (18)

As George Chauncey points out, the identification with female gendered behavior in the middle-class male gradually turned to a new definition of themselves "on the basis of their difference from women." Furthermore, terms such as "*sissy*, *pussy-foot*, and other gender-based terms of derision became increasingly prominent in late-nineteenth-century American culture, as men began to define themselves in opposition to all that was 'soft' and womanlike" (114-115). The ex-colored man, writing from a distance (and as a "white" male) is aware of the possible sexual implications of the passage, and blames his (black) mother. "Of course, to counteract this tendency to temperamental excesses I should have been out playing ball or in swimming with other boys of my age; but *my mother* [my emphasis] didn't know that" (18-19). Curiously, the text alternates passages suggestive of sexual difference with narrative prescriptions of strained heterosexual conformity, and in this case, the narrator returns to "Red."

The second trope of gender, continues Sedgwick, concerns the adherence to the inescapable binaries of sexuality that a subject *must* be male or female. Confronted with the facts of homosexuality, turn-of-the-century scientific experts "discovered" the "invert" or "third sex", in other words, male inverts were women trapped in male bodies and vice versa (which handily explained same – sex desire) a trope, explains Sedgwick that has "remained a fixture of modern discourse of same-sex desire." Sent to the rough and tumble world of school-boys, the narrator meets his first male friend: "He was a big awkward boy with a face full of freckles and a head full of very red hair." The new friend is older ("He was perhaps fourteen years of age. . . ."), and the narrator names him "Red Head."

> I had been quick enough to see that a big, strong boy was a friend to be desired at a public school; and, perhaps, in spite of his dullness, 'Red head' had been able to discern that I could be of service to him. At any rate there was a simultaneous mutual attraction. (7)

After the narrator learns his "real" racial designation in school when a teacher labels him as one of the "others," the narrator is consoled by "Red" who offers to carry his books: "Le' me carry your books.' I gave him my strap without being able to answer" (11). I would argue that the "naming" of his true racial category further establishes the "loss" of whiteness, and the irrevocable loss of masculinity that is suggested by "the big strong boy" who carries his books home. Moreover, the racial difference of existing neither white nor black, instigates his search for *gender* difference (neither male nor female) that the narrator implies. "I rushed up into my own little room, shut the door, and went quickly to where my looking-glass hung on the wall. For an instant I was afraid to look, but when I did, I looked long and earnestly."

> I was accustomed to hear remarks about my beauty; but now, for the first time, I became conscious of it and recognized it. I noticed the ivory whiteness of my skin, the beauty of my mouth, the size and liquid darkness of my eyes, and how the long, black lashes that fringed and shaded them produced an effect that was strangely fascinating even to me. (11)

The intriguingly ambiguous language of the passage makes it unclear what exactly the narrator remembers searching for in his face, especially when one recalls the thousands

of nineteenth century treatises on the existence of the "mulatto"as a race in-between. Accordingly, the same type of scientific thinking was applied to those who apparently had male bodies, but female brains, or as they were termed "inverts." In this instance, the narrator "sees" the mother and her "race" as one and the same (and here Johnson uses the familiar physical description for the tragic mulatta), and the narrator carries the restless mark of race and gender inversion through out the text. But it is with the wealthy, older white male ("my millionaire") that combines the narrator's equation of masculinity with the properties of whiteness first awakened in him by his absent white father.

I Was Born the Night I Met You

Passing as a "black" ragtime pianist in a Harlem cabaret, the narrator soon meets "a friend who was the means by which I escaped from this lower world."

> Among the other white 'slummers' there came into the 'Club' one night a clean-cut, slender, but athletic-looking man, who would have been taken for a youth had it not been for the tinge of gray about his temples. He was clean-shaven and had regular features, and all of his movements bore the indefinable but unmistakable stamp of culture. He spoke to no one, but sat languidly puffing cigarettes and sipping a glass of beer. He was the center of a great deal of attention. . . . (84)

The "mysterious millionaire" soon invites the narrator to play at his home, and the narrator is quick to note that the "millionaire" pays generously for his "strange" requests, but a "bond" grows between them (although the exchange of money suggests a different type of relationship), and the narrator remembers: "There at length grew between us a

familiar and warm relationship, and I am sure he had a decided personal liking for me. On my part, I looked upon him at that time as about all a man could wish to be" (88). The narrator becomes involved in a fight between a white woman and her black lover, ("I say, without any egotistic pride, that among my admirers were several of the best-looking women who frequented the place. . . ."), and runs in terror when the woman is shot dead by her jealous lover. He is rescued, fortuitously, by the "millionaire:" "But of course you don't want to be mixed up in such an affair. I decided last night that I'd go to Europe tomorrow. I think I'll take you along instead of Walter. . . .It was settled that I should go to his apartments for the rest of the night and sail with him in the morning" (90-91).

Thus, the narrator is rescued not only from his voluntary "blackness," but also from the apparent dangers of enforced heterosexual behavior from which the narrator literally runs. Moreover, the narrator describes the woman's gun-shot wound in imagery that suggests the menstruating vagina with all of the myths about female sexuality, and women as the source of sexual disease: "still I could see that beautiful white throat with the *ugly wound* [my emphasis]. The jet of blood pulsing from it had placed an indelible red stain on my memory" (91). The "ugly wound" spurting blood is also suggestive of an earlier wound from a woman: the school teacher who revealed his "true" identity. It is the woman who becomes the source of his early "racial dis-ease" which instigates the narrator's masculine identity crises. "Perhaps it had to be done, but I have never forgiven the woman who did it so cruelly. It may be that she never knew that she gave me a sword-thrust that day in school which was years in healing" (12). As with the white woman in the "Club," who, the narrator states, was "using me only to excite the jealousy

of her companion," the narrator remembers his first love who did not take his devotion "seriously."In addition, there is also the specter of the contagion of the black mother (another example of feminine deceit) who "taints" him, not only with her "race," but also with her feminine influence that ultimately contributes to his gender anxiety.

James Weldon Johnson first published The Autobiography of An Ex-Colored Man in 1912 as an anonymous work, and the novel (and it is a work of fiction) is *not* the autobiography of Johnson, but may have been suggested by the life of a college acquaintance. Johnson's novel also situates itself as a significant bridge between the works of Paul Laurence Dunbar, Charles W. Chesnutt and the Harlem Renaissance novels of Nella Larsen and Claude McKay in that he elaborates (and reverses), for example, Dunbar's dire warnings about the dangers of city life. Unlike Dunbar and Chesnutt, however, the sophisticated Johnson was not conflicted by color and class, and was an early proponent of the unique cultural contributions the African American masses had to offer at a time when Johnson's own peers advocated an assimilation of European cultural forms. Furthermore, by creating a racially indeterminate figure, like those of Chesnutt's, Johnson more accurately portrayed the complications of racial and gender passing on the black subject in psychological terms further explored by Larsen's Quicksand (1928), and especially Passing (1929). I would argue, however, that the novel's significance was its daring in enfolding the masking of race with that of male sexuality that signifies on Laurence's The Sport of the Gods, although Johnson (perhaps deliberately or not) clearly suggests homosexuality – like the ex-colored man's racial decision to leave the "race" – is an act of racial treason. In many ways, the question of

black male sexuality in The Autobiography anticipates the politically enforced heterosexism of the black nationalist groups of the 1960s where homosexuality was declared alien to the black nationalist agenda, and an insidious sign of Eurocentric assimilation. However, the peripatetic novel is clearly influenced by Johnson's varied career as a fixture in the formation of African American popular culture as a lyricist, with his musician brother Rosamond and Bob Cole, of popular black dialect-laden songs for black entertainers such as Williams and Walker[21]. Although Johnson was the epitome of a "race" man, as an organizer for the NAACP, and later as head, nevertheless, "He spent a good deal of time among the black and white theater people and bohemians of [New York's] Fifty-Third Street district. . . ." (xi). In his own travels between spheres of blue-vein respectability, and the urban "jook-joints" frequented by the black masses, Johnson, no doubt, witnessed the (unspoken) sexual variety in black male populations that I discuss later.

Sambo Misbehaves: The Bad Nigger

The figure of the "bad nigger" also suggested a turning point in evaluating black masculinity as an opposing construction to the effete, intellectualized constructions of the black bourgeois and black elite classes that comes to full fruition in the works of the younger artists of the Harlem Renaissance who, in some cases, turned the black working class male into a sexual fetish. Thomas H. Wirth notes that "The first part of the twentieth century was a period in which working-class men were celebrated as paragons

[21] Unlike his fellow poet, Dunbar, James Weldon Johnson was not bothered by the continued use of "darky dialect" songs as entertainment for white audiences. When Dunbar quit as the lyricist for the Williams Walker show "The Cannibal King" (1900), Johnson happily finished the show's libretto.

of masculinity, as opposed to men of the middle and upper classes, who many observers believed had become 'overcivilized' and 'soft.' In the popular mind, it was middle- and upper-class men who were primarily associated with homosexual activity" (52). Although the sexual theories of Krafft-Ebing and Sigmund Freud were little known to a majority of Americans, many educated black men "knew" about the subject of homosexuality, and "knew" enough to hide it at a time when black male *heterosexuality* had to be carefully circumscribed. Moreover, access to the existence of sexual difference was not limited by class, or the (often) difficult access to erudite German medical tomes. Working class blacks knew (and sang) about "bull-dagging women," and "sissy-men" as part of the war between the sexes, and the ribald songs and jests may have functioned as "whistling in the dark" in order to warn *and* ward off any potential acts of black sexual deviancy, although there is a sense in the folk vernacular that such sexually confused characters *really* did not exist in black working-class communities, and all they really needed was a good old heterosexual "fuck" to cure them. But for many blacks, male homosexuality was thought to be one of the worse components of white cultural assimilation which made charging the light-skinned elites as "sissy men" that more satisfying. It was an accusation that troubled many open and closeted gay male artists of the Harlem Renaissance.

The dark-skinned (and closeted) Wallace Thurman used the light-skinned male to openly challenge the class and color values of Harlem elites by associating masculine light-skin with as a "defect" of black masculine authenticity in The Blacker the Berry. The novel traces the moral descent of the light-skinned Alva who shares a small, Harlem

apartment (and a bed) with his friend Braxton. Thurman describes Alva that hints at something "other" in Alva which Thurman "hides" in Alva's "oriental" appearance."Alva's mother had been an American mulatto, his father a Filipino."

> Alva himself was small in stature as his father had been, small and well developed with broad shoulders, narrow hips, and firm, well-modeled limbs. His face was oval-shaped and his features more oriental than Negroid. His skin was neither yellow nor brown but something in between, something warm, arresting. . . .(103)

The "something in between," Thurman hints, is Alva's inherent sexual deviance which Thurman links with the racist assumptions and myths about the Asian. Emma Lou, the color-struck heroine is attracted to Alva because he is the color that intraracial color attitudes have taught her to value in a male partner. From this perspective, Thurman questions the class attributes signified by light-skin, unknown to the color and class conscious Emma Lou, Alva works as a presser in a costume house.

> *He* was her ideal. He looked like a college person. He dressed well. His skin was such a warm and different color, and she had been tantalized by the mysterious slant and deepness of his oriental - like eyes. (124)

Thus, Thurman's portrait of Alva hints at the "feminine" qualities of Alva who cold-cremes his face at night, works in a traditional "female" occupation, and shares his room with his close friend Braxton.

Braxton considers himself "a golden brown replica of Rudolph Valentino. Every picture he could find of the late lamented cinema sheik he pasted either on the wall or on some of his belongings." Here Thurman signifies on the contemporary myth believed by heterosexual men about the actor's lack of masculinity and the rumors, that in fact, Valentino was a closeted homosexual. For Thurman's contemporary readers, the suggestion that Braxton considers himself a replica of the actor is highly suggestive of the sexual connotations Braxton's passion indicates. Furthermore, to underscore the point of Braxton's obsession, is Alva's reaction: "The only reason that likenesses of his idol did not decorate all the wall space was because Alva objected to this flapperish ritual" (161).

In the character of Braxton, Thurman intimates a lack of moral firmness in the light-skinned elite. Braxton, it appears, comes from an elite Boston family who have sent him off to be a "credit to the race" at Columbia. But Braxton has lied to them about attending school, and has squandered their money on pleasure. Unemployed, and cut off financially, Alva argues with his roommate "that one either worked or hustled. But as Alva had explained to Emma Lou, Braxton wouldn't work, and as a hustler he was a distinct failure."

> No matter what his condition, Braxton would not work. He seemed to believe that because he was handsome, and because he was Braxton, he shouldn't have to work. He graced the world with his presence. Therefore, it should pay him. "A thing of beauty is a joy forever,". . . .(161)

Braxton soon finds a financial "sponsor" in the unsophisticated Anise – "She was a simple-minded over-sexed little thing from a small town in Central Virginia, new to Harlem. . . ." – who eagerly begins "slipping Braxton spare change to live on."

But Braxton soon loses Anise, as she gets "wise" to his duplicity in spreading himself to others.

> Because Anise was so madly in love with him, he imagined that all other women should do as she had done, and how much more delightful and profitable it would be to have two or three Anises instead of one. So he began a crusade, spending much of Anise's money for campaign funds. (168)

Alva, disgusted at Braxton's inability to "hustle" women, finally throws Braxton out: "You're the most no-count nigger I know. If you can't do anything else, why in the hell don't you get a job? I don't see you working," Braxton would answer. "And you don't see me starving, either," would be the come-back'" (169). Both men live off the earnings of black women by preying on the susceptibilities of color-struck, dark-skinned women , but it is Alva who is more "successful" at the "game" as he juggles Emma Lou and Geraldine who becomes pregnant.

Alva and Geraldine's baby is a disappointment to both parents as the child is sickly. "It had a shrunken left arm and a deformed left foot," which suggests that Thurman uses the child as a symbol of Alva's inherent moral instability.

> Alva declared that it looked like an idiot. Geraldine had a struggle with herself, trying to keep from smothering it. She couldn't see why such a

> monstrosity should live. . . .At any rate, she had lost her respect for Alva. There was no denying to her that had she mated with some one else, she might have given birth to a normal child. (192)

The child fails to thrive and is "assuredly an idiot." And Geraldine is left with the child as Alva refuses to stay home with Geraldine and their child. "He hated that silent, staring idiot infant of his, and he had begun to hate its mother."

> Geraldine felt that she could have stood its shriveled arm and deformed foot had it not been for its insanely large and vacant eyes, which seemed never to close, and for the thick grinning lips, which always remained half open and through which came no translatable sounds. (192)

Thurman's description of the child eerily recalls the image of Sambo and his African "gibberish" with its "thick grinning lips, through which came no translatable sounds." Is Thurman suggesting a reversal of colorist values whose longevity reveals a "deformity" in the black community? The deformity of the child's limbs recalls the Spanish definition of a "zambo" as "a person who is bowlegged or knockkneed' (Boskin 38). Equally compelling is another definition of the Sambo. When we consider the fact that the term "Sambo" also denoted a racial cross between a mulatto and a "negro" in the early rankings of color by European racist logic, Thurman's revision of the Sambo becomes pertinent here.

But it is the last we see of Alva that makes Thurman's intentions of linking skin color and black masculinity strikingly clear as a disillusioned Emma Lou sees Alva for the last time. "She saw the usual and expected sight: Alva, face a death mask, sitting on

the bed embracing an effeminate boy whom she knew as Bobbie, and who drew hurriedly away from Alva as he saw her. There were four other boys in the room, all in varied states of drunkenness – all laughing boisterously at some obscene witticism." Emma Lou is disgusted as Alva pulls the boy back down on the bed: "Now stay there till I tell you to get up."and snarls at Emma Lou "If you don't like it –" "Tears came into her eyes, and for a moment it seemed as if all her rationalization would go for naught."

> Then once more she saw Alva, not as he had been, but as he was now, a drunken, drooling libertine, struggling to keep the embarrassed Bobbie in a vile embrace. (220-221)

The Burden of Racial Representation: The "Gay" Harlem Renaissance

In "Black Is, Black Ain't: Notes on De-Essentializing Black Identities," black, gay film-maker, Isaac Julien recalls how the estate of Harlem Renaissance icon Langston Hughes effectively silenced his visual meditation Looking for Langston (1988) on "black gay desire in the context of the Harlem Renaissance." The Hughes' Estate, apprized of the "sexual" nature of Julien's project refused to grant permission of "two archival sequences of Langston Hughes reciting his poetry." During the film's New York premier, the film-maker was forced to explain to the audience that the "silencing" of Hughes' voice was due to "copyright" entanglements.

But, as Julien points out, the truth about the copyright injunction was more about protecting Hughes' reputation as a black heterosexual icon, and the "silencing" of black

gay artists in general. The Estate's "wish to censor lay elsewhere: it objected to Julien's association of Hughes with homoeroticism" (259). "For many," writes Essex Hemphill, Hughes is a 'sacred icon,' an icon saddled with what Julien astutely refers to as 'the burden of representation,' a burden that effectively obscured questions of Hughes's sexual identity until Julien chose to gently undress him, or, more appropriately, ease him out of his closet" (174). Although Julien states that "Langston Hughes's queerness was a widely kept secret" – and definitive proof of Hughes' sexuality has of this late date not come to light, the point is that the suggestion (no matter how ephemeral) argues Julien "trespassed across the essentialist battle lines of blackness" (259). Although according to his biographer Arnold Rampersad, "No one could offer the name of a man who had been involved with Hughes, or recall an incident, even at secondhand, involving Langston's presumed homosexuality."

> In his lifetime, he was never called upon to assert or deny that he was a homosexual, but it is clear that – whatever the truth – he did not want to be considered gay. Whether this attitude derived from a personal aversion to homosexuality, or only from shame or fear, is impossible to say. (337)

However, part of the "open secret" about Hughes' sexuality was his open and demonstrable sexual fascination for the darkest, dark-skinned young men he came across. But what was more important for Hughes was "the preservation of his position as the most admired and beloved poet of his race. That position," observes Rampersad, "which

he saw as a moral trust, and which intimately connected his deepest emotional needs to his function as an artist, may have meant too much for him to risk it for illicit sex" (336)

What is known for certain is that several young black Harlem artists chaffed at the sexually reticent prohibitions expected from the older guard who held the whip-hand over which new artists would get funding from influential white patrons and publishers. The relaxation of Victorian attitudes about sex during the Jazz Age also affected the younger black artists eager to make a name for themselves in Harlem. Many of the younger black artists like Zora Neale Hurston, Langston Hughes, Aaron Douglas, Richard Bruce Nugent, Claude McKay, and Wallace Thurman, "moved in a social matrix in which the existence of extramarital sexual relationships of all kinds – homosexual and heterosexual – was taken for granted. The matrix was defined by sophisticated, 'modern' attitudes and a general rejection of conventional sexual mores, not by sexual orientation."

> Both extramarital dalliances and same-sex interests were effectively 'open secrets' – acceptable in private, gossiped about, but not publically acknowledged. Embedded *within* the matrix, and inseparable from it, was a network of friendships among men who were sexually drawn to other men. (Wirth 21)

Although (with the notable exception of Nugent) many black male artists of the period "hid" their sexuality from "outsiders" by maintaining heterosexual facades. What was clear among the small black literary "crowd," was that a man's sexuality could be "winked" at as long as the issue did not reflect on "the race." Thus, the black literary set could exchange amused gossip about the Cullen/Du Bois marriage while *pretending* that

the marriage's failure was due to Yolanda Du Bois' sexual inexperience. As Arnold Rampersad notes, among other male Harlem notables of the 1920's, Thurman, and McKay could also point to a heterosexual marriage somewhere in their past (even the openly gay Richard Bruce Nugent remained married in name only for seventeen years), but Hughes, whose sexuality could never be definitively pinned down never chose the cover of heterosexuality. My point here is not to dwell on Hughes' sexuality (or lack of it), but to emphasize the literary strategies of gay authors, like Thurman and McKay, who were forced to compromise their own artistic impulses, and sexuality with the "burden of representation" dictated by the "openly" gay Alain Locke, and the sexually prudish W. E. B. Du Bois[22].

Positioned directly against W.E.B. Du Bois' "Criteria of Negro Art" in which Du Bois states forcefully his own guiding principles for black representation ("Thus, all Art is propaganda and ever must be. . ."), Langston Hughes' "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain" set the agenda for many of the younger black members of the Harlem Renaissance by attacking the "Nordic" values of the black middle-class who failed to see "the beauty of his own people. He is never taught to see that beauty. He is taught rather not to see it, or if he does, to be ashamed of it when it is not according to Caucasian patterns" (27). Although Hughes pleads for a recognition for a recognition of the value represented by a specific African American cultural creativity that owes nothing to

[22] Du Bois fired Augustus Granville Dill, the business manager of the NAACP house organ Crisis, when the arrest of the openly gay Dill became public. Dill had been caught in a public restroom in 1928 engaging in "homosexual activity." Du Bois later regretted firing Dill, no doubt due to the fact that Dill was not a prominent black creative artists, and was, thus, exempt from the "burden of representation."

European cultural influences, the point must be stressed, that this cultural response comes directly from the black rural and urban working classes. The "Niggerati," as they termed themselves, famously celebrated their break with the older guardians of black respectability with the one issue journal Fire!!: Devoted to Younger Negro Artists in 1926, much to the dismay of Du Bois and Alain Locke who were no doubt relieved when another issue failed to appear. However, the disapproval of the watch-guards of "black respectability," were forced to face the fact that African American writing about the circumspect lives of the light-skinned elite was a dead issue.

Claude McKay's 1928 novel Home to Harlem, according to Wayne F. Cooper, "has often been called the first Afro-American 'best seller'. . . Not until Richard Wright's Native Son in 1940 did another Afro-American novel enjoy such popular success" (Home ix-x). Posited in some literary circles as more "authentic" than Carl Van Vechten's Nigger Heaven (1926) which Du Bois loathed, the new novel from one of the bright lights of the younger Harlem literary set "sparked even more critical commentary." David Levering Lewis assess: "If anyone was an expert on primitivism in the spring of 1928 it was the author of Home to Harlem, the novel that, said the Tattler, 'out-niggered Mr. Van Vechten'" (224). "Moreover," explains Lewis, "one aspect of McKay's novel that rankled many readers deeply was too invidious for frank discussion."

> All Renaissance writers were preoccupied with color, but McKay, to the acute distress of Harlem's elite, was not merely obsessed with 'chocolate, chestnut, coffee, ebony, cream, yellow' complexions, his novel (as became the quasi-Garveyite he once was) embraced

antimulatto sentiments. (227)

The Jamaican born, dark-skinned Marxist writer "sinned" against the dictates of the black literary elite by setting his novel among the black working class world of dock workers, Pullman waiters and cooks, domestic workers, prostitutes, pimps and sweetmen who were supported by an assortment of older black women. Significantly, McKay's characters (except for the effete Haitian Ray) all speak in the soft, easy-going African American vernacular redolent of their rural Southern roots, and the protagonist was not only dark-skinned, but clearly had no aspirations higher than picking up the next woman and a pair of dice. "No graduates of Harvard and Howard discourse on literature at the Dark Tower," black middle-class critics charged, " there are no easily recognized imitations of Du Bois, Jessie Fauset, or James Weldon Johnson – and no whites at all" (Lewis 226). Furthermore, the open enjoyment of casual sexual relations appalled many black literary elites who encouraged black artists to counter prevailing stereotypes of black sexuality. McKay (like other black writers) were also saddled with the "burden of representation,"and like his fellow gay artists, McKay was expected to place his "race" before his own ambivalent sexuality.

The Black Love That Dared Not Speak Its Name: Home to Harlem

Among the casual sexual relationships in Home to Harlem, the homoerotic connection between the boisterous, uneducated Jake and the shy, educated Haitian scholar Ray is conspicuous because McKay implies a type of coded male bonding that "hides" and enfolds itself within a narrative structure that contravenes the "cult of respectability." Following the agenda set forth in Langston Hughes' salvo against

middle-class propriety – "The Negro Artist and The Racial Mountain" – McKay set his novel among the black working poor, and those who made their living the best way they could, often on the margins of the respectability and the law. The novel's world is predominantly male, and celebrates the black male unencumbered by the over-educated elitism of many gay and straight American men."They were largely uneducated. They lived in boarding houses. . .Their places of entertainment were cabarets, night clubs, saloons, pool halls, gambling dens, buffet flats, and houses of prostitution" (Home xxi-xxii). Adds Wayne F. Cooper: "There were no black families either (except in the distant rural past), no really permanent relationships, and no overweening worldly ambitions" (241). McKay's masculine world is indicative of what George Chauncey terms "the bachelor subculture," a cultural ethos whose characteristics appealed to many working class men, and closeted gay males."The dominant working-class ideology," Chauncey argues, "made the ability and willingness to undertake the responsibility of supporting a family two of the defining characteristics of both manliness and male 'respectability.'

> But many of the men of the bachelor subculture, either because their irregular and poorly paid work made supporting a family difficult or because they had deliberately chosen to avoid such family encumbrances, forged an alternative definition of manliness that was predicated on a rejection of family obligations. (79)

Faced with racial segregation, employment opportunities for the masses of young, black males newly arrived in Harlem were perilous at best, a fact which made supporting a family according to black middle-class dictates doubly difficult. However, for black male

gays, the bachelor subculture – as long as one stayed within the boundaries – was a perfect cover for those whose heterosexuality was in question.

By taking up the cause of the black masses, McKay and other black gay males were able to subsume their sexual ambiguity under the cover of celebrating the cultural products of the black working classes. Like their white peers, black gays also embraced the new manliness embodied in the culture of physical labor and male sociability. Home's hero, Jake Brown, in many ways captures the spirit of Jack Johnson as he moves through the night-life of Harlem after his war-time service with his pal Zeddy. But the ghost of the good-natured, grinning Sambo hovers in McKay's signification of the figure as central to the make-up of Jake. Jake becomes a familiar customer to Harlem's brothels, one of McKay's settings where men can establish their masculinity under cover of highly ritualized practices, such as, states George Chauncey "through the custom of treating one's fellows to rounds of drinks," which Jake and his buddies do in a variety of night-clubs, buffet flats and brothels where they also indulge in gambling and making easy sexual conquests. Significantly, McKay's novel stresses the deliberate lack of emotional ties where heterosexual sexual contacts were involved.

> Sexual prowess with women was another important sign of manliness, but such prowess was significant not only as an indication of a man's ability to dominate women but also as evidence of his *relative* virility compared to other men's; manliness in this world was confirmed by other men and in relation to other men, not by women. (80)

Although the unrepentant bachelor could perform compulsory heterosexual acts, nevertheless, even semi-permanent relationships with women were considered unmanly. In a world where sex was a commodity of mutual exchange, to be a "kept man" signaled a loss of independence and manly virility. For many men, the loss of domination (even in semi-domestic relationships between men and women) "feminized" them according to the boundaries that governed gender roles.

Zeddy, Jake's buddy from the docks, finds that he cannot compete with the sexual allure of Jake as they float through the night-spots of Harlem: " Jake was a high favorite wherever he went. There was something so naturally beautiful about his presence that everybody liked and desired him. Buddies, on the slightest provocation, were ready to fight for him, and the girls liked to make an argument around him" (103). Zeddy envies the easy-going ways Jake has with women: "If only I could get those kinda gals that falls foh Jake."

> Zeddy did not seem to possess any of that magic that charms and holds women for a long time. All his attempts at home-making had failed. The women left him when he could not furnish the cash to meet the bills. They never saw his wages. For it was gobbled up by his voracious passion for poker and crap games. (56)

Zeddy soon attracts Gin-head Susy who moves him into her apartment as her exclusive "sweetman." But Zeddy finds there are "strings to Susy's largesse. . . Susy was jealous of him in the proprietary sense. She believed in free love all right, but not for the man she possessed and supported" (82).

> About her general way of handling things Susy brooked no criticism from Zeddy. She had bargained with him in the interest of necessity and of rivalry and she paid and paid fully, but grimly. She was proud to have a man to boss about in an intimate, casual way. (84)

On the other hand, propositioned by Rose to be her sweetman, ("If you'll be mah man always, you won't have to work.") the independent Jake responds: "Me? I've never been a sweetman yet. Never lived off no womens and never will. I always works" (40). To restore his own sense of masculinity, Zeddy defies Susy and joins Jake and their circle of male friends for a night on the town. "Zeddy discovered that in his own circles in Harlem he had become something of a joke. It was known that he had become something of a joke. It was known that he was living sweet' (87). Later at a Harlem cabaret, Zeddy engages in the male ritual (identified by George Chauncey) of buying a round of drinks: "Zeddy was determined to go the limit of independence, to show the boys that he was a cocky sweetman and no skirt-man. Plenty of money. He was treating" (90).

As George Chauncey notes: "Harlem's gay world was perhaps the most complex in the city because segregation forced such a wide range of people to live side by side. . ."

> Many of those locales attracted prostitutes, gamblers, and other 'disreputable' folk who participated in what they called the 'sporting life' or simply 'the life.' Lesbians and gay men were 'in the life' as well, and they mixed easily with the other guests at many such gatherings. (248)

Thus, sexual variety was not unknown to the black community of working folks who often made sexual difference a theme of the blues, a cultural expression the black elite loathed. McKay is explicit in detailing the relative tolerance for gay identified men as part of the circle of "normal" men with the curious character Billy Biasse who runs an illegal gambling den, and is, thus, doubly in "the life." Nicknamed Billy the Wolf, Biasse teases Zeddy about his dependance on a woman: "Billy boasted that he had no time for women. Black women, or the whole diversified world of the sex were all the same to him" (88). Later Zeddy and Jake come upon Biasse at another Harlem club with a "date".

> Billy Biasse was there at a neighboring table with a longshoreman and a straw-colored boy who was a striking advertisement of the Ambrozine Palace of Beauty. The boy was made up with high-brown powder, his eyebrows were elongated and blackened up, his lips streaked with the dark rouge so popular in Harlem, and his carefully - straightened hair lay plastered and glossy under Madam Walker's absinthe-colored salve 'for milady of fashion and color.' (91)

"Wolves," explains Chauncey, "occupied an ambiguous position in the sexual culture of the early twentieth century. They abided by the conventions of masculinity and yet exhibited a decided preference for male sexual partners."

> But the fact that neither they nor their peers regarded them as queer, even if they sometimes regarded them as *different* from other 'normal' men, highlights the degree to which gender status superseded homosexual interest as the basis of sexual classification in working-

class culture. (87)

For those in the know, Biasse was typical of males in "the life." Easily traveling between the "sporting life" of male gamblers, and the world of gay masculinity, Biasse as a "male" wolf is welcomed among the black working class drinking establishments catering to working class men who gathered in masculine and class based camaraderie far beyond the moralizing eyes of the elite black churches, and the class and color conscious black middle-class. Moreover, Biasse, as a *wolf*, is one who *penetrates*, but does not get penetrated, a condition that proclaims his masculinity in the phallocentric world of men. Hence, Biasse is able to distance his homosexuality from the young man who clearly fits the stereotype of effeminacy many heterosexual men, and strait-laced middle-class blacks came to identify as the typical "sexual degenerate."As Chauney (and the closeted nature of Hughes, Thurman, and McKay demonstrate) male homosexuality in the black middle-class was barely tolerated as long as public figures played by the rules of public gender conformity.

Although several Harlem literary elites were angered by McKay's open antagonism to the cult of respectability, his portraits of the casual sexual mores of the black masses, and their tolerance for sexual variation, a smaller number who recognized McKay's "wolves" and "punks" no doubt satisfied themselves that at least the sexual licence in Home to Harlem was safely located in the black lower and working classes. However, the anger of many Harlem cultural leaders was more than likely directed toward the homoerotic sub-textual relationship between the working-class Jake and the educated Haitian exile Ray (modeled after McKay). In a letter to William Aspenwall

Bradley, about Home to Harlem, McKay wrote his friend that "Ray gives me a chance to let myself go a little" (Cooper 235). "Ray. . .reads Alphonse Daudet in the original between dining car chores, sleeps with books rather than women, yet is ambivalent both about formal learning and about proletarian naturalness" (Lewis 228).

> He remembered when little Hayti was floundering uncontrolled, how proud he was to be the son of a free nation. He used to feel condescendingly sorry for those poor African natives; superior to ten millions of suppressed Yankee 'coons.' Now he was just one of them and he hated them for being one of them. . . .(155)

But Ray is also ambivalent about his feelings for the good-natured Jake who he meets when both are employed (Jake as third cook, and Ray as waiter)on the railroad.. Jake is immediately impressed by Ray's learning as Howard student Ray gives him an impromptu history lesson on Haitian history. Jake is appalled that Ray would waste his learning in such a demeaning job:"Then what in the name of mah holy rabbit foot youse doing on this heah white man's chuh-chuh? It ain't no place foh no student. It seems to me you' place down there sounds a whole lot better. . . .This heah work is all right for me, but for a chappie like you. . . ." (137-138). As David Levering Lewis maintains – "Ray symbolizes more than the obvious 'other side' of McKay. He is one of Nordic civilization's mental outpatients – the side that pits the black man's brain against his loins and makes a shambles of both" (228). Lewis observation is apt, as McKay like his fellow semi-closeted gay peers struggled to balance their own personal identity with representing the black masses.

The world of railroad workers was one that McKay knew well as a recent Jamaican immigrant and budding young writer. As Wayne F. Cooper explains:

> The railroad seemed made to order for him. His brief encounters with diners, the constant travel, and his adventures with fellow railway men in the various cities along their route – all provided the challenge, variety, and adventure that suited McKay's temperament. (85)

It was also a life that most likely suited McKay's pursuit of male lovers, *and* material for the poetry and fiction that would come later. However, it is Home to Harlem that most captures the world of men McKay remembered in later years with fondness. One of the hazards of working on the railroads was finding a place to sleep in heavily segregated cities. Often, enterprising black landlords would open up boarding houses catering to the hundreds of weary rail workers searching for a place to sleep-off last night's hangover. Jake and Ray find such a place in Pittsburgh where the men are crowded in dank, bed-bug infested rooms. Unable to sleep, both join another man for a night at a local speak-easy:

> The little place was something of a barrelhouse speak-easy, crowded with black steel-workers in overalls and railroad men, and foggy with smoke. They were all drinking hard liquor and playing cards.(148)

After returning to the boardinghouse, Jake falls asleep happily under the influence of cocaine (a drug McKay admitted he tried more than once) obtained from the resident

drug pusher: "Jake took a few of the little white packets from Happy and gave him some money. 'Guess I might need them some day. You never know.'

Ray finds he cannot sleep, and casts his eyes over the other men he is forced to share a night's lodging: "These men claimed kinship with him. They were black like him. Man and nature had put them in the same race."

> He ought to love them and feel them (if they felt anything). He ought to if he had a shred of social morality in him. They were all chain-ganged together and he was counted as one link. Yet he loathed every soul in that great barrack-room, except Jake. Race.... Why should he have and love a race? (153)

The passage succinctly suggests the dilemma faced by many black gay men who were forced to exchange allegiance to self with the "burden" of racial representation. However, McKay problematizes questions of artistic individuality, artistic representation with human sexuality as he responds to the physicality of Jake.

> Ray looked up at Jake, stretched at full length on his side, his cheek in his right hand, sleeping peacefully, like a tired boy after hard playing, so happy and sweet and handsome. (157)

Ray reaches into the sleeping Jake's pocket for the packets of cocaine and swallows the contents like headache powders.

Ray has a cocaine induced homoerotic fantasy that leaves no doubt about McKay's covert narrative purpose. According to his biographer Wayne F. Cooper, McKay recounted the early literary influences on his writing career introduced to him by the

older, openly homosexual Walter Jekyll who fled England for the sunnier climes of the Caribbean. "Among the famous authors he listed as having read and discussed with Jekyll, he significantly grouped together Oscar Wilde, Edward Carpenter, and Walt Whitman."

> For those in 1918 who were possessed by 'the love that dared not speak its name,' the stringing together of the names Wilde, Carpenter, and Whitman would have left no doubt about McKay's meaning. It was there, so to speak, written between the lines. (31)

Also "between the lines" was one of McKay's most open, and poetic descriptions of male homosexual desire as the cocaine unleashes the palpable desire Ray has for the sleeping Jake. "Now he was a young shining chief in a marble palace; slim, naked negresses dancing for his pleasure; courtiers reclining on cushions soft like passionate kisses; gleaming-skinned black boys bearing goblets of wine and obedient eunuchs waiting in the offing. . . . Taboos and terrors and penalties were transformed into new pagan delights, orgies of Orient-blue carnival, of rare flowers and red fruits, cherubs and seraphs and fetishes and phalli and all the most-high Gods. . . ."

> A thousand pins were pricking Ray's flesh and he was shouting for Jake, but his voice was so faint he could not hear himself. Jake had him in his arms. . . . (158)

Significantly, the episode between the two men passes without notice, however, there remains an unspoken bond between them.

Later in the novel, in keeping with George Chauncey's theory of bachelor culture, Jake leads Ray to a brothel where he introduces Ray to the Madam: "Mah friend's just keeping me company. . . .He ain't regular – you get me?" But surrounded by the open sexuality between "real" men and the flashy women, Ray feels "different," more so than a Billy Biasse.

> Ray felt alone and a little sorry for himself. Now that he was there, he would like to be touched by the spirit of that atmosphere and, like Jake, fall naturally into its rhythm. He also envied Jake. Just for this night only he would like to be like him. . . . (194)

As a member of the black middle-class, McKay suggests, Ray feels the need to cloak his desire by wishing away his sexual difference. In many ways, Ray can be read as McKay's criticism of the light-skinned elite who tried vainly to "wish" away their blackness by covering it up with European civilization. Ray, trying to be like the masculine Jake, approaches one of the young prostitutes: "Tickling, enticing syncopation. Ray felt that he ought to dance to it. But some strange thing seemed to hold him back from taking the girl in his arms" (195). Joined by another girl, Ray tries again to join the ranks of male heterosexual behavior: "The round face of the first girl, the carnal sympathy of her full, tinted mouth, touched Ray. But something was between them. . . ." (196). The "something" is hinted at, by McKay, in the music designed to stir sexual passion in the male customers, but for Ray the music stirs a "different" passion which he dares not name.

> Far, far away from music-hall syncopation and jazz, he was lost

> in some sensual dream of his own. No tortures, banal shrieks and agonies. . . . The notes were naked acute alert. Like black youth burning naked in the bush. Love in the deep heart of the jungle. . . . Simple-clear and quivering. Like a primitive dance of war or of love. . . the marshaling of spears or the sacred frenzy of a phallic celebration. (197)

But Ray is not a "wolf,"and McKay hints that Ray's sexual reticence, is in fact, the curse of the overly educated black middle-class who deny themselves the sexual expression enjoyed by those in the working-class with nothing to lose. For many gay black men of the Harlem Renaissance, especially ones who were so invested in public propriety like Countee Cullen, Wallace Thurman (and perhaps Langston Hughes), the "burden of representation" weighed heavier than the "burden" of public exposure.

The very notion of an ideal face of a black masculinity is a notion inherently problematic because of the historic realities of slavery. Black men were first of all considered non-human – subject to the control of other men who would not, and could not meet them on equal grounds. Second, under the economics of chattel slavery, total control of the black male centered, not only on their physical capacities, but also on their reproductive functions used to create and support the wealth of white men. Hence, what was first viewed as a productive instrument of slavery was turned into the fear and desire for the black male phallus after white males lost their legal rights to control its function, and finally to ritually to erase or obliterate it as a competitor. But as Henry Louis Gates points out: "When we recall that early Harlequin figures wore a phallus, the connections

between him and Western representations of the African are even stronger" (51). Thus, we can consider Sambo the castrated Harlequin. Post-Reconstruction images of the black male were thus divided between the manner in which the desire and loathing of the black male's sexuality would be interwoven in American mainstream culture.

The more lenient portrait of black masculinity, by necessity, became an emasculated figure in the pages of plantation fantasy, an image ready-made for an early twentieth century commodification of a "safe" intimacy of male blackness in the pastoral renditions of black males, and the dialect poetry of Dunbar. American popular culture is where these two images – the emasculated black "uncle" and the vicious black brute – met and competed in mainstream culture as *the* face of black manhood. Thus, black creative artists were forced to confront the conceptions of black masculinity in the neutered figure of the Sambo, on the one hand, and the hypersexual black brute on the other. Paul Laurence Dunbar and Charles W. Chesnutt were forced to mask and conceal their positive images of black manhood within the familiar tropes of the white racial fantasies of black emasculation in the "plantation tradition" in order to reach commercial success, although Dunbar bitterly challenged the association of masculinity with skin color.

The superiority of light-skinned, respectable masculinity, however, directly influenced the class and color perspectives of male sexuality in the works of the younger members of the Harlem Renaissance. Connecting with the *zeitgeist* emblematic of the post World War I era, works by Langston Hughes, Countee Cullen, Wallace Thurman, and Claude McKay artistically challenged the over-determined *lack* of sexuality of the

black male by slyly shifting the terms of an authentic black masculinity by shifting its values to the black working classes. In doing so, their works restore the missing phallus of Harlequin by locating an authentic black masculinity in class terms – the descendants of Sambo/Harlequin. Mc Kay's Home to Harlem directly revises and signifies on the sub-textual sexual themes in The Autobiography of An Ex-Colored Man which continue in Richard Wright's essay "Blueprint for Negro Writing," (1937) and his 1940 best-seller Native Son which irrevocably locates the "burden of representation" in the black masculinity of a darker-skinned working and "under-classes" of urban America. By the late 1960s and early 1970s, black manhood becomes inextricably tied to a black nationalist agenda that continued to challenge the elitism of class and color in shaping a face of black masculinity. Coming to terms with a culturally authentic face of black masculinity suggests the continuing implications of the figure of Sambo, but a Sambo reconnected with the symbol of black male potency. He did not die in the 1960s as argued by Joseph Boskin, but lives on as a figure of contestation.

Conclusion: Beyond the Color-Line

When I began to think about this project, I realized that the idea of coming to terms with color and class bias reflected a postmodern crisis in the state of black America. There are several reasons why I chose popular culture to foreground my study simply because African American popular culture is a perfect site to exam the fault-lines in the construction of an African American unity. First of all, the need for political unity was a necessary means for survival – even if the story about a black unity based on race and the experience of slavery was never really true. But popular culture does allow for a close critique of black-on-black differences we rarely want to address because of the political investment in showing a united front in the face of racial hostility. The situation of Clarence Thomas is a case in point. The debates in the black community over Thomas vividly revealed the chasms in the African American community over class and gender where, on the one hand, Anita Hill was demonized as a racial traitor in questioning Thomas' nomination to the Supreme Court, and on the other hand, as not recognizing the fact that black authenticity was properly a black *male* prerogative. It was only much later that Thomas' black authenticity was questioned when the "distraction" of black female gender was excised. The point is that we too often fail to see the dangers in essentializing blackness by dismissing the ways in which we use it in the construction of gender. The later attacks on Thomas pointed out that he was not "black enough," as he embraced the political ideas inimical to the political fortunes and welfare of black people as a group. But the attacks on Thomas' black authenticity (and the current attacks on Condoleeza Rice) are not new arguments, for the simple fact that antagonisms over class elitism, and

class privilege between blacks are as old as plantation slavery – that both Thomas and Hill share the deep, dark coloring associated with the less privileged "folk"only indicates the complicated nature of colorism.

At bottom, the activity of creating a distinct African American cultural authenticity *is* one of class warfare as I have demonstrated earlier. Thus, the current intraracial clamor over hip-hop and gangsta' rap, is the same one waged during the Harlem Renaissance between the assimilationists and those who argued for the folk culture emanating from the working and lower-classes for the rights to claim "cultural authenticity." Now the fight is between the Civil Rights generation and the hip-hop generation as the recent series of "scoldings" by comedian Bill Cosby has indicated. Cosby's "ill-timing" – the celebration of the 50th anniversary of the 1954 Brown decision – to attack the black working and lower -- classes for their embarrassing-to-the-race dysfunctional practices generated a plethora of responses from the *elite* portion of the African American community.

Some responders agreed with Cosby's argument that the working and lower-classes "failed to hold up their end of the bargain," while other commentators strenuously disagreed with what they considered an ahistorical attack. But it was Cosby's perceived attack on the cultural hi-jacking by hip-hop of black cultural authenticity that received probably the most attention from the community who profited from the genre's commodification. Ironically, the entire debate (and I include the unfinished confrontation of the Harlem Renaissance with "low" culture) recalls Matthew Arnold's dicta from <u>Culture and Anarchy</u> (1869). Using Arnold's distinctions, the Barbarians easily equate to

the black elite gatekeepers of the state of African American political and cultural representation; the black middle-class (Arnold's Philistines); and the Populace: "that vast portion. . . . of the working class which, raw and half-developed, has long lain half-hidden amidst its poverty and squalor, and is now issuing from its hiding-place to assert. . . .[a] heaven-born privilege of doing as he likes, and is beginning to perplex us by marching where it likes, bawling what it likes, breaking what it likes. . . . That these are not "fixed" class identities accounts for the variety of responses to Cosby across class lines. Many of the objections to Cosby's accusations against the lower-classes were from black academics with working-class backgrounds, whether the impulse for their opposition came from class guilt, or the fact that they are in Arnold's terms class *aliens*, points to the continued issue of intraracial class tensions.

In a cogent editorial from the on-line journal The Black Commentator observed that many recipients of the civil Rights struggle for integration barely upheld their end of the bargain for class inclusion: "Many among the Black "striving" classes ridiculed the victims of *Cointelpro* and other state gangsterism, believing that fulfillment of their own pent-up aspirations-now within the realm of possibility thanks to a movement in which they may not have participated in any way – was the prize for which so many others died."

> For them, "movement" meant individual, or class, upward mobility. "The Race" would be uplifted by their shining example, a more achievable goal than jobs and justice for the masses of Black folks. the innocent poor applauded each individual advancement of these

representatives of "The Race" – as they had always done, not understanding that the group contract had been broken.

As blacks who came of age in during the Civil Rights Movement began a nostalgia fueled trip down memory lane about the good-old days, and slapped each other on the backs about the increase of the black middle and upper-classes, something more disturbing was happening between the blacks who benefitted from the push for integration, and a hip-hop generation left behind in an ever-increasing number of societal "problems"that are hopelessly interconnected like a black rendition of the nursery rhyme "This is the House That Jack Built, Ya'll."A crumbling inner-city physical infrastructure, a "politically mysterious"crack-cocaine epidemic, the rise of gang culture, an HIV-AIDS crisis over-whelming an inadequate health-care system, and a steady erosion of an industrial job market all contributed to a crisis in the black community that has both sides accusing the other of being sell-outs, wannabes, lazy welfare cheats, ad infinitum. "Naturally, a horrific cycle of social disintegration was set in motion in Black communities, nationwide."The shouting, name-calling, and bitter recriminations from both sides were so strident, that no one bothered to listen – or, as The Black Commentator suggests, the new black elite were too intent on celebrating "good times," while a younger (and darker-skinned) generation fed the expanding prison-industrial-complex, or kept black funeral homes busy. Against a back-drop of a reinvigorated racial conservatism in American domestic policy and the reign of terror against inner city youth: "one would not know it from the popular Black music of the late Seventies, inspired by the rising fortunes of Black businessperson – musicians, producers and media

owners." But an entire generation who saw a major portion of the black elite on television "actin'out," "threw the black elite's world into confusion."

> Hip Hop was invented, thanks to newly available, cheap technology. The social divide that the Black elite had welcomed as the terms of conditional acceptance into the larger society, was finally answered by a mass Black youth cultural response: fuck you and your bougie music, too.

But hip-hop, as it became more visible, drew critics for its unabashed genderized colorism (a tendency they shared with the Civil Rights generation) and the genre's violent misogyny. "An amplified and exaggerated masculinity," pointed out Paul Gilroy in 1993 about hip-hop, has become the boastful centerpiece of a culture of compensation that self-consciously salves the misery of the disempowered and subordinated" (85). But what happens when the images and rhetoric of disempowerment posits misogyny and excessive consumption of empty status symbols as "cultural authenticity?" As hip-hop steadily increases a pool of young, black instant millionaires, the form will continue to struggle with its own issues of economic class differences as it slowly devolves under the same type of material excess (and lack of cultural authenticity) they accused a previous generation of exchanging for black unity.

Black Middle-Class Gains, Black Middle-Class Guilt

As quiet as its kept, some successful African Americans who have achieved the goals that their parents worked for have nostalgically looked to the past of racial segregation as a healthy period of black communal responsibility that seemed to end with

the gains of equal opportunity. Cornel West recalls: "We had a much deeper sense of community in '67 than we do in '97."

> This is important to say not in a nostalgic way, because it's not as if '67 was a time in which things were so good. Materially speaking, they were much worse. But culturally speaking, in terms of social connection, they were much better.

This is not to say that anyone longs for the days of racial brutality, and legal segregation, but as Henry Louis Gates muses in The Two Nations of Black America: "I sometimes wonder if all of us were ever meant to reach the promised land. Today there is a gap between the black middle and the black lower classes as wide as that between the black and white races. Our stories are narratives of ascent. But narratives of ascent are also narratives of alienation." As I have charted, since the post-Reconstruction period the black middle-class has always believed in the theory of racial up-lift even while distancing themselves from those they sought to up-lift. Under segregation, before the middle-classes were able to cross over into white suburbia, examples of black middle-class success were readily available as economic classes were forced to live side-by-side. As Karen Grigsby Bates points out "most integrating blacks were people setting off into white neighborhoods like westward pioneers on prarie schooners. We were going with firm purpose and a definite list of wants: better houses, better schools, less crime. If getting those things meant living next to white people, so be it, but living next to white people, per se, was not why we went." Currently, many of the children and grandchildren of those who participated in the heady days of the Movement, wonder if they have traded

a cultural authenticity and sense of historic black community for white symbols of success.

Although prosperous blacks of the middle and upper-classes emphatically do not wish to relieve their alienation by moving back to crumbling, crime-ridden ghettos in an ill-advised move to "prove" their blackness, instead they have reached back to the class group behaviors instituted by older generations of well-off blacks. Grigsby-Bates recounts a dilemma many upper-class black families with children now face: "A whole raft of us – black, gifted, ambitious – did what the architects of the civil rights movement would have wished. We married, usually to people who had had experiences much like our own, and had children."

> And then we began to notice that our kids weren't, well, as *black* as we had been. Whether we'd grown up in the 'hood or had integrated suburbs, we had been grounded, if not in black neighborhoods, then by the black churches to which most of us returned every Sunday.

Grigsby-Bates and other parents who feared that their children lacked a sense of cultural authenticity (in other words, they were becoming too white) reinvigorated old, elite organizations such as the venerable Jack and Jill, a club for the children of prominent, elite blacks founded in Philadelphia in 1938. The irony with organizations like Jack and Jill, an organization whose goals were to acquaint black children with the cultural outlets that were barred to them because of race, is the fact that the organization continues to enforce intraracial color and class attitudes.

As Grigsby-Bates admits, Jack and Jill was so elitist "to the point that admitting to membership was considered certifiably counterrevolutionary in the late '60s and early '70s. Now it's viewed as just another tool, another safeguard, to keep black children with more and more options outside the black community culturally grounded[23]." What has happened, however, is that the children of the upper-middle classes *only* associate with other black children with similar class backgrounds while learning about the great icons of the race who succeeded through individual achievement, and not through the largesse of the federal government. Many parents argue that the club allows their children to be surrounded by "as many high-achieving kids as possible," and that not *all* blacks are like the ones they only see on television. But the organization takes great pains to instill in their children that *they* are decidedly not like *them*. Furthermore, black parents were equally alarmed by the other "benefit" of integration: interracial dating. According to Lawrence Otis Graham, the new interest in Jack and Jill can also be traced to the fears that black children of the elite will not have a chance to meet "our kind of people."

The organization's membership continues to be "by invitation only" – only current members can propose future candidates for admission – which ensures that the membership of Jack and Jill retains the same skin-color strictures that were adhered to at its inception in 1938 (although membership rules appeared to "loosen" sometime in the 1970s to allow the children of notable celebrities). Although ostensibly a pro-black group, color differences continue to be checked at the door; even within the group, members (especially young girls) who were not light enough, or did not have the

[23] The daughters of Malcolm X were also members of the exclusive organization.

straightest hair, or the "right" features were stigmatized. Membership is also based on "wealth" and professional attainments, and some memberships were denied because as one member remembers of one applicant: "because we all kind of knew that the family didn't have the kind of money to support the activities, dues, and social demands" (Graham 33). Although publically the organization touts their charitable work to the "unfortunate" members of the race, they rarely come into contact with the inner city, and significantly, the organization also fails to provide the types of cultural activities organized for the children of the privileged which brings into question the sincerity of the black upper-classes in bridging the class and color gaps in black America. As Henry Louis Gates and his pool of the best minds of the new Talented Tenth have surmised, there are no easy solutions: "Today, like second-generation immigrants, we look back at the old country with both a sense of regret and some ambivalence."

The New/Old Colorism: Racial Diversity in Whiteface

In her insightfully argued legal article "Shades of Brown: The Law of Skin Color, legal analyst Trina Brown meticulously attempts to sort out the confusion between what we know as "race, and our perceptions of visible differences within "race." "People often confuse skin color and race because skin color is used to assign people to racial categories. With colorism, skin color does not serve as an indicator of race. Rather, it is the *social meaning* [my emphasis] afforded skin color itself that results in different treatment" (1498). *Aunt Hagar's Garden* is an attempt to focus on the "social meanings" that differences in skin color and phenotype have for African Americans at the end of the twentieth-century. The social meanings of colorism, as I have argued, can be divided into

two broad social realities for African Americans: gender and class. The inevitable result of the complex intersectionalities of color, class, and gender are reflected in the cultural products created by African Americans. However, the right to cultural representation has historically been the right to define a cultural black authenticity which makes the issue of race and skin color highly problematic. How does one define "blackness"– is it identifiable "race,"or is it culture? Is "blackness" defined by racial or class affinity? Can one look "white," and still be culturally black? Does economic class matter? These are extremely demanding and burdensome questions that began this study for which there are no easy, hard-and-fast solutions as the issues of class and colorism enter a new century.

As a readily identifiable political minority group in a color and race conscious America, African Americans have been concerned with numbers. In America group numbers translate to political power, and some black leaders have looked with alarm at every census and demographic movement that indicates which broadly identifiable racial group is gaining, or losing in the Minority Sweepstakes Bowl – and African Americans were losing numbers (according to the last count) to an increase in the Hispanic population. Never mind the fact that the category "Hispanic" is a suspect term in itself, or that the broad category also includes identifiable people of African descent who happen to speak Spanish or Portuguese, what matters to African Americans who care is the perception that African Americans as a political group are rapidly losing ground. Several blacks point nervously to a notion subscribed to by a number of blacks and whites that vision a future where every distinction of "biological race" is erased in an illogical presupposition that a population of "brown" people will necessarily eliminate skin color

hierarchies. This line of thought fuels what some blacks consider the most alarming current trend in racial categorization. The Multiracial Category Movement (one of several movements) is a movement that many blacks feel began with the resentment of white mothers who were "forced" to identify their children as black. As Trina Jones explains:

> The Multiracial Category Movement (MCM) originated in the 1980s when parents of biracial children began to challenge identification criteria on school data forms. By the 1990s, multiracial category advocates had shifted most of their energy to a campaign to secure the addition of a multiracial category on decennial census forms for the year 2000. (1522)

"Their efforts," continues Jones, "were ultimately unsuccessful." But not through lack of trying; the most visible advocate of the movement (although his connection may not be a formal one) is the professional, charismatic golfer Tiger Woods. Woods is the perfect example of the contradictions of colorism and the confusion of the social meanings of blackness. Woods (a light-brown skin man with curly black hair) throughout his public career has insisted on his non-blackness – evidenced by his Filipino mother and his visibly *African American* father. However, at the beginning of his career, Woods apparently did not mind the novelty of his race factored into the equally novel idea of a "black" golfing prodigy.

As I have argued earlier in this study, Woods' racial equivocations are disingenuous at best because his *color* has different social meanings to whites and blacks.

On the one hand, Woods appears to be of one mind with the MCM agenda in challenging the one-drop-rule, if whites have tacitly "agreed" to his racial designation, blacks have adamantly refused to acknowledge his complicated "explanation" of his blood-line. The MCM claim is that multiracial individuals, like Woods, should be able to "self-identify,"and "to acknowledge all aspects of their racial heritages." The gist of their argument may be a recognition of the fluidity of "race," or even that "race" as a category should not matter, but again, underneath their argument is the implication that "race" does matter – especially when we consider the social meanings of what the term blackness continues to imply. Special categories according to skin color, unfortunately, will most likely result in the type of racial stratification of values typical in the Caribbean which will only serve to exacerbate already existing intraracial tensions about the values of skin color. Clearly, the agenda of the Multiracial Category Movement is not a new one, or one specific to the United States. As Trina Jones argues, we continue to hold onto the social meanings of "race" even when we know it to be a constructed value, and this holds true for color and class bias in the African American community as well. Regardless, of the well meaning position of organizations like the MCM, racism, and to a large extent, colorism will not disappear by pouring old wine into new bottles as the continued preference for "racially ambiguous" bodies in mainstream popular culture– especially those of women – fit neatly into the age-old tradition of gender colorism in the visual products controlled by African American men. To paraphrase Deborah E. McDowell, colorism still remains "the changing same" whatever incarnation it appears in.

That's *Miss* Tragedy to You!

In Chapter Two, my hope was to articulate some of the issues that black women have historically faced with class, and skin color. In her impassioned essay, "If The Present Looks Like The Past, What Does The Future Look Like? presented as a letter to an unidentified woman, Alice Walker painfully recounts the separation colorism has on black sisterhood: "You may recall that were speaking of the hostility many black black women feel toward light-skinned black women, and you said, 'Well, I'm light. It's not my fault. And I'm not going to apologize for it'"(290). But in the last few years, there have been notable ***mea culpas*** in popular literature from biracial women who have been silent about the pain the issue has for them. In her autobiography Black, White, and Jewish: Autobiography of A Shifting Self, Walker's daughter, Rebecca explains the problems, confusions in having to pick "my people." Walker's book is a perfect example of a "shifting self" that finds a "racialized body" forced by multiple signifiers of race and culture, and in many ways, Walker's autobiography answers her mother's letter.

Walker writes of a series of questions from her darker-skinned lover about "what it feels like to have white inside of me." "Are you aware that there is white in you and does that whiteness feel different from blackness? What is it like to have thin curly hair and lighter skin, what does it *feel* like?" Basically, Walker is asked the same question W. E. B. Du Bois asked at the turn of the century - how does one reconcile "his two-ness?"

> Well, I say. The only time I "feel white" is when black folks point out something in me that they don't want to own in themselves, and so label "white." My tendency to psychoanalyze, for example, or my

> greater tolerance for cold. My hard-earned sense of entitlement is another example, or my insistence on physical beauty wherever I live, which, ironically, comes from the black side of my family tree.

But Walker, who clearly understands the pain of black women who have been made to feel the "lack" according to cultural standards of beauty dictated by a patriarchal heterosexist mainstream, "feels white" as a negative "lack" of visible blackness.

> I also "feel white" when I compare myself physically to darker people and find myself lacking. I most experience whiteness then, as a lack of some attribute or another. A lack of a certain kind of thickness, of a particular full, round, "womanly" shape that I find beautiful and associate with abundance. A lack of color, of the richness, depth, and luminosity that I see in skin darker than my own. (305)

Carol Camper, a biracial adoptee, had no idea of her "racial identity" as a child. "I didn't know my race at all. I was not informed by my parents that I was Black."Camper experienced the social meanings of race when she first heard the term "Nigger" and the question, "What are you?" "On some level I could see why I was called 'nigger' but there was still no discussion, no explaining, only urges to ignore the nasty words" (xvi). By the eighth grade, she got her first lesson in the touchy subject of intraracial colorism: "In grade eight my discussions with apparently-White Gayle about what her full lips and broad nose could mean, led to her grandmother's instruction to slap my face the next time I dared to say such a thing" (xvii). Camper's experience points to another example

of intraracial colorism where the biracial woman is either denied a "racial" identity, or makes a conscious political decision to be designated as "women of color."

Biracial women aware of the meaning of race and gender routinely reject their objectification as a means of saying "sorry." Recounting her experiences "with a Black American boyfriend," Camper writes: I seemed to be prized by him and his friends because of my 'Red' coloring. My light skin, freckles, green eyes and looser hair meant that I was sought after, exoticized." A later politicized Camper realized "that to commodify myself as exotic meant incredible loss. Loss of self, family, community and spirit. I began working to reject the hierarchy of colorism" (xx). Lisa Jones, not only rejects intraracial colorism, but the implications of "hidden" white racism when inquiring whites cannot fathom why she chooses to be "black" instead of "interracial" or "white." "The implication," Jones points out, "being that choosing black was somehow a settlement, a compromise following a personal identity crisis, and not a much larger cultural-historical calling or even just sheer love, romance, and respect for blackness (in all its permutations). . . ." As Jones wryly observes:"White women in particular have trouble seeing my black identity as anything other than a rebuff of my mother. Deep down I wonder if what they have difficulty picturing is this: not that I could reject, in their minds, my own mother, but that I have no desire to be *them*"(31). As the child of a white mother and a black father, Jones argues that her embrace of blackness in no way means a denial of her white ancestry, and refuses to be anyone's "Frankenmulatta." But even the *choice* to be black raises questions about an essentialism, and about culture. As biracial women their choice to be black suggests that "blackness" can be taken off and on

like a suit of clothes – the essence of passing – by adopting an agreed upon meaning of vernacular and cultural styles as authentically black.

As we enter the twenty-first century, "everything old is new again" as the black community faces a host of what many believe to be are external problems. But many of these problems also affect the work we must do inside the community as many black intellectuals have tried to point out. How can we reconcile the continued color and class bias in black cultural representations when it "sells" in a global market-place that markets our own issues as "diversity"? How do we, as black folks, create an agenda that severely calls out our own internalized complicity with racism? Especially when we missed the boat on recognizing the intersectionalities of gender, class, and sexual oppression as internalized practices replicated in our cultural products and social practices. The late filmmaker Marlon Riggs, recognizing the multiplicity of blackness, characterized its essence as "a sizzling gumbo," an apt metaphor for releasing the essentialist thinking around a black cultural authenticity. Perhaps, as bell hooks suggests, we need to formulate and practice a critical "postmodern blackness" that "alters and informs."

> Such a critique allows us to affirm multiple black identities, varied black experience. It also challenges colonial imperialist paradigms of black identity which represent blackness one-dimensionally in ways that reinforce and sustain white supremacy. (1990, 28)

We should also keep in mind Paul Gilroy's counsel that we opt "to embrace the fragmentation of self (doubling and splitting) which modernity seems to promote" (188).

A postmodern blackness, I would suggest, is at least a way to see blackness as a mosaic, and to be wary of cooption by the very sources that continue to impede us as a people. We need to practice what we preach in our everyday lives instead of investing in empty slogans while we continue to commodify the harmful practices – such as homophobia, misogyny, and class and colorist attitudes – that line deeper pockets of those whose interests are not our own.

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