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The female world of love and racism: Interracial friendship in U.S. women's literature, 1840–1940

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The Ohio State University, 1989
THE FEMALE WORLD OF LOVE AND RACISM:
INTERRACIAL FRIENDSHIP
IN U.S. WOMEN'S LITERATURE, 1840-1940

DISSERTATION

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for
the Degree Doctor of Philosophy in the Graduate
School of the Ohio State University

By

Glynis Carr, B.A., M.A.

* * * * *

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FIELDS OF STUDY

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Introduction

I [a white feminist] am struggling now to speak [against racism], but not out of any role of ought-to; I ask that you try not to place me in that role. I am trying to speak from my heart, out of need, as a woman who loves other women passionately, and wants us to be able to be together as friends in this unjust world; and as a woman who lives in relative security in the United States, and who is trying to figure out my responsibility and my need in struggles against injustice in a way that will lead to our friendship.

Minnie Bruce Pratt, 1984

Even as I witnessed the hypocrisy of [white] feminists, I clung to the hope that increased participation of women from different races and classes in feminist activities would lead to a reevaluation of feminism, radical reconstruction of feminist ideology, and the launching of a new movement that would more adequately address the concerns of both women and men. I was not willing to see white women feminists as "enemies." Yet as I moved from one women's group to another trying to offer a different perspective, I met with hostility and resentment.

Bell Hooks, 1984

On the last day of class, I return to the possibility of feminist ideology as a space of cross-racial connection between women. From the white women, a flurry of approval. From the black women, silence—dead silence. I am the white bitch making more promises I won't be keeping.

Minrose Gwin, 1988
The feminist movement, if not yet a fully realized "space of cross-racial connection between women," is at least one in which the possibility of that connection is ardently being worked for. Among those feminists whose notion of the movement is not "shallow and trivial," who see feminism as more than just "a new road to inclusion within a white male order" (Rich 1979: 279), racism—both within and without the movement—is a pressing problem. In the discourse of anti-racist feminism, friendship between women is frequently offered as an epitome of a transformed social order, as in the passage above from Minnie Bruce Pratt. Yet, historically, white and black women have not frequently or easily been friends. As Hooks's testimony above makes plain, white women have ignored, devalued, and oppressed women of color. Even white feminists are among the racist oppressors; we have written our own ironic chapter of the long history of enmity that separates white and black women. We—women of both races—have had enormous difficulty listening to each other, responding to criticism, recognizing the bases of interracial alliance (or even agreeing that these exist), understanding our differences and their implications, and making common cause.

This dissertation is a study of representations of friendship between black and white women in U.S.
women's literature from the abolitionist era to 1940. Such representations have special significance at this moment of feminist history when the image of interracial friendship is an anchoring vision for anti-racist activists. In addition, to study these representations also leads one to confront certain pressing theoretical issues such as differences among women, solidarity among women and female self-definition, racial and sexual essentialism, and the relationship of literature to "real life," particularly the status of literary subversion as political strategy.

I imagine this work as a response to the multiple challenges issued by black feminism since at least the early nineteenth century, challenges which have intensified since the 1970s. At the very least, we white feminists have been asked simply to recognize the multi-racial nature of feminism. According to the Combahee River Collective, whose "Statement on Black Feminism" has become a touchstone of black feminist theory,

Black, other Third World, and working women have been involved in the feminist movement from its start, but both outside reactionary forces and racism and elitism within the movement itself have served to obscure our participation. (273)

According to the Collective, these forces have combined to constitute feminism as the exclusive property of a certain
class of white women when in fact there have always been
black feminists and a high degree of overlap between
feminist and anti-racist concerns. In order adequately to
address these overlapping concerns, black feminism as an
identifiably separate enterprise from white feminism was
reborn with the formation in 1973 of the National Black
Feminist Organization in New York City. The movement gained
strength during the 1970s and 80s, so that now, in spaces
carved between the sexism of black liberation and the racism
of white feminism, the voices of black feminists can again
be heard. The groves of academe are among those places
where, if listened to, they can be heard most clearly.

White feminists who claim, as I do, intellectual and
activist roots in the sometimes weedy, sometimes cultivated
fields of the WLM ("Women's Liberation Movement") and
cultural feminism have had both our theories and political
practices challenged by black feminists. In the field of
literature, the inaugural texts of black feminist theory all
denounced specific white feminist practices. The most
offensive of these is the exclusion of black women's
experiences from white feminist accounts of "female
experience," a practice which is mirrored in the exclusion
of black-authored texts from the all-white syllabi,
anthologies, and critical journals of women's studies. We
are called upon to recognize the limitations of "women" as a
category of analysis as we acknowledge the many differences
between women. We are invited to join black feminists in developing the new methods of analysis necessary if we are to see the complexity, power, and interdependence of social constructions of race, class, and gender.

Barbara Smith, in "Toward a Black Feminist Criticism," was among the first to express her "rage at the fraction of . . . pages that mention Black and other Third World women" in "the thousands and thousands of books, magazines, and articles which have been devoted, by this time, to the subject of women's writing" (169). The year was 1977 and Smith was longing "to be writing this for a Black feminist publication" (169), but none yet existed.

Two years later in 1979, Alice Walker would make a similar observation in "One Child of One's Own: A Meaningful Digression within the Work(s)." Here Walker cites Phyllis Chesler's affirmation of Patricia Meyer Spacks's statement prefacing The Female Imagination, a statement that had become by then a formulaic disclaimer in white feminist theoretical texts:

'I have no theory to offer . . . Third World [women]. As a white woman, I'm reluctant and unable to construct theories about experiences I haven't had.' (372)

Yet, as Walker angrily notes, white feminists of the 1970s also "never lived in nineteenth-century Yorkshire," yet we feel sufficiently competent to "theorize about the Brontës" (372).
This sort of racist duplicity evident in the work of white women scholars continues to be a theme of black feminists at present, although they have moved beyond a simple critique of exclusion to consider whether it is possible at all merely to "add black women and stir." Some good work has been accomplished to illuminate basic differences in the assumptions, concepts, and methods of black and white feminisms. A recent contribution to the discussion, Sondra O'Neale's essay in Teresa De Lauretis's *Feminist Studies/Critical Studies*, complains that white women scholars are assuming the role of "inhibiting midwife" to black women's cultural expression, acting as gatekeepers, canon-makers, and censors to ensure that the words black women speak will be the words white women want to hear and approve. Many gender-conscious black women, like Chikwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi, are disgusted enough with this cultural imperialist function of white feminism to seek an entirely new name for what they are: womanists. Womanism will not simply reproduce aspects of white male "patriarchy"--such as its "centrism," the putting of oneself in the center and the relegation of socially constructed "others" to the margins of discourse--but will construct accounts and explanations of culture useful to all women, and men, interested in progressive social change.

Traditionally, formulations of white feminist theory have constructed a notion of "sisterhood," meaning unity
and/or solidarity among women, as the precondition for social change. But, as black feminists have emphasized in their analyses of racism, white feminists have frequently undermined the basis of sisterhood by exhibiting indifference to black women's theories, priorities, and experiences. Some white feminists have chosen to listen in a disciplined way to the voices of black women, to accept responsibility for our share of racism, and to commit ourselves to its elimination. Theorists such as Adrienne Rich, Charlotte Bunch, Mab Segret, Elly Bulkin, Susan Koppelman, and Minrose Gwin are among those white women formulating feminist agendas to correct the racism of the white women's movement.

The writings of white anti-racist feminists often incorporate utopian visions of rehabilitated feminist communities, visions anchored with astonishing frequency to images of interracial friendship. The first epigraph cited above, from Minnie Bruce Pratt's enormously influential essay in *Yours in Struggle*, is a good example of the genre. In the passage quoted, Pratt hopes to bring about a world in which justice is present, a world in which "we"—meaning all women—can "be together as friends." Similarly, Adrienne Rich, in "Disloyal to Civilization," describes the evolution of her thinking about women and racism:

I used to envy the "colorblindness" which some liberal, enlightened, white people were supposed to possess; raised as I was, where I was, I am and
will to the end of my life be acutely, sometimes bitterly, aware of color. But I no longer believe that "colorblindness"—if it even exists—is the opposite of racism; I think it is, in this world, a form of naivety and moral stupidity. It implies that I would look at a black woman and see her as white, thus engaging in white solipsism to the utter erasure of her particular reality. But in moving further and further out of the worldview into which I was born, something else happened: I began to perceive women as women. I began to see what separations by class, race, and age did not wish me to see; but above all, what patriarchal fragmentation did not intend for me to see, or for us to see in each other. That we are different, that we are alike; that we have been together by miracle and against the law; that we have been disconnected by violence; that we still dread and mistrust each other; that we long for and are necessary to each other; that to make a primary commitment to women is to break a primary taboo, for which we often go on paying through self-punishment as well as through penalties imposed by the taboo-keepers. (1979: 300)

It is characteristic of Rich's radical feminism that she tends strategically to merge the categories of lover, mother, sister, and friend, describing each as a form of "primary commitment" among women, commitments which are both means and end of a reformed social order. Rich projects a rehabilitated world in which racism is no longer a fact of life, but black and white women may satisfy their "long[ings] for . . . necessary" connections with each other, or, as she says earlier in the essay, "take each other up in our strong arms . . . to fuse our powers" (1979: 299).

Now black women's writings are of another order entirely.
Black women do not, as a rule, "long for" white women, or if they do, the longing is not normally given voice. Nor do they often imagine our arms as "strong" arcs within the protecting circle of which "necessary" connections can be forged. Although, as Gwin has pointed out, "[n]ot all black women write about white women in the same way," nor is it appropriate now "to valorize white women's position in black women's texts" (1988: 21), still it is obvious that relationships with white women are not the crux of black female concerns. Black women, first and foremost, are interested in speaking to and seeing eye to eye with each other and black men. When we whites are addressed by black women, it is more often than not a request to get our boots off their necks, not an invitation to embrace. The image of interracial friendship is not therefore a formidable presence in the texts of black feminism. At worst, we are the enemy; at best, some black women are willing to make cautious alliance with us (for we white women, naively ignorant of our own power, somewhat like overgrown children, can be enormously, if sometimes unintentionally, destructive).

Audre Lorde, for example, a black feminist more optimistic about the anti-racist potential of white women than most, speaks cautiously, as in the following extract from "An Open Letter to Mary Daly":

This letter has been delayed because of my grave reluctance to reach out to you, for what I want us to chew upon here is neither easy nor simple. The
history of white women who are unable to hear Black women's words, or to maintain dialogue with us, is long and discouraging. But for me to assume that you will not hear me represents not only history, perhaps, but an old pattern of relating, sometimes protective and sometimes dysfunctional, which we, as women shaping our future, are in the process of shattering and passing beyond, I hope. (1984: 67-68)

Lorde's theoretical essays are dotted with images of interracial cooperation and community, but her tone, rather than being utopic, is reserved, cautious, and self-protective. She acknowledges her negative expectations and assumptions about white women (that we won't listen or hear, that there will be no shared understandings). These qualify, but do not eradicate the poet's "hope" for a different future.

Other black feminists are not so hopeful. They understand relations with white feminists as a sort of necessary evil. Bernice Johnson Reagon, whose articulation of the principles of "Coalition Politics" has been basic to black feminist theory, speaks of interracial relations:

I feel as if I'm gonna keel over any minute and die. That is often what it feels like if you're really doing coalition work. Most of the time you feel threatened to the core and if you don't, you're not really doing no coalescing. (356)

The feminist movement, Reagon says, is "no hiding place . . . nowhere you can go and only be with people who are like you. It's over. Give it up" (357). Black and white feminists can not expect to feel "at home" with each other
in the movement; rather, we must struggle painfully together in public, in our workplaces, and "in the streets" (359).

In doing so, however, we encounter more barriers than supports. One is that "long and discouraging" history which Audre Lorde spoke of, a history which features the "passive or active instrumentality of white women in the practice of inhumanity against black people" (Rich 1979: 204), a history of racial enmity. And yet, most black women do recognize that to construct an image of white people as a monolithic "enemy" will not serve any of us. Without, as Hazel Carby cautions, dismissing "material differences in the lives of . . . black and white women" or "deny[ing] the hierarchical structuring of the relations between" us (1987b: 17), an anti-racist white feminism needs historiography which provides us with a usable sense of the past. Black historian Paula Giddings's When and Where I Enter is exemplary in this respect. Not only is it a valuable source of information about the materially and ideologically different conditions of the lives of actual black women, but its chapters on interracial cooperation provide white women with valuable role models. Here, for example, we can learn about the minority of white women who worked in the Freedman's Schools after the Civil War, or the Association of Southern Women for the Prevention of Lynching in the 1930s, composed of white women "determined that they would 'no longer . . . remain silent in the face of this crime
done in their name'" (1984: 207), or the white women who worked in SNCC in the 1960s, among others.

For white women, a vital movement away from our racist heritage involves the disruption of our sense of the past as a dead, but determining weight. We need to know the manifestations and consequences of racism, to be sure, just as we need a historiography that makes us understand our own agency and complicity in racist systems. But we also need a history that features ruptures in and resistance to those systems. We need the history of formal and informal multi-racial alliance for social justice as a wedge for opening spaces in which we can imagine ourselves in different, anti-racist relationships to black women and black men.4

Another barrier is the images black and white women have of each other, images which often run counter to experience, or--given the complex and inchoate nature of experience--attempt to reduce and mold it into manageable and politically expedient forms. When we look, what we see are images of each other: mammy and whore, "Miss Anne" and the whiners. We tip-toe and tap-dance through a matrix of difference and similarity, or, more accurately, through the entrenched patterns controlling how we first perceive difference and similarity and then organize these perceptions into patterns of dominance and subordination. Some of us, "colorblind," don't see differences, and distance ourselves from the idea of racism. It's not in me,
we say; its somewhere else, "out there." I never owned
slaves, and besides, it doesn’t matter anyway, we’re all the
same under the skin. Or, alternately, we’re trapped in
difference, able to see each other only as exotic or
threatening "others," whose lives are inscrutable, strangely
connected to ours, or not connected at all.

Some feminists, like Minrose Gwin (1988), have proposed
that "otherness" take on new value for us as a guide to the
rehabilitation of race relations between women. But like
Barbara Christian, the first black woman to respond to Gwin
in print (1988), I argue for a more complex interracial
vision than the embrace of "otherness" allows. I want our
theoretical commitments to "positionality" to become more
than mere matters of theory. I want us to internalize what
we have accepted as abstractions about "the intersection of
multiple oppressions" and "the fictionality of identity," so
that our thinking about women takes place simultaneously
along many axes of categorical difference at once--and yet
never loses sight of the flesh and blood human beings who
inhabit those categories in the real world. I want us to
develop visions of each other in which many types of
difference and similarity are recognized within and between
the broad analytical categories through which we order our
lives. I want us--black and white women--to suspend what we
think we "know" about each other and explore instead the
variety of creatures existing within those categories--
"black women," "white women." I want us to cultivate the capacity for the sort of "surprise" discussed by Barbara Johnson in *A World of Difference*:

If I perceive my ignorance as a gap in knowledge instead of an imperative that changes the very nature of what I think I know, then I do not truly experience my ignorance. The surprise of otherness is that moment when a new form of ignorance is suddenly activated as an imperative. (16)

Yet, it is never possible to see another human being directly, without the mediating influence of "images." I am not therefore suggesting that women attempt merely to dispense with the old images and the "old patterns of relating" appended to them in order to see each other as we "really" are. I argue instead that we accept the images and their attached narratives as simultaneously constitutive of reality and as profoundly arbitrary constructions that are susceptible to reformulation. Black and white women's images of each other are both conditions of our present seeing, thinking, and acting, as well as conditions for the production of new and different "texts" about ourselves and each other. As self-conscious agents of social change, we are not inevitably bound to "an old pattern of relating," but can appropriate, or reconstruct, those images and patterns, to create reality anew in order to live different kinds of lives.

The chronological sequence of black and white women's fiction about interracial relationships provides a
convenient springboard for examining both the old patterns and the possibilities for change. Female friendship, and its representations, has only lately emerged as a subject of scholarly investigation, as feminist theory has entered a stage of inquiry concerned with the reconceptualization and reassessment of those aspects of women's experience not represented in patriarchal accounts of culture. It is conventional to cite Virginia Woolf as the theorist who first drew attention to the importance of friendships between women in her famous discussion in A Room of One's Own of Chloe liking Olivia (85-89). Since then, Annis Pratt and Barbara White have named friendship as one of the Archetypal Patterns in Women's Fiction (1981) and a number of scholars have focused attention on friendship in specific periods of various national literatures. A persistent problem which has plagued the scholarship on female friendship (and other subjects as well) is the specifically literary nature of the representations of friendship in fiction.

Some theorists formulate the problem as a conflict between "American-" and "Franco-" feminist approaches to language and literature. The American feminists are accused of accepting literary representations as accurate "reflections" of women's experiences in "real life," whereas French feminists question the mimetic potential, or the so-called "transparency," of language. Recent feminist
analyses of female friendship have been caught between these conflicting theoretical agendas: how to acknowledge that friendships in literature are different from friendships in "real life," and how to pursue the conviction that literature nonetheless can and does say something true about "real life." Underlying these debates is a notion of experience--"real life"--somehow disjoined from language.

My own position is that both "real life" and literature are both institutions which are constructed. Language is an important, but not the only means of constructing experience; material cultural practices are also significant. Literature and real life are comprised of socially constructed texts which are made, via the conventions of interpretation, to refer to each other. Literature, in other words, reproduces the real world at the same time that the real world reproduces literature. That is, people mold their lives to fit accepted cultural patterns. These patterns are found, among other places, in literary texts.

History is also a (largely narrative) construction of experience, just as literature is. Yet, historians' accounts are generally accepted as closer to the "truth" about real life. Certainly, there is no denying that the images of interracial cooperation and friendship between women are different in the two genres: history and literature. Historians document a wide range of friendly
relationships between black and white women in which a variety of dynamics may operate: surface acquaintanceship, collegiality, patronage, political alliance, neighborliness, and "private" friendships, more or less emotionally (and sometimes physically) intimate. Yet in literature, black and white women see only a few images of each other and a few basic plots. This "reduction" of the scope of experience into a limited number of forms is the definition, for some scholars, of "ideology." From this vantage point, the significance of literary representations of interracial friendship is due to their charged ideological content (DuPlessis 2-3; Cosslett 2).

As I have said, since there is no level of unmediated experience, since we are always inside our ideas, images, and myths, there never was, nor ever will be a time when black and white women experience each other directly, without the mediating influence of images of race. Certainly, by the nineteenth century when the female abolitionists began their literary work, racial stereotypes had already solidified. As the works of Jordan and Banton demonstrate, although discourses of race were not unified—although, in other words, there were many conflicting and contradictory ideas and ways of speaking about race current, even about matters as basic as whether blacks could be considered human beings at all—still, by the 1840s when the earliest texts considered here were being written, the
dominant ideology among white people defined blacks with a few simple categories. According to racist ideology, all black people were inferior to all whites and therefore needed the guidance and discipline of the white race in order to overcome their inherent racial disabilities and "prosper" (which meant to accept both Christianity and social subordination to whites). The "nature" of black folk was to be lazy, dishonest, emotional, child-like, sexual, and musical, but they could be molded into hard-working, trustworthy servants with some effort. Otherwise, blacks were subdivided according to an unsophisticated schema: black men were (more or less dangerous) studs or kindly uncles; black women were (more or less dangerous) whores or kindly mammies. Abolitionist writers entered this discursive field with a weapon of their own making: new images of white-skinned slaves, honorable men and refined ladies, who deserved to be free because of their similarity to white people. After the Civil War, literary representations of black and white women's relationships remained bound to the stereotyped characters of the earlier period, even, or perhaps especially, when their conscious project was to argue against the stereotypes. Both black and white women did attempt revision—in which the "content" of the categories is changed to make the image acceptable to both self and other. But as late as the 1930s, black female characters continue to be depicted as caught and thwarted by
the old stereotypes of black female character. The first century of literature about interracial friendships, then, both reflects and engages in a battle of images, a sustained argument as to the "truth" about slavery, race relations, and the "nature" of white and black character.

In addition to relying on a limited repertoire of character types, stories of interracial friendship employed only a few basic plots, as well. These plots were closely associated with the specific stereotypes of racial character, as though one's type determined the kind of life one would inevitably lead, the kinds of stories in which one could be cast as major or minor character. I am tempted, borrowing from Jean-François Lyotard (1979), to call these plots the "grand narratives" of women's racial experience. Although these plots do act as a kind of "first-order discourse" endowed with special explanatory power for the experiences of everyday life, these female-centered stories focused on private life lack the grandiose qualities, especially the large historical scale, I think Lyotard wants to capture with his term. More appropriate, perhaps, is the term "culture text" advanced by Joanne S. Frye to refer to the "paradigmatic plots" (1), "the stor[ies] with prewritten ending[s]" (3) we use to interpret our experience, even molding our experience to fit the socially condoned and communicable forms such stories embody. Anthropologists and folklorists call such stories simply "myths," core
narratives of a culture understood as "sacred" because of their key position in larger ideological systems. Nancy Miller's concept of "the heroine's text," sometimes called "the femininity text," is an example of what Frye means by the generic name "culture text." Another "culture text" familiar to women's studies scholars is the standard plot of "woman's fiction" described by Nina Baym (1978).

Barbara Herrnstein-Smith, on the other hand, takes issue with the whole concept of a "hypothetical basic story"—however small or grand—because it "bears an unmistakable resemblance to a Platonic ideal form: unembodied and unexpressed, unpictured, unwritten and untold" (216). Yet she concedes the existence of

(1) the similarity of our individual prior experiences of particular individual tellings . . . .  
(2) the similarity of the particular ways in which almost all of us have learned to talk about stories generally; and  
(3) the fact that all of us, in attempting to construct a plot summary in [a] particular context and in connection with . . . particular issues, would be responding to similar conditions and constraints. (217)

Herrnstein-Smith wants analysts to see that to summarize a plot is to tell a story oneself, not to engage in a different level of critical discourse. Although Herrnstein-Smith's point is well-taken, it will not do to lose sight of the regularization of tale telling and the grouping of narrative "versions" into meaningful sets. These are the activities that I wish to undertake and underscore here.
For women's story-telling about race is regularized. The same narrative formulae—whether at the level of linguistic unit, narrative episode, or whole narrative (Mellard)—are employed again and again in women's stories of interracial friendship. These formulae are not simply an "enclosing grid" of convention which constrains our ability to represent experience (see below), but have a continuing role in the formulation of experience as an on-going achievement. This is what Audre Lorde implied when she spoke of the "old patterns of relating" at the heart of black and white women's contacts with each other. These formulae are fictional constructs, yet as I have argued, they are also very very real. We first need to know what the old patterns are, what culture texts exist, before we can understand how they operate as crucial conditions for our formulations and reformulations of interracial relationships in everyday life.

However, it is not simply the case that writers of earlier ages formulated the culture texts of women's racial experience and that now, from our superior vantage point, we will reformulate them. Even the earliest writers, such as Lydia Maria Child, understood themselves as participants in on-going processes of reformulating racial and other kinds of meaning. It is difficult to find a critical discourse that keeps both these facts—that culture texts both construct and are constructed by the times—in mind.
The authors of the fiction considered here lived and wrote in the United States between the 1840s and the 1930s. Many of them identified themselves as feminists; others were passionate abolitionists or worked for black civil rights in the years after the Civil War; many, like Louisa May Alcott or Frances Harper, were committed to a number of causes simultaneously. Some of the women were not involved in organized "politics" at all, but as private citizens believed racism to be wrong and wanted their work to help end it. All these authors were women committed in some way to changing the racial system. To use Amy Shuman's term (1986), stories about interracial friendship are therefore "immediate." That is, the texts are implicated in an on-going chain of events, as opposed to "mediate" texts which claim a certain remove from the "real world." Mediate texts, more likely to be classified as "literary," are ones in which the aesthetic, self-referential function of language is foregrounded. Immediate texts, less likely to be considered among the enduring works of great art, are more directly attempts to communicate a certain social vision and to persuade others of it.

The women writers considered here were not hostile to the premodern conventions of fiction, which others have seen as an "enclosing grid, a set of constraining interpretive paradigms that foreclose ... access to new interpretations of experience" (J. Frye, 32). They seem, if I am reading
into their work with appropriate sympathy, to have understood language as a malleable force through which truth-claims can be made, or visions and versions of reality negotiated. At the same time, attempting to use fiction as an agent of social change, they assumed that their audiences would interpret their stories according to specific, rather traditional strategies. They relied on those conventions of interpretation to be able to "fix" meanings in a certain way. Interpretative conventions were not rebelled against, but accepted as guarantors that certain meanings would be produced, meanings which then could be manipulated according to the demands of a specific political agenda.

In *Structuralist Poetics*, Jonathan Culler summarizes the conventions which govern the popular reception of the novel, conventions which he implies are interesting only insofar as they reveal the "edges of intelligibility" (190) currently enthraling the imagination of the postmodern avant-garde:

... the basic convention which governs the novel—and which, a fortiori, governs those novels which set out to violate it—is our expectation that the novel will produce a world. Words must be composed in such a way that through the activity of reading there will emerge a model of the social world, models of the individual personality, of the relations between the individual and society, and perhaps most important, of the kind of significance which these aspects of the world can bear. (189)

First and foremost, the characters, settings, and plots of women's anti-racist fiction are supposed to have relevance
to the world of everyday life. Writers expected their readers to move back and forth between text and world fairly easily. Women writers counted on their settings being interpreted as the real social world, including both the possibilities and the probabilities of that world. These fictions rely especially heavily on conventional strategies of interpretation which posit plots as chains of events linked by relationships of cause and effect. Such strategies allowed authors to impress upon readers the idea that actions toward racial others have practical and moral consequences. It is in the area of character that the women writers focused their attack on the conventions governing the representation and interpretation of black and white women's lives.

As Joanne S. Frye has elaborated, the conventions of nineteenth-century fiction included the idea that human character was apparently definable and objectively knowable through traits. These traits, moreover, were considered the source of destiny:

Defined by traits, female characters were expected to match cultural expectations of what constitutes female identity: the virgin/whore dichotomy or the woman in love or the wife and mother. When the conventions of character interacted with limiting social expectations, feminine traits and female destinies often bound the lives of women characters into the grid of male-dominant expectations. (41).

In the abolitionist period through the turn of the century, black and white women writers attempted to undermine the
existence of black character types defineable by fixed traits (laziness, sexuality, and so on) which implied a certain destiny (enslavement or social subordination). They did this by positing other, new types of black character such as the highly refined octoroon, with opposite traits such as chastity and piety deserving of a different, and better, destiny. Whereas the figure of intra-racial friendship among women has often been noted as a device for the exploration of women's choices. Interracial female friendship has a different use. When one of the friends is black and the other white, the figure of female friendship suggests not choice, but "fate," that accident of birth that fixes one's sex and race and thus predetermines the ending of one's story. As such, these novels and short stories are written profoundly against the grain of dominant American culture, a sacred tenet of which is the power of the individual to mold his own destiny. Stories of interracial friendship thus gesture beyond the texts themselves to indict the entire social system.

In the modernist period, roughly the 1920s and 30s, stories of interracial friendship became preoccupied with the idea of race as a sign, a text to be read, not an essence with the power in and of itself to determine one's destiny. Whereas nineteenth century texts offered character types as embodiments of the "truth" about race, the essence of racial character and destiny, twentieth century authors
created black characters whose major problem was being seen by the white characters in the text as something other than the fictional types—regardless of whether those types represented "positive" or "negative" articulations of character. Black female characters might have adapted Joanne Frye’s statement of the problem as follows:

Defined by traits, [black] female characters [are] expected to match cultural expectations of what constitutes [black] female identity: the [mammy/lady/whore trichotomy] or the [tragic mulatta] or the [self-sacrificing mother of her race]. When the conventions of character interact . . . with limiting social expectations, [black] feminine traits and [black] female destinies often bend the lives of [black] women characters into the grid of [white]-dominant expectations. (J. Frye 41).

Black women’s texts thus expressed an interest in the rejection of stereotypes of black "character as . . . enactment[s] of the dominant culture’s values" (J. Frye 41). The fiction itself plotted the black woman’s (usually abortive) attempt to escape the paralyzing gaze of the white woman’s "arrogant eye" (a phrase I borrow from Marilyn Frye), a way of seeing which fixes the identity of the other and conceals one’s own status of oppressor from oneself. Black women characters exert themselves to be seen for something other than the racist types, something more individual, closer to the subjective, complex, and contradictory human being one knows oneself to be. In literary critical terms, the black woman’s quest can be formulated as the search for an audience to read the
wholeness of one's character and permit the autonomous self-determination of one's own life course. To escape "the arrogant eye," therefore, is the necessary precondition for rewriting social scripts that control black women's lives, as well as those controlling the possibilities for life between black and white women. White women can be either aware or unaware of their arrogant gaze, can either resist or participate in the struggle for black women's liberation, a struggle uniquely and intimately connected with white women's own quest for freedom.
Endnotes to Introduction

1. Now, of course, there is at least Sage, as well as several black female owned publishing houses such as Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press and Alice Walker's Wild Trees Press.


3. Alice Walker was the originator of the term "womanism." See her In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens. For definitions of "centrism," "perspectivity," and other concepts of black feminist criticism, see also Ellen Messer-Davidow's "The Philosophical Bases of Feminist Literary Criticisms" and the responses to it by various racial ethnic women in New Literary History 19.1 (1987): 63-194.

4. I say "anti-racist" here rather than "non-racist," because, although there may be a time in the future when racism will not be an issue, to claim "non-racism" now is absurd. Anti-racism, the posture of opposition, is the necessary intermediate step.

5. Gilbert and Gubar, in "A Classroom Guide to accompany The Norton Anthology of Literature by Women, identify the stages of feminist inquiry as critique, recovery, reconceptualization, and reassessment (1).


7. For adequate overviews, see Joanne Frye (1986) and Nellie Furman (1985). Many recommend Toril Moi's Sexual/Textual Politics as the best articulation of
this debate, but I find Moi's method racist.

8. See Roman Jakobson for a full discussion of the aesthetic and communicative "codes" present in all literary texts.
Chapter I
Their Sisters' Keepers:
Interracial Friendship in Abolitionist Fiction

Reader, I beseech you not to throw down this volume as soon as you have glanced at the title. Read it, if your prejudices will allow, for the very truth's sake.

I am fully aware of the unpopularity of the task I have undertaken; but though I expect ridicule and censure, it is not in my nature to fear them.

... The reader will observe that I carefully refrain from quoting the representations of party spirit, and refer to facts only for evidence.

Lydia Maria Child, 1833

I could not write the story as he told it. If I were to use the English tongue with the nervous strength that he did when he told the bitterest portion of his tale, all the women in the land would tear the pages out of the fair volume; yet alas! if we but knew it, when we mention the word Slavery, we sum up all possible indecencies as well as all possible villainies. In the cover of its consonants and vowels lie hid all manner of evils, that woman dare not name, even though to name were to avert them from half their sex.

Caroline Healey Dall, 1858

Introduction

In the first half of the nineteenth century, slavery was one of the key subjects treated by both black and white women writers. Virtually all of the notable literary women
of the age, on both sides of the Atlantic, wrote novels or poems denouncing the "peculiar institution." It is curious that this period of American literature has come to be recognized and celebrated for the individualistic and "self-absorbed" romances produced by men during the American Renaissance, for when we consider the period through the literary works of women, the tenor of the age seems remarkably different. According to Ellen Moers, antebellum women writers were engaged in producing a literature of social conscience, a body of fiction epic in scope, bold in subject, realistic in detail, and powerful in its commitment to humanitarian causes (1977; 1978: 22).

Moers was referring specifically, of course, to Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. This classic American novel was published serially for the *National Era*, an abolitionist journal, beginning in June 1851. It culminated several decades of intensive production of abolitionist fiction and non-fiction, the conventions of which Stowe would use to create her major novel.

However, a long history of exclusion of women's writings from the canon of literary studies has unfitted contemporary readers to appreciate either Stowe or her sources. Twentieth century literary criticism, when it addresses abolitionist fiction at all, has frequently judged even the best of these texts to be contrived and implausible on the level of plot, the characters inauthentic and
stereotyped, and the narrators overindulgent in their use of "intrusive" moral tags. Along with other female-signed fiction designed for popular consumption, women's abolitionist writings have also been dismissed out of hand for their sentimental, as well as didactic qualities. Black critics have been especially angered by the racist conventions saturating the texts and embarrassed that several generations of black women writers would themselves adopt them when black women began to write in greater numbers later in the century. In short, these stories have been rejected as unrealistic and politically incorrect. Professional readers who are also committed feminists have been the readers most willing to take this fiction seriously—and even we have had difficulty with it. Nina Baym, for example, in Woman's Fiction, complains that such stories as we will examine here "lack the esthetic, intellectual, and moral complexity and artistry that we demand of great literature," even as she notes the male bias that makes this so and attempts to correct it at least "by taking their content seriously" (14-15).

In other words, contemporary feminist criticism of women's popular writing, a category that includes abolitionist fiction, has frequently defaulted on questions of aesthetic value and centered instead on questions of oppositionality. Feminist critics have asked to what extent did women's abolitionist fiction accommodate and support
racism, and to what extent did it oppose the racial status quo. This debate is part of the larger feminist concern with the political status of narrative generally and with literary subversion as a form of social contestation of structures of oppression.

To investigate the representations of friendship between black and white women in women’s abolitionist writings necessarily involves us in this larger critical project. However, simply "taking the . . . content seriously" as a gauge of women’s lived experience is not only theoretically questionable, but ultimately only leads us back around again to questions of aesthetic power. As awareness grows that there is no level of unmediated experience or "reality," the arrangement of genres according to degrees of remove from reality becomes a much less compelling task. Instead, major efforts are being directed to understanding the fictional nature of genres previously accepted as accurately representing the objective truth, genres such as reporting, history, and the like. Given this new theoretical context, it is inappropriate merely to demonstrate the ways fiction diverges from "reality," although, indeed, it does. Even a cursory comparison of abolitionist fiction with two of its more pertinent contexts—contemporary non-fictional accounts such as slave narratives and reconstructed accounts from present-day historians—reveals major discrepancies between the worlds
proposed in some of this fiction and the worlds proposed by historians. However, rather than saying one group of texts represents "reality" and the other distorts it, I refocus critical attention to the emotional reality to which these fictions appeal. My interests therefore are aesthetic: I want to know how texts have the power emotionally to move readers and thereby perform certain cultural work.

What appears to be the single black woman's novel produced during the period—Harriet E. Wilson's Our Nig—comes closest to being "realistic" fiction, if by realistic we mean matching the conventions of history. Indeed, with the exception of Leidel, every literary critic treating Our Nig emphasizes its barely fictional nature, demonstrating how closely patterned it was after contemporary slave narratives—a major source for historians. Our Nig is a thinly veiled chronicle of the life of its author, a free black woman in the North.

Stowe's Uncle Tom's Cabin also mines the annals of history in the creation of incident. Stowe's characters on the other hand, as critics repeatedly note, are literary types (even though they are also extremely moving or animated ones). Stowe's project, as Yellin and Thompkins, among others, have described it, was to "frame... the mundane struggle for black emancipation in the United States in the universal spiritual struggle for Christian salvation"
(Yellin 1986: 85). Stowe therefore overtly charges her narrative with mythic significance.

The earliest white women's abolitionist fiction—represented here by the short fiction of Child and Dall—is considerably less plausible than either Wilson's or Stowe's narratives as a reflection of the actual experience of slavery by the majority of black and white women. To name only a few of the major discrepancies, no field hands are present in these stories, nor are there any of the mean and jealous plantation mistresses that play such a prominent part in the autobiographies of slaves and ex-slaves (Gwin 1985). The "black" women in most white women's abolitionist fiction are the petted, refined, and bejeweled companions of basically humane white mistresses, privileged in every way except caste and having no enemies among white women, but hounded and destroyed by white men. White women's powerlessness is assumed; even their betrayals of their slave friends are coerced—making both white and black women equally the victims of white men.

If this fiction, then, does not always "reflect" reality, what it does do is expertly manipulate certain of white women's anxieties about their own lives, channeling them into symbolic forms, so as to reorder, or "reconstruct" the audience's beliefs about slavery and provoke readers to work for social change. Among the symbolic forms employed by women writers was the character dyad consisting of a
black and a white woman, bound to each other by economic and affectional ties and described to readers as "friends."

These literary interracial friendships reflect the dynamics of white women's intimate friendships with each other, not race relations as they most frequently obtained in real life. The power of the image as a means of creating humanitarian feeling toward black women among white female readers resided in its capacity to manipulate white women's anxieties about the stress points of their own lives—a major one being the conflict between female friendship and heterosexual marriage. These fictions are located at that tense moment in the cultural ideal of the white female life cycle when the young woman's largely homosocial world is broken in order that she be married, a time of life when her major tasks include reestablishing on new and different terms her important intimate relations with women kin and friends.

The writers discussed here—Lydia Maria Child, Caroline Healey Dall, Harriet Beecher Stowe, and Harriet E. Wilson—were convinced of the potency of narrative to manipulate the hearts and minds of a people sorely divided on the issue of slavery. Whereas twentieth-century readers have pronounced their narratives "unrealistic," they themselves asserted the opposite. Their fiction, they claimed, was simply a display of the "facts" of slavery. It was designed to combat the prejudices and false ideas of a populace bamboozled by
Southern pro-slavery propaganda. Abolitionist writers hoped that, knowing the facts, the people would act to change them.

But despite the authors' commitment to "fact," these stories do not seem realistic today, especially where their female characters are concerned. The characters lack psychological depth and embody the postures, not of real women, but of the literary conventions associated with "The Cult of True Womanhood" (Welter). The white mistresses and their (almost always nearly white) slaves of fiction seem to readers today to be nothing more than a one-dimensional "set of gestures" (the phrase is Nina Baym's; see below). Yet, if we are to appreciate what this fiction can tell us about the real lives of actual women, we must be willing to assess it on its own terms.

First of all, we must accept that abolitionist writers were more concerned with plot than with character, more concerned with action and happenings than with consciousness and subjectivity--a concern not usually shared by (academic) readers today. Plot-centered fiction is frequently judged by academics as hopelessly naive, but what condemns abolitionist fiction even more in the professionals' eyes is the authors' reliance on only a few basic plots. Formulae do not receive much critical respect, but are considered either the hackneyed and worn-out expressions of a by-gone age (J. Frye) or the conventional field against which
"great" artists define themselves as inventors (Hart).
Nonetheless, I argue that the plot formulae of abolitionist fiction are vastly important to us today. They are the "culture texts," or the "grand narratives," of women's racial experience that have a continuing life in the multi-racial culture of the United States. They articulate the "old patterns of relating" that black and white women today are struggling to overcome.

Two major culture texts are reproduced in and by the body of abolitionist fiction. In the rape/"seduction" story, slaves are hounded by a lustful, hateful white man until they are ruined, usually by suicide or being beaten to death or dying in childbirth or going mad. Before it was adapted to represent the experience of slavery, this culture text already had a long history of use by white women to describe their own lives. Samuel Richardson's Clarissa is perhaps the best known example of the form, but Richardson drew heavily on earlier stories written by women, as well as on women's oral story-telling. What has been described as the formula for the "tragic octoroon,"³ is only a specific sub-type of the rape story. In the "motherhood text," a slave woman confronts the possibility of losing her child when the master or mistress decides to sell it. This story has several endings: she can escape to freedom, she can kill herself and the child, or she must bear the loss.

Interracial friendships are placed strategically in each of
these two major culture texts. Usually the friendships fail; the friends are separated, the black woman often having been betrayed by the white, and one or both are ruined. Both black and white women tell these stories over and over again. However, each of the two groups inflects them slightly differently. The white female characters of white women writers frequently do not comprehend their position in the story, their role or power as an actor. In many white women’s stories, therefore, the separation of friends is depicted as an inevitable, inscrutable, unexplainable event. It is simply the way things are. Black women writers tend to attribute both more power and more consciousness of power to their white women characters than white women do to themselves. In black women’s stories, which are structured as quests—for literacy, freedom, or at the very least for the right to choose which man will have control over one’s life (Porter 1988)—white women are self-conscious helpers and hinderers in black women’s lives.

Secondly, at the same time that female characterization has been placed inappropriately at the center of contemporary critical concern, the characters have also been judged against inappropriate criteria. Feminist critics have expected these verbal constructs to match our vision of what women were "really" like—but they were never meant, even to contemporary readers, to suggest "real" women. They
were, however, meant to suggest "reality." Their "reality" consisted in how accurately they indicated an ideal type of womanhood and dramatized the fate of the ideals she embodied in some of the very real situations confronted by flesh and blood women under slavery. Abolitionist fiction, then, as Barbara Christian pointed out to be true of the exemplary black women's fiction of the turn of the century, is an exploration of "the ideal as affected by the real" (Christian 1985: 169). In such a context of use, female characters were verbal strategies designed to explore issues of women's moral agency, female power and powerlessness, and the consequences of choice. Characters dramatized both the fate of slaves and ideas about what white women's response to slavery ought to be.

Abolitionist fiction was therefore highly symbolic and idealized, disjoined from "real" life in key ways yet at the same time extraordinarily committed to it. The image of friendship between black and white women was a prominent element in this fascinating body of fiction. It was a potent symbol with key uses in the literary struggle to end slavery. As participants in this struggle, women writers understood literature as a political resource, but not one that could be used without confronting certain problems.

The two epigraphs cited above, the first from Lydia Child's preface to her fateful Appeal in Favor of That Class of Americans Called Africans (1833) and the second from
Caroline Dall's 1858 short story "The Inalienable Love," suggest at least the outlines of the problems faced by the female abolitionist writers. First, there was a cluster of overlapping problems related to the issue of authority. And second, there were powerful forces--among them, the generic conventions of fiction, as well as traditional restraints on female speech, especially restraints to conjoin women to chastity—that silenced women writers from naming the most offensive "facts" of female experience under slavery. Yet these facts—having to do with rape and fornication—combined with more mentionable topics such as murder, the abandonment of children, and the tearing asunder of families—were precisely those aspects of slavery that women writers understood as having the greatest potential to mobilize the public against slavery.

A significant part of the struggle to end the "peculiar institution" was a propaganda war—in which fiction was assigned a key role. Both pro- and anti-slavery forces barraged the populace with tracts, sermons, broadsides, and first-person narrative accounts, as well as fiction, advancing their opposite causes. Each side competed to define the "truth" of slavery; each side claimed only to be articulating the "facts." A variety of strategies existed to claim the authority of one's spoken or written voice. (Male) preachers and politicians sometimes claimed it as a function of their institutional power; they could argue from
abstract principles to audiences conditioned to accept their authority. Women, disenfranchised from the institutions of religion and politics, did not have that kind of authority, nor were their sex's fundamental intellectual capacities sufficiently acknowledged to allow individual women easily to claim authority on the basis of their own powers of reason.

Women abolitionists, therefore, tended to base their authority in personal experience and couched their arguments against slavery, not in abstractions from philosophical principle, but in the physical, emotional, psychological, and social effects of slavery on the lives of slaves and their owners. As authors, black and white Southern abolitionists could claim eye-witness status and intense, prolonged experience of the institution itself. This is why women such as the Grimké sisters or Sojourner Truth were considered so dangerous to the pro-slavery cause. Even so, widespread doubts existed as to women's intellectual capacities and motives. Black women especially lacked authority, rendering their accounts of experience under slavery a sign to be interpreted with caution. Their life-stories required documentation from trustworthy white people to establish their factual nature and thus their claim on the public ear. Women's slave narratives, such as Linda Brent's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, were necessarily enclosed within mediating frames authored by
whites, the texts criss-crossed with their authors' conflicting needs to define themselves autonomously and to accommodate an audience with fixed ideas about black identity.

Similarly, the authority of northern women, such as Child, Dall, or Stowe, could also be discounted, but on the further basis that they lacked first-hand experience of slavery. They too, therefore, were at pains to prove the "truth" of their words. Child's preface to her Appeal obviously reveals her anticipation of a hostile audience. She does not argue from principle, but induces principles from the experiences of slaves. That each "story" she tells in the Appeal is a "fact," Child meticulously documents from "reliable"—which frequently means white male-authored—sources.

Abolitionist fiction, of course, was considered even further removed from "the truth" than autobiography and other forms of non-fictional testimony. This genre, as a vehicle for the representation of "fact," was most vulnerable to challenges to the authority of the woman writer. Stowe, for example, felt compelled to deflect the vehement criticism that her blockbuster novel, Uncle Tom's Cabin, was a truthless slander, by producing a lengthy non-fictional Key "proving" it was more than mere fiction. Child and Dall used narrators that frequently "intrude" into the story reminding readers of the factual nature of their
tales. Female abolitionists’ lack of authority is only a specific instance of the general difficulty that nineteenth century women faced in claiming narrative authority of any kind, a difficulty described perhaps most eloquently by Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar in *The Madwoman in the Attic*.

Nonetheless, abolitionist writers remained committed to the use of fiction as a tool for reaching an audience that they believed would not otherwise be reached. By the 1840s, fiction writing was a booming business. Over ninety percent of the adult white population was literate and hungry to read. Between 1800 and 1835, the number of newspapers published in the U.S. had increased dramatically from 200 to 1200; the magazine industry enjoyed similar growth (Mott). Book producing and selling became more lucrative enterprises as new technologies (namely, the printing of books from plates instead of type) lowered costs. Subscription libraries remained popular and energy gathered for the public library movement that would swell later in the century. In the antebellum years huge new audiences for fiction emerged and were happily glutted with the reading—especially the novel, which was the preferred form—that they craved. Abolitionist writers correctly identified the bullish market for fiction as susceptible to activist exploitation. They sought among fiction readers—although not without problems—new agitators against the evils of slavery.
There were several significant barriers that prevented fiction from being an effective vehicle to convey the facts of slavery to women readers. (That abolitionist writers expected a specifically female audience for their fiction is made abundantly clear in the epigraph above quoted from Dall.) First of all, the writers had to overcome the subtle modes of censorship practiced in the publishing industry, practices by which publishers control "public opinion" while ascribing their (ideologically rather than financially based) choices of which materials to publish, distribute, and promote to the spontaneous workings of the "free market" (Karcher 1986a). Women writers were pitted against the racist conservatism of publishers who refused to take what they called "financial risks" with controversial writing—a category that included all writing against slavery.

Second, abolitionist writers engaged in forms of self-censorship when they anticipated unreceptive audiences and made choices about how best to influence them. As they understood it, the tasks were to create sympathy for slaves and free blacks among readers whose racial prejudice was severe and deeply entrenched, to appeal to the "fellow-feeling" of creatures habituated to thinking of slaves as outside the circle of human fellowship, and to provoke the desire to oppose slavery by appealing to the morals of readers deeply, albeit sometimes unwittingly, involved in immoral practices. Sometimes, then, writers would dilute or
compromise their cherished principles in order to gain the widest possible popular hearing. Carolyn L. Karcher’s article, "Censorship American Style," explores these issues in depth as they had an impact on the career of Child’s Appeal. Even the briefest comparison of that book with Child’s anti-slavery fiction demonstrates the point. The former condemns color prejudice, does not object to miscegenation, and calls for the immediate emancipation of all slaves in order to alleviate the most hideous tortures to which the representative, "uncultured" slave is subject. The latter seems initially to present slavery as a relatively benign institution and features "cultured," white- or nearly-white slave characters in situations highly unrepresentative of slavery, but a familiar stock of white women’s romance.

Perhaps the most serious obstacle that fiction as a genre posed to abolitionist writers was that the scope of the reportable in respectable fiction was so severely circumscribed. The "facts" of slavery most damaging to the Southern cause were those related to sexual violence and sexual excess—topics unmentionable in genteel literature. Yet, as I have said, these are precisely the facts women writers most wanted to expose. As a consequence, abolitionist writers were compelled either to cloak in romantic euphemisms the harsh facts of slavery they wanted to publicize, or to omit them altogether. Karcher explains,
referring to the Dall passage cited at the beginning of this chapter:

Had [Dall] used the words of her slave informant, she points out, her female readers would have recoiled in horror (and her male readers, she might have added, would have stigmatized her as unwomanly). It is the facts of slavery that are obscene, she objects—not the uninhibited discussion of them. . . . Nevertheless, Dall realizes that she cannot hope to influence her genteel readers unless she respects their sensibilities. Hence her choice of a literary form and language that reflects their tastes, even though she feels all too keenly how inadequately it conveys the experiences of the slaves for whom she would speak. (1986b: 323)

The most powerful of black women's slave narratives, such as Brent's *Incidents in the Life*, reveal the same minefield through which the fictionists had stealthily to creep in order to do their work. The conditions of life for black women, such as their vulnerability to rape, had accurately to be described and their choices, such as Brent's decision to become the teenaged mistress of a white man, had to be reported in such a way that readers could not easily or quickly "blame the victim." White women must be made to see themselves as members of the oppressor class in the narratives of exploitation, but also to have their "better selves" stirred to protest and action. In other words, the presentation of female self in writings about slavery was a delicate and dangerous undertaking. Current critical interest in women's abolitionist fiction, therefore, has centered on them as a texture riddled with silences and
skewed by the conflicting needs and demands of authors and audiences.

Abolitionist Fiction as Political Work

The polemical nature of abolitionist fiction must be neither overlooked nor apologized for, although the very qualities that made it persuasive propaganda for women—its sentimentality, floridity, and melodrama—also caused twentieth-century literary critics to devalue it. The most important social context for abolitionist fiction is its production within and for the abolitionist movement. This fiction was meant to serve a political master—and serve it did.

When women writers took up their pens to write fiction denouncing slavery, they were confident that what they were doing was important and effective political work. Their confidence was based in specific contemporary assumptions about the nature of fiction and its operation in the social world. The citizens of the new republic had an enormous appetite for the written word, and literature was routinely accepted as a powerful, if often unwholesome means of influencing the public. Although, as women, many pivotal political roles—such as voting and public speaking—were closed to them, writing was not. As women in a sex-segregated and sex-conscious age, they felt themselves endowed with special moral perspectives on racism and
slavery that the nation sorely needed. As writers and editors, they seized opportunities to widen fissures in the walls of the slave system. They wrote because they could, and because they thought it mattered.

All the authors discussed here—Lydia Maria Child, Caroline Healey Dall, Harriet Beecher Stowe, and Harriet E. Wilson—were committed to the anti-slavery movement. Abolitionism was a dynamic and internally heterogeneous movement capable of commanding the passions of the citizenry and engaging the public mind. It emerged from and overlapped with what women's social historians have named "the moral reform movement" (Woloch 172). In increasing numbers, antebellum women devoted themselves to political organizations allied with the various protestant churches. In the so-called "female voluntary associations," women addressed social issues such as poverty, prostitution, alcoholism, and child labor. Social historians have stressed that here women learned political skills and to a certain extent created new roles for themselves. For the most part, however, the political work they undertook, such as "visiting," was an extension of their traditional caretaker role in the family. The female moral reform movement was based in and not invulnerable to the limitations of protestant evangelism.4

Abolitionism and feminism were radical outgrowths of the general political mobilization of women in the
antebellum years. Unfortunately however, the structure of both movements only reproduced existing relationships of race and sex. As a rule, for example, abolitionist societies were segregated into separate white and black, male and female groups whose power and prominence within the movement reflected the social privileges conferred by the dominant culture. Subsequent accounts have reproduced these configurations as well. Historians of abolitionism foreground the activities of white male "stars," such as Garrison. In white male groups, black men were used as mere story-tellers; they were given a public forum and voice, but frequently discouraged from political analysis and theory, an activity reserved for white males (Stepto). The history of black abolitionism emphasizes the activities of men, implying that the activities of black females were either slight or have subsequently been permitted to slip from the historical record for want of documentation. The names of only a few--Harriet Tubman, Sojourner Truth, and Maria Stewart, for example--have any currency today at all. The white female anti-slavery societies that formed in the major Eastern cities in the 1830s are less obscure, but are often discussed only insofar as their work affected that of white men, as in the extended debate about the series of splits that occurred in the movement between 1837 and 1845 over the issue of women's rights. Another strategy of historians is to present white women's abolitionism as the first chapter
of the history of white feminism (Dubois; Hersh), a strategy that risks minimizing the importance of racial issues in their own right.

At any rate, female abolitionist societies initially had missions to support male abolitionists by raising funds, circulating petitions, and the like. During the early years, women were barred from such public roles as speaking. When these barriers were challenged by lecturers such as Francis Wright and the Grimké sisters, the public was considerably aroused—often to the point that the women were heckled or even attacked. Such attacks were part of the spectrum of violence, described by Karcher below, that was forcefully directed against the abolitionists:

. . . the molders of Northern public opinion used every means at their disposal to quash what they called "agitation" of the slavery issue. Throughout the North, well-organized mobs led by "gentlemen of property and standing"—congressmen, attorneys general, judges, mayors, bankers, financiers, merchants, and manufacturers—disrupted abolitionist lectures, pelted the speakers with brickbats and rotten eggs, burned down abolitionist meeting halls, demolished the homes of prominent abolitionists and free blacks, razed black neighborhoods, raided post offices for anti-slavery publications, which they fed into bonfires, destroyed anti-slavery presses, and in one notorious instance, killed an abolitionist newspaper editor. (1986a: 284)

Although Lydia Maria Child was mobbed twice and Harriet Beecher Stowe received ugly hate mail, including at one time the severed ear of a black person, women writers were generally immune to the severest forms of sexist and racist
backlash faced by the abolitionists. This made literary production an important wedge women, in relative safety, could manipulate to advocate for their enslaved "sisters." In the process, they also expanded their own social roles.

Literary activity was an important part of abolitionists' overall programs. As I've said before, the movement was ideologically heterogeneous, with various anti-slavery groups taking various positions on the issues and emphasizing various political strategies. Jean Fagan Yellin (1986) has summarized the positions of the two large factions--one headed by Catharine E. Beecher, the other by the Grimkēs--that commanded the loyalty of most women. All female abolitionists derived their politics from their religion: they believed slavery to be a sin and they believed it to be their Christian duty to oppose it. There was disagreement, however, on the means of opposition. Basically, the Beecher camp advocated that women resist slavery by attempting privately to influence men:

A man may act on society by the collision of intellect, in public debate; he may urge his measures by a sense of shame, by fear and by personal interest; he may coerce by the combination of public sentiment; he may drive by physical force, and he does not outstep the boundaries of his sphere. But all the power, and all the conquests that are lawful to women, are those only which appeal to the kindly generous, peaceful and benevolent principles. Woman is to win every thing by peace and love... But this is to all be accomplished in the domestic and social sphere. (Yellin, 87)
The Grimkës, on the other hand, believed that women's influence on men from the confines of their sphere could not go far enough. They advocated private solutions such as prayer, too, but also urged women to organize publicly, to emancipate their slaves, even to break unjust laws, such as those prohibiting black literacy.

Child and possibly Dall—although biographical details of her life are scant—were aligned with the Grimkës, while Stowe's political beliefs were closer to her sister's, although as we shall see below, none of these writers' fictional heroines embody their authors' politics. Wilson's political principles, like so much of the rest of her life, are unknown. Both ends of the spectrum of female abolitionism, then, are represented in this study. An interesting aspect of the fiction, however, is that "politics" per se is almost never discussed. The female characters, as a rule, are completely insulated from organized abolitionism and other public events. Their experience of slavery is represented as wholly "private" in nearly every case. And yet, a curious reversal is at work in the fiction. Whereas one might expect the white heroines of Child and Dall to embody the activist principles of the authors, in fact they are always and only victims. Futile and ineffectual are their feeble efforts to manipulate their environment and influence the men who control their lives. They are finally able to help neither themselves nor their
black women friends. Similarly, Child and Dall's black heroines are also passive victims. Stowe's white and black heroines, on the other hand, are active and effectual. They escape, for example, and help their friends to escape. They break the laws, providing a salutary corrective to the image of Uncle Tom whose unwillingness to resist the system of slavery allows it to destroy him.

At any rate, the published minutes of the Anti-Slavery Convention of American Women, held in New York City on May 9-12, 1837, serve to illustrate how at least one women's society envisioned the use of members' literary talents in service of the cause (Sterling 1987). This convention is of particular note because it was attended by the most famous female abolitionists of the day, including the Grimkés and Lucretia Mott, as well as writers and editors such as Lydia Maria Child and Anne Weston whose work will be specifically considered here. Although the principles espoused at the convention were more radical than most women would have held, a sense of the range of issues confronted by the female abolitionists is apparent from the minutes. This meeting is also notable in that it was not racially segregated and its manifesto condemns informal racial prejudice as well as the formal system of slavery. Strange as it seems, not all abolitionists were anti-racist. The back-to-Africa sympathies of a good many abolitionist societies are often offered as proof of racist abolitionism.
The Anti-Slavery Convention of American Women, however, believed that racism was the underlying problem, and slavery was only one of many overt manifestations of it.

The delegates urged Woman "to do all that she can by her voice, and her pen, and her purse, and the influence of her example, to overthrow the horrible system of American slavery" (Sterling 1987: 13). Specifically, women should resist marriage to Southerners, petition the various state governments for reforms (such as a slave's right to trial by jury), investigate and discuss the subject of slavery, pray, aid and abet fugitive slaves, form coalitions with other anti-slavery organizations, boycott certain Southern products, make financial contributions to the movement, and as mothers "educate their children in the principles of peace, and special abhorrence of that warfare, which gives aid to the oppressor against the oppressed" (17). The role of literary women was crucial. They were directed to write and disseminate the facts of slavery and analyses of its philosophical and moral underpinnings. Women writers complied by contributing to the anti-slavery newspapers, by producing and selling gift-books (such as The Liberty Bell) as fund-raisers, and by publishing essays, stories, and novels wherever they could.

Abolitionist writers, both men and women, were met with much resistance. Consequently, "wherever they could" ended up meaning not many places to publish at all. Donald
Leidel's 1961 dissertation is an extended discussion of the fate of the anti-slavery novel in the publishing industry. Leidel's thesis is that the novel would not be an effective political vehicle until the 1850s when the success of Uncle Tom's Cabin would prove to publishers that abolitionist fiction could sell. However, Karcher's recent work on Lydia Maria Child and censorship (1986a) directly challenges the public statements of publishers, that Leidel apparently assumes as unproblematic statements of fact. Karcher maintains that the power of "silent" Southern patronage and ideological considerations, rather than "saleability" and widespread "public opinion," kept abolitionist writing out of print. This is significant because so much criticism of white women's texts focuses on images of black people and ideologies of race with the assumption that the only constraint on the authors' creation of character and plot was her own (more or less racist) imagination. This exclusive interest in issues of textuality obscures and distorts the power of publishers to control women's texts. Whatever the case, as future research will hopefully reveal, the institutional politics of publishing must be acknowledged as a pertinent context for this body of white-authored fiction, just as it is already acknowledged in relation to black-authored texts. Virtually every study of slave narrative and early black fiction assumes, not the freedom of the author, but the existence of constraints.
The Mechanism of Fiction

Much of the popular women's writing of the antebellum years was not what we would qualify today as "serious" work. It was instead a simple telling of stories for pleasure and profit by authors who wanted merely to excite and entertain their readers. Such women were patently unconcerned with challenging the political status quo (and thus of course they buttressed it). But at the same time, a substantial number of women did aspire to produce fiction that both was aesthetically powerful in the terms accepted by the popular audience (that is, "exciting") and would effectively serve their (radical) political interests. In other words, in the nineteenth century, women were engaged in producing a "serious" or "great" body of literature, and among these women are the first of many who wrote against racism.

"Serious" or not, radical and activist or not, all women writers of the nineteenth century worked in a social context that understood fiction, or narrative, much in the manner of Plato, as a powerful force malleable to various social uses. As Nina Baym amply demonstrates in her *Novels, Readers, and Reviewers*, the antebellum novel--and, I would speculate, short fiction, too--was attractive and popular because it provoked the "interest" of readers. This interest, which might vary in intensity . . . could never be entirely forgone and . . . at its greatest, could be so exciting as to be painful.
People liked novels because they alone among literary types produced this experience [that is, the pleasure of heightened emotional activity]. They did so by telling stories about sympathetic, humanlike beings beset by difficulties, thus engaging curiosity and arousing suspense. . . . Mimesis [in this context was] utterly conventional and schematic, a set of gestures defining the novel's agents as human beings and their surroundings as the real world. (54)

Here Baym describes the popular practice of reading in the nineteenth century. This practice, that has survived among non-professional readers today, assumes that short stories and novels are about plausibly human beings in the real world. Readers are aware, of course, that characters are not real people and that the world depicted in fiction differs from the world of everyday experience in significant ways (especially in its capacity for closure that repairs the unfinished and chaotic experience of everyday life—an important point I will discuss in detail below). What is important is that what we may call "popular readers" assumed that the scope of the novel, as distinguished from the earlier form of romance, was the real social world. Narrative fiction was understood as a description and ordering of the world, especially its moral aspects. Fiction "worked" because the act of reading aroused and sustained interest in characters—"people," what they do and what is done to them. According to Baym, plot was the novel's primary formal organizing principle and the literary criticism of the day (book reviewing) was concerned with the
reader's response at this high level of organizational structure (64-65). In the antebellum period, especially before Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* so thoroughly reorganized readers' expectations of the novel, character was a function of plot rather than the other way around, as it is in our own postmodern period.

In the abolitionist era, every narrative was assumed to have a "moral tendency" that operated on readers through the mechanism of their identification with characters. Regardless of strictly aesthetic considerations (which were less significant than the power of plot, of story itself), a novel was judged as "bad," as possessing a vicious or immoral "tendency," when it provoked sympathy for "bad" (immoral) characters. Likewise, narrative was "good" when readers' interest was aroused on behalf of virtuous ones. Fictional texts thus provided occasions for debate among readers regarding the moral principles supposed to govern and regulate human life. Such arguments turned on whether or not certain characters were virtuous, and whether or not they caused or deserved their fate in the story.

To repeat, it was generally believed that the power of narrative resided in its ability to provoke "interest." To a certain degree, this "interest" was a self-contained literary experience; in other words, the novel in turn first excited and then calmed the reader through the narrative devices of complication and closure of plot. Yet what I
wish to underscore here is that, at the same time that a novel’s "interest" was understood to be self-contained, it was also believed capable of influencing the real social world by affecting the emotions, aspirations, and ideals of readers. Baym quotes a lengthy review of an 1856 Thackery novel in this regard:

Yet, if there is one class of works more than another which it is specially desirable to estimate correctly, it is that included under the generic name of popular fiction. If this department of literature does not reflect, it in a degree moulds the age. . . . It is through vivid and fascinating pictures of human life, through the adventures of some hero or the sentiment of some heroine [sic], that we usually image our own career, or, at least, first shape our ideal of what it should be. . . . (172)

This is a social constructionist view of fiction, in line with aspects of poststructural literary theory being produced today. Yet, though this assumption appeals to and affirms our commonsense understanding that fiction and story do change lives, it can be notoriously difficult to trace the influence of a particular text, to appreciate the way it worked—and continues to work—as an intervention in history.

The prevailing attitude among academics toward popular narrative today is that it is a conservative influence, an opiate for the masses, arousing desires to produce and consume and quelling subversive urges toward social revolution. But the abolitionist writers, and the writers maintaining the tradition into the twentieth century, worked
within a much different "horizon of expectations," including a widespread belief in the power of narrative to incite discontent and unrest, or to prey on existing ones—and all the more powerfully so in female and juvenile readers. Many critics—both conservatives and feminists—therefore believed (especially in the eighteenth century when the realist novel had not quite emerged from its origin in the stylized romance) that fiction in general was "bad," that it stirred women's discontent and desire without offering correct or upright models for action. As Baym points out, the very form of the novel itself "assumes discontent as the psychological ground from which it springs. The essence of plot, after all, is that something is wrong; there is a disturbance that needs correcting" (1984: 172).

For the abolitionist writers, that disturbance of course was slavery.

And they used their fiction to probe it.

Using language as graphic and descriptive as possible within the constraints already discussed, and using characters as close to their intended audience's ideal self-image as possible, abolitionist writers created a body of texts in which the stress points of black and white women's lives were turned into high drama to manipulate a white female audience. These stress points included the loss and death of children, the sexual infidelity of men, the vulnerability to rape, and the complicated emotions entailed
by financial dependence. The specific agonies of black women's lives as slaves were represented in such a way to suggest a common, bi-racial female experience. For example, black women's experience of having their children sold away was frequently linked to white women's fear of child-death by illness and accident. In addition, black women's texts, and Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, described the daily verbal and physical abuse suffered by "unlucky" slaves.

The image of female friendship was a bright image in these tales of suffering and woe. Manipulating white women's high expectations of this powerful relationship, abolitionist writers depicted women acting on each other's behalf to survive slavery. Heroic moments occur when women help, protect, and love each other; and since the needs of one's self are not disconnected from the needs of others, helping, protecting, and loving others is also helping, protecting, and loving the self. Other powerful and dramatic moments of these texts are those in which white women betray their black friends and their own categorical expectations of the friendship bond. By not helping the female slave, white women become villains and victims themselves.
Action Stories:

Toward a Model of Women’s Literature as Problem Solving

Three short stories published in The Liberty Bell during the 1840s exemplify a type of anti-racist fiction that white and black women writers continue to produce in the 1880s. These are simple "action stories," in which the characters are not fully developed psychologically. Instead, characters are represented as "a set of gestures" suggesting an ideal social type that would be recognized by the intended audience. Action stories compel readers primarily through the power of plot. In this way they are like folktales or myths or any other type of formulaic story, which according to Jay Edwards are "about the interplay of essential ideas. Characters have the function of dramatizing the interrelationships between these ideas in actions, and making them concrete" (101-02). Specifically, anti-racist action stories set idealized social types in "real life" situations requiring ethical choice. As authors manipulate their characters through a field of possibilities for right and wrong action, they explore the pertinent issues of moral agency: power and powerlessness, and the social values on which action should ethically be based. In abolitionist fiction, narrators make plain that slavery, prejudice, or racism are wrong, and that something should be done.

But what?
Recent theoretical work in the structural analysis of oral literature provides a method to answer this question, that is, to analyze the tradition of women's anti-racist action stories as probes of the causes of social disturbance and what might be done to correct it.

Structuralism, which first galvanized the intellectual world in the 1920s and 30s, has been described by its advocates as "the key which unlocks the central meanings of all shared, complex forms of human culture" (Edwards, 81). As a method, it is directed to discovering patterns of cultural activity and "the principles governing human culture generally" (Dundes 128). Structuralist critics agree that its major uses are in the definition of genres and subgenres, the discovery of their origin and development, the cross-cultural comparison of local content within universal forms, and the investigation of the functions of specific cultural practices to maintain a given culture as a coherent ("totalized") whole (Dundes 1965, 211-13; Edwards, 81-82). More recently, structural studies of oral literature and other folkloric expressions have been touted as the means of demonstrating the complexity of folk (and presumably popular) cultures, thus qualifying them for serious academic consideration.

Feminist criticism has been greatly enriched by structural studies, especially by its capabilities for revaluation of the previously degraded popular writings of
women. In this discussion of women's abolitionist fiction, I am assuming that the reader is generally familiar with Nancy Miller's work on *The Heroine's Text* and Nina Baym's *Woman's Fiction* (however, see Chapter III below for a fuller account). Each of these structural studies defines a genre of women's fiction, the conventions of which were used by the abolitionist writers. However, I am less interested here in defining a sub-genre of women's literature than in using recent developments in structural theory to investigate how each of the *Liberty Bell* short stories asserts a conception of women as moral agents, how each structures certain perceptions of the choices available to women for ethical action, and what values are associated with those choices.

Theoretical contributions from Bremond, Edwards, and others are applicable to abolitionist texts because they conform to and extend, rather than violate what we know about the contemporary habits of reading that determined the initial reception of these stories and thus their power to effect social change in their own day. Since those popular strategies of interpretation have survived into the present, such studies have continuing relevance. The theoretical concern of these structuralists, like that of the first readers of *The Liberty Bell* and many non-professional readers now, is primarily plot. Both sets of readers would see action as the most important organizing principle of the
text and character as merely a vehicle for it. Bremond's work is specifically designed to be a tool for analyzing ethical choices, actions, and constraints as they are represented in narrative texts. Edwards provides a means of integrating the idea of social value into discussions of plot (narrative syntax). Finally, I will show how this body of theory can clarify for feminists the present critical debate regarding the extent to which abolitionist fiction accepted, or even supported, the racial status quo vs. the extent to which this fiction successfully agitated for social change.

Claude Bremond has developed a method of syntagmatic structural analysis designed to elucidate narrative's uses in the negotiation of standards for ethical behavior within a community. His work follows and modifies that of Ante Arne and Stith Thompson, Vladimir Propp, and Alan Dundes, work that is too well known to require summary here. Bremond's work was motivated by dissatisfaction with Propp's conclusion that the Russian fairy tale "develops according to UNILINEAR series of functions" which were limited in number (thirty-one, to be precise) and fixed in sequence (250, emphasis his). Bremond differed with Propp's implication of a predetermined outcome of the fairy tale's events. Instead, he wanted a tool that could underscore "the concept of mediating process [as] essential to narrative structures" and could be used to classify
narratives based on their development of mediation. His own theory would "explore systematically the field of options before which the narrator finds himself [sic] at every moment," as well as "retrace the most frequently used itineraries" (251). To this end, Bremond proposed two important modifications of Propp's theory.

The first modification was to group Propp's "functions" in triads corresponding to three phases of mediating process: potential, actualization of the potential, and its outcome (which could be either success or failure). Potentials are described from the point of view of one or more characters as objectives (such as "lack to liquidate," "villainy to commit," and so on). Actualizations are procedures that characters follow in order to reach their objectives. As well, the narrative can describe a lack of actualization, due for example to a character's own inertia or to one character's being prevented from acting by another. Outcomes are either objectives reached or missed (248-49). The narrator, then, rather than being bound to relate a predetermined sequence of events, confronts instead a field of possibilities in constructing her story. A narrative's characters, by implication, dramatize those possibilities.

Bremond's second modification of Propp was to propose that narrative is "the development of an action which goes through phases of degradation and improvement according to a
continuous [circular] cycle" (Bremond 251). The phases of the cycle are as follows: State of Deficiency, Procedure of Improvement, Satisfactory State, and Procedure of Degradation. A given narrative may begin or end at any point of the cycle, but a single triad of motifemes (consisting of potential, actualization, and outcome) will always suffice to describe the movement of the narrative from one state to the other. Bremond thus envisioned the structure of the [French fairy] tale (and that of any story) as being composed, like a braid, of multiple superimposed elementary sequences, entwined, and bound together. Each event and action may fulfill simultaneously several functions in the story, i.e., to advance several juxtaposed elementary sequences. (250)

As Edwards summarizes, any of the tripartite elementary sequences which compose the narrative "may be complicated by the insertion of one or more secondary sequences, such as tasks, tests and contests which are embedded into the main plot" (Edwards, 85).

The value of Bremond’s work for feminist analyses of the uses of narrative as political subversion resides in its systematic capacity to locate moments of choice as functional events. I do, however, want to emphasize, echoing Barbara Herrnstein-Smith’s concerns discussed in the previous chapter, that the application of Bremond’s or any other structural method results in a plot structure, not the plot structure of the text, as Bal (1985) has pointed out.
Applying Bremond's scheme to the women's fiction from *The Liberty Bell* yields some interesting results. First of all, the linear plot sequence with its predetermined outcome normally used to describe these narratives as a class of fiction can be displaced in favor of a model that invites readers to attend to a process of negotiation of values, struggle, and resistance of oppression. In other words it underscores those issues of ethical choice to which I believe abolitionist authors intended their readers to be attentive. At the same time, it does not prevent us from seeing the "most frequently chosen itineraries" of women writers. We will still, in other words, be able to understand the basic culture texts informing the race relations that obtain between black and white women.

Lydia Maria Child published two early short stories in *The Liberty Bell* in which friendships between white and black women were depicted ("The Quadroons" and "Slavery's Pleasant Homes"). Child was not only an indefatigable abolitionist, she was also a highly respected author of fiction. Her writings are often cited as groundbreaking pieces whose structural patterns helped to define the genres emerging in her day (Karcher 1986a, 1986b; Koppelman 1984: 1-2). Caroline Kealey Dall certainly used Child's stories as models for her own work. Dall's "Amy, A Tale" contains the most fully developed friendship between Black and white women in the early abolitionist literature.
Child, born in 1802 in Massachusetts, entered the abolitionist struggle early in the 1830s, when organized abolitionist societies were first beginning to appear in substantial numbers. At that point in her career, Child’s first two novels, Hobomok (1824) and The Rebels (1825) had been highly praised by the Boston literati. Child was celebrated as an emerging young talent. In 1826 she began writing and editing the Juvenile Miscellany, and in 1830 she brought out her charming cookbook and advice manual, The Frugal Housewife. However, her career took a sharp turn downward when, in 1833, she published her scorching Appeal in Favor of Africans. An outraged public plunged Child from the pinnacle of popularity into total ostracism. Her fashionable patrons slammed their doors in her face; the Boston Atheneum hastily revoked the library privileges it had granted her (privileges only one other woman in its history had received); indignant parents cancelled their subscriptions to the Miscellany en masse, forcing Child to abandon the magazine; and the sale of her vast body of works plummeted. (Karcher 1986b: 324)

Karcher points out the "conciliatory" nature of the Appeal, but its graphic portrayal of violence and severe tone make it, to me, one of the least compromising jeremiads against slavery that exists. Certainly, it was not what the public expected from Lydia Maria Child, despite the facts that her first novel centered around miscegenation and the Juvenile Miscellany had included in 1831 several anti-slavery stories for children.
After being abandoned by her public, Child continued to work as a professional author, bringing out in 1834 a volume of stories, *The Oasis*, which included anti-slavery stories such as "Malem-Boo." In 1841 she assumed the editorship of the *National Anti-Slavery Standard*, which she resigned in 1849 after increasing its readership many times over. She did not want to be involved with the factional in-fighting that surrounded the *Standard*. Instead, she wanted the various factions to sink their ideological differences in order that the paper might reach as many non-abolitionists as possible, and change the public's attitudes. Child's fiction of the period is also designed to reach and persuade the racist public. This work includes the two stories from *The Liberty Bell* we will be analyzing in depth, as well as other writings such as "Charity Bowery" (a slave narrative) and "The Black Saxons" (a male-centered story). With the *Letters From New York* in 1843 and the collection *Fact and Fiction* in 1846, Child attempted a come-back, which was successful. She continued to publish—books of women's history, biography, textbooks for freed slaves, advice manuals for good wives, inspirational literature for aging Americans, and, of course, fiction—until she was 76 years old. She also edited the most interesting of the female slave narratives, Linda Brent's *Incidents in The Life of a Slave Girl*. 10
"The Quadroons," first published in 1842 and the earlier of Child's two stories interpreted here, is constructed according to a formula that, unnurtured by critical interest, was dropped from the canon of recognized forms in our century. However, this formula was frequently used in the early 19th century by women writers and does deserve renewed critical attention, especially by those researchers, such as Chodorow, Dinnerstein, and Gilligan, interested in developing new psychological theories to account for women's connectedness to their mothers and the comfort or discomfort that attends the processes by which women tend to repeat their mothers' lives. The formula Child uses in "The Quadroons" links together two complete and structurally similar story cycles, one with the mother, the next with the daughter as protagonist. In this formula, the mother's life is interrupted or sacrificed for the daughter and the daughter's life fulfills that of the mother.

The first half of "The Quadroons" is a classic "heroine's text" in which Rosalie, a beautiful quadroon, is first seduced and then abandoned by Edward, a white man. Child describes Rosalie as "the daughter of a wealthy merchant, . . . highly cultivated in mind and manners, graceful as an antelope, and beautiful as the evening star" (62). Rosalie's marriage to Edward is described as "genuine love; that mysterious union of soul and sense, in
which the lowliest dew-drop reflects the image of the
highest star" (62). The two have a daughter, Xarifa,
described as follows:

Her flexile form and nimble motions were in harmony
with the breezy sound of the name; and its Moorish
origin was most appropriate to one so emphatically
"a child of the sun." Her complexion, of a still
lighter brown than Rosalie’s, was rich and glowing
as an autumnal leaf. The iris of her large, dark
eye had the melting, mezzotinto outline, which
remains the last vestige of African ancestry, and
gives that plaintive expression, so often observed,
and so appropriate to that docile and injured race.
(63)

Child’s descriptions, which Baym would call "a set of
gestures," consist of linguistic formulae that define the
quadroon type until at least the turn of the twentieth
century. "Highly cultivated," with a "high poetic
nature," "pure mind," and "glossy ringlets of . . . raven
hair"—these are the formulae revealing "the drop of
midnight" in the quadroon’s veins. Many critics call these
formulae racist; and we will return to this important issue
after the plots of all three stories have been analyzed. At
this point, I only want to remind us that it is not
characterization, but plot which would have been most
important to Child.

The plot of "The Quadroons" is designed to prove an
important fact of slavery: that slavery destroys the
family, either by disordering familial relationships or
breaking the bonds that hold well-ordered families together.
A narrative tag at the end of the story disarms the reader's potential to disbelieve the "facts" it embodies:

Reader, do you complain that I have written fiction? Believe me, scenes like these are of not unfrequent occurrence at the South. The world does not afford such materials for tragic romance, as the history of the Quadroons. (12)14

Child is concerned in this particular story that her readers understand how slavery debauches marriage and rends the ties between parent and child. Throughout, the story plays with the question of form and content: what kind of relationship may be signified by the name "real marriage," and what sort only gives off an outward appearance of marriage? "Real marriage" between the quadroons, such as Rosalie and Xarifa, and the white men they love is legally proscribed. Rosalie, the mother, must be content with a verbal contract based on trust and the sanction of "the church that my mother loved" (62). Xarifa, who is recaptured into slavery, is prevented from marrying at all.

Initially, Rosalie's marriage to Edward is a happy one. Even though the couple lives in an isolated cottage because "[t]he edicts of society had built up a wall of separation between [Rosalie] and them" (62), they share spiritual, emotional, and physical intimacy, enjoy "an outward environment of beauty," and are able to raise their daughter "in the warm atmosphere of father's and mother's love" (63). Into this nearly idyllic scene intrudes white racism and the racial caste system, first mildly, as when white women, "in
scornful pride and ill-concealed envy" (63), call Rosalie and her daughter vulgar names on the street as they walk, but later in a more serious form when Edward’s political ambitions are awakened and he comes to understand how a "black" wife will ruin his career. The sanction of the church then proves to be of little worth to prevent Edward’s betrayal of Rosalie. He enters into a second marriage—legally sanctioned and recognized by polite society—but false to God and, as he later would know, to his own heart. Edward becomes a bigamist and adulterer. Charlotte, his white wife, is cheated of any but the shaggiest appearance of marriage.

In the second half of the story, the career of Edward and Rosalie’s daughter Xarifa follows the formula Zanger describes as the classic fate of the tragic octoroon. First, after her parents’ deaths, a loophole is discovered in the manumission papers of her grandmother, revealing Xarifa to be a slave. She is snatched away from her home, and flung into the market. Humiliated and terrified, the girl is auctioned off as a "fancy article." Her fiance, who is also her music teacher, can not purchase her in time, so Xarifa is sold to a "profligate gentleman," who first tries to seduce her, but finally rapes and effectively murders her, although technically she dies a suicide.

Thus, Child’s "Quadroons" dramatizes for its genteel readers the desecration under slavery of the principle of
marriage, a principle they claim to hold higher than any other because it is the foundation of the family which in turn is the foundation of all society. And because it desecrates marriage, slavery also inevitably desecrates the sacred bond between mother and child, disabling a woman's performance of that highest of social duties: motherhood. First Rosalie is unable to provide a proper shelter for her daughter's developing sexuality. Then when she is betrayed by her husband, she is unable to prevent her grief from infecting Xarifa. The only power she has is a vague, and ultimately ineffectual one over her husband's "heart." His weaknesses, both moral and physical, are simply too much for her to control, or even affect. When he too utterly fails as a father, Xarifa's life becomes a downward spiral. Edward, of course, is a type of the bad father (a popular type with the first generation of writers after the Revolution). Finally, Xarifa has the effectual protection of neither parent. Her ruin displaces marriage as the story's focus; "The Quadroons" becomes the terse dramatization of the effects of slavery on parenthood.

In the terms provided by Edwards' paradigmatic structural model, Xarifa's mother plays out Role A. Her relationship to the social value of motherhood (parenthood) is univocal: her moral stance is perfect, and her failure results from her lack of social power, not her ability or willingness to maintain social value. Her father plays Role
B; he is the story's trickster as it were. He promises to fulfill the protecting and providing roles of husband and father—but delivers betrayal, adultery, and drunken irresponsibility instead. His role is "bivocal," then, in his relationship to the social value of family and parenthood.

Applying Bremond's syntagmatic structural model, the issues of moral choice so pressing to the abolitionists are underscored. Each of the two links in this story chain begin with a "satisfactory state." Child, I think, initially seems to accommodate the racism of her audience insofar as that satisfactory state includes the facts that Rosalie's marriage is not recognized by law and she and her daughter suffer racist verbal abuse that causes them "inexpressible pain." Child begins her tale where her audience is located ideologically: inside a belief system that tolerates both informal racism and the formal mechanisms maintaining slavery and the racial caste system.

Assuming that Child's popularity can be attributed to her ability to exploit the fears and ideals of a popular and predominantly female audience, identifying the procedures of degradation reveals much about female consciousness of the period. Specifically, these procedures of degradation suggest that women feared sexual coming of age, for it rendered them vulnerable to sexual abuse rather than gaining them access to adult social power. This fear has long been
an aspect of women's cultures; avoiding it by becoming one with the "green world" of nature is one of the archetypal patterns discovered by Annis Pratt in her study of women's fiction. In addition, from identifying the procedures of degradation in "The Quadroons," we can surmise that women feared the dependence they suffered as wives on the whimsical hearts of men. Child manipulates these concerns of white women, showing how the slave system makes black women doubly vulnerable. Thus she both creates and appeals to fellow-feeling among women.

In "The Quadroons," the first interruption of the initial satisfactory state is Xarifa's budding sexual maturity. Quite simply, female coming of age is dangerous; it is not the welcomed event that a boy-child's coming of age would presumably be, but one that puts extra pressure on parents to ensure the daughter's safety from the sexual victimization understood by all to be immanent. Rosalie attempts to act at this point to improve the situation. She asks Edward to remove the family to Europe where Xarifa has a better chance to make a respectable marriage. But, financially dependent, she has no real power to make the move herself. Choice without the power to carry it out is really no choice at all.

The other procedures of degradation are changes in Edward's character. Specifically, he becomes ambitious for political power. A means is proposed for him to satisfy
that ambition: he can marry Charlotte, the daughter of a wealthy politico, who will then advance his career. Contemplating that means arouses in him yet another sensation which becomes the third and final procedure of degradation: Edward must satisfy his lust for the physical difference of blonde flesh.

Charlotte, though inferior in beauty, was yet a pretty contrast to her rival. Her light hair fell in silken profusion, her blue eyes were gentle, though inexpressive, and her delicate cheeks were like blush-rose-buds. (65)

Child describes Edward, at this point, as an addict. The "doubtful game of mutual cunning" that is politics rouses in him "all the fierce excitement of a gambler" (65). Likewise, the sexual thrill that Charlotte represents to him after years of marriage to one woman—"the strong temptation of variety in love" (65)—is too much for the morally "weakened" young man to resist. He succumbs to the cravings of his lower nature.

In order to achieve his two objectives, Edward proposes several means, which might be labeled according to the Bremondian system "bigamy to commit" and "treachery to conceal." The plan to commit bigamy fails because Rosalie refuses to continue seeing Edward after he marries another. Or, perhaps he is still a bigamist because he has no valid grounds for divorcing Rosalie. Whatever the case, Child's point is that slavery disorders the proper and healthy relationships between husband and wife. Edward is able to
conceal his treachery from Charlotte for a time, a short
time, until she too understands that her marriage is a
fraud.

The women grieve.

But they do nothing, for there is nothing they can do.

Rosalie’s social power is exhausted in her refusal to
share Edward with Charlotte. She prays that Charlotte never
learns of her existence, but this procedure of improvement
fails. Finally, seeing that her grief is hurting her
daughter (the only thing that had motivated her to continue
living after Edward’s betrayal), Rosalie dies the kind of
elegant death only to be found in nineteenth century women’s
fiction: "the conflicts of her spirit proved too strong for
the beautiful frame in which it dwelt" (70), and Rosalie was
found dead one autumn morning in her bed.

Dying, Rosalie becomes a type of Christ, for her death
causes a change of heart in Edward. Temporarily redeemed
and remorseful, Edward attempts at least to fulfill his
obligations to his daughter even if he has failed utterly as
husband to the mother. Thus, the second link of Child’s
story chain begins with a partially restored satisfactory
state.

Structurally, Xarifa’s story parallels that of her
mother. Procedures of degradation consist of natural
events: sexual awakening, disease (specifically, Edward’s
alcoholism—his addictions are legion), and death. Xarifa
is finally destroyed, as I have noted, by the violent, possessive lust of her owner.

Examining moments of choice in this story with Bremond's method reveals that, for the women, there are no moments of choice at all. Rosalie thinks about fleeing this country to Europe, but has no power to do so. Xarifa's options to improve her situation consist in making a marriage (which she is prevented from doing) and resisting the rape attempts of her owner (which fails). Charlotte does have some small power to dispense money. Men in Child's fictional world have considerably more choices than women do, even though they are morally less well equipped than women to make choices. The social system empowers and permits them to make the wrong ones. This story, like many of women's texts of the age, contains a profound, if justifiable, bias against men. Men are frequently depicted, like Edward, as the destroyers of women's lives. The social system permits male violence and women are powerless to resist it. "The Quadroons," like the next two stories we will examine here, consequently asserts that the moment of successful resistance to male violence can not be the moment of victimization itself. Thus, the story gestures outside itself, indicating that other points of resistance must be found: the system must be reformed.

In "The Quadroons," friendship between black and white women is a weak and ineffectual thing. Yet it exists.
Rosalie and Charlotte never meet, but each refuses to harm the other, each refuses to engage the other in the patriarchal role of "rival." Rosalie could have continued to see Edward, although married to Charlotte, but she doesn’t:

Hers was a passion too absorbing to admit of partnership; and her spirit was too pure and kind to enter into a selfish league against the happiness of the innocent young bride. (87)

Instead, she withdraws from competition, praying that the white woman will be spared the pain of betrayal Edward has dealt her. Charlotte, in turn, although deeply wounded to discover the former marriage with Rosalie, provides for Xarifa after Edward’s death. This type of relationship, conforms to an older definition of "friend": it is a sort of patronage.

Child’s next anti-slavery story to appear in The Liberty Bell would expend much more energy detailing the disordered relationships between white and black women that obtain under the slave system. Women, Child apparently believed, should be "friends" because of their "natural affinities" based on sex. They should at least be as close as the friends in "The Quadroons," always opting in their personal lives to honor the "natural" sexual-political alliance of women.¹⁵ When women do not befriend each other in this way, each suffers certain loss and women as a social class aid in the process of their own disenfranchisement.
"Slavery's Pleasant Homes, A Faithful Sketch," published in 1843, is structurally similar to "The Quadroons" in that it begins with a satisfactory state that is quickly degraded by the same combination of uncontrolled male lust and permissive environment. But whereas "The Quadroons" focused on the destructiveness of slavery to slaves, "Slavery's Pleasant Homes" is also concerned with the effect of the institution on slave-owners.16 Child was building here on a decade of political analysis and theory by women such as the Grimké sisters and Lucretia Mott, linking the double oppression of black women (as blacks and as women) under slavery with the oppression of white women as wives under patriarchy. While Child's earlier fiction, such as "The Black Saxons," and her non-fiction, such as "Charity Bowery" and the Appeal, had demonstrated Child's major objections to slavery--that it violates the individual's right to freedom, that it prevents Christian worship among blacks, and that it deforms the character of slaves, causing them to be ignorant, obsequious, and duplicitous--here the author would extend that analysis showing parallel damage to slave-owners. Rather than being a minor concern, this is an important theoretical leap that is still not consistently made among anti-racist feminists, even in the 1980s. We learn and teach that blacks alone are the victims of racism and slavery. Rarely are we whites taught also to think of ourselves as damaged by racism and,
Because damaged by it, have a not inconsiderable stake in working to end it.

"Slavery's Pleasant Homes" is the story of two friends, Marion Dalcho, the young mistress of the Dalcho plantation, and her slave Rosa, her dearest friend who also may be her half-sister. During the course of the story, Marion and Rosa are betrayed and ruined by the same man, the master Frederic. Karcher's extended analysis of the story draws attention to major techniques of Child's craft: her deflation of the pro-slavery plantation stereotypes, her use of images linking the supposedly Christian home of the plantation South with the immorality of the brothel and harem, her equation of women with property under patriarchy, and Child's brilliant naming of sexual violence despite the restrictions of genteel fiction discussed earlier in this chapter (327-29). The story's events turn on Fredric's claim to sexual access to his wife and her slave on the basis that he owns them both, one as much as the other.

At the marriage of Marion to handsome Frederic Dalcho, the two women go to live on the Dalcho estate where Rosa falls in love with George, Frederic's slave who is also his brother. George and Rosa's affair greatly displeases Mars, Marion's coachman, who plots against the young couple in anger and resentment. Frederic, too, is unsettled to discover George and Rosa's affection, for he realizes, seeing her smile at George, that he wants her for himself.
Of course, as her master, he is permitted to have his way, and he does. Marion discovers her husband's infidelity. In anger, she slaps Rosa, though she immediately regrets the act, understanding that the slave is blameless—because powerless and victimized. The scene ends as "The foster-sisters embraced each other, and wept long and bitterly; but neither sought any further to learn the other's secrets" (153). Despite their love for each other, Frederic's rape of Rosa is a wedge, perhaps permanent, between the women friends. On the other hand, the outcome of a parallel fight between Rosa and George was the black couple's continued love for and commitment to each other, which, by the way, Frederic strictly forbade.

The slave lovers are caught together, repeatedly, and Rosa is punished for this offense so severely that she finally dies in childbirth brought on prematurely by a whipping. When the master is found dead the next morning, both George and Mars are blamed, but guilt is soon assigned to Mars. At the hanging, however, George, unwilling to let an innocent man die, confesses to the murder and is himself hanged instead.

The friendship between the two women plays a major role in the narrative until just after the murders of Rosa and Frederic when both women are dropped from the story. The relationship between the black slave and her white mistress undergoes a procedure of degradation parallel to the
seduction and rape of Rosa by Marion's husband. Initially, the two women enjoy a close relationship, described by the narrator in terms that obscure the legal relationship of master to slave under a guise of friendship between equals. Both women are described with the established formulae: Marion is a "pale and almost vanishing moonsickle" while Rosa is "elegantly formed and beautiful as a dark velvet carnation" (148). Marion gives Rosa gold jewelry to wear because "they contrast so well with the soft, brown satin of your neck and arms" (149). For herself, she reserves pearls and amethysts, as light and clear as herself. The language of flowers and jewelry abounds. Both women are petted and spoiled, exotic plants; like women of the harem, they are Frederic's symbols of status and his sexual objects. In addition, Marion and Rosa are foster sisters, nursed in infancy by the same Mammy. As well, there is a strong suggestion by the narrator that the two may also be half-sisters by blood. For Child to embroider her description of the friendship between Marion and Rosa with such strong sororal images has two effects.

First, it evokes white women's categorical expectations of both female friendship and the bond between sisters. Carol Lasser, in her essay "'Let Us Be Sisters Forever': The Sororal Model of Nineteenth-Century Female Friendship" explains how the categories "sister" and "friend" frequently overlapped and reinforced each other in white, middle-class
female culture. "Sisterhood" would have suggested three
different levels of experience to Child's women readers:

First, sisterhood relied on the basic fact of
shared femaleness, and, as Nancy Cott has shown, it
established between women the cultural "bonds of
womanhood"; this shared gender identity implied
both the burdens and obligations of women's work on
the one hand and the potential for sympathetic
connection on the other.

On the second level, nineteenth-century natal
sisters established serious emotional and financial
commitments as well as lifelong obligations to
maintain kin networks. Sisters expected from each
other mutual care and intense love. They turned to
each other in times of distress as well as success,
looking for solace as well as celebration, and
monetary as well as spiritual assistance.

Beyond these two levels rooted in the realities of
natal sisterhood lay a third, public level to which
some women activists extended their understanding
of their gender identity and responsibility, as
they became "sisters" by working together in the
great social movements of the nineteenth century.

Child intended to evoke all three levels of meaning by
making Marion and Rosa "sisters" as well as "friends." The
strategy was one she shared with other female abolitionists.
The emblem of the "Ladies Department" of the Liberator, for
example, was the figure of a black woman crouching in chains
with hands uplifted in supplication; beneath this image was
printed the logo: "Am I Not a Woman and a Sister?" The
same image of interracial "sisterhood" has been used
affirmatively in our own age, too, by black as well as white
women. Dorothy Sterling's anthology of black women's
writings from the nineteenth century draws its titles from
one of its selections: We Are Your Sisters. On the other
hand, the image of interracial sisterhood has been hotly contested as insulting to black women on the basis that it obscures the differences between black and white women's "real" political interests.

At any rate, Child would also have counted on a second effect by making Marion and Rosa "sisters" as well as "friends." Their sororal relationship parallels the fraternal one between Frederick and George, the slave beloved by Rosa. The incest theme, which recurs with such frequency in early American literature, here is put to work as a major lever of anti-slavery propaganda fiction: slavery is wrong because it disorders the "natural," divinely ordained family. It permits one brother to rape his own wife's sister, his own brother's wife, with impunity, leaving the victims no acceptable courses of action, no means by which to obtain justice. The fraternal bond between men is shattered (a bond seen as characterizing the citizenry of any republic). As well, the sororal bond is shattered, too. The friendship between the Marion and Rosa is degraded from one of mutual love, tenderness, and material aid into one characterized by the inability of either to act on her own or each other's behalf, actions expected and deserved by real life sisters and friends.

When Frederic begins to seduce Rosa, the friendship between the women, once so close, becomes punctuated by silences ("neither sought to learn the secrets of the
other's heart") and finally degenerates into a futile round of emotional and physical violence—with Marion blaming Rosa for Frederic's betrayal of her, and finally slapping the poor slave woman in anger. This response to a husband's sexual behavior with slaves—in which the white woman blames and punishes the black woman—is a staple of both white and black women's narratives of their experiences of slavery. Fanny Kemble, a white woman, and Linda Brent, a black woman, are only two of the many who testify to having experienced it.

This leads us to define the first and most important of women's culture texts of race: the white man will always victimize the black woman and, instead of joining with her to fight against him, the white woman always sides with her man—no matter how much he has hurt her, or will continue to hurt them both.

This is what happens between Marion and Rosa, their relationship becoming a far cry from the kind of sustenance and mutual support that sisters and friends would normally give to each other. The slap that Rosa receives at Marion's hand is a slap that would be repeated dozens of times in American life and letters. It is one of the formulaic episodes of the basic culture text. Janie's Nanny, in Hurston's Their Eyes Were Watching God, is slapped while still in childbirth by the jealous mistress whose husband is the father of the gray-eyed infant. Fifty years later, in
Sherley Anne Williams’ *Dessa Rose,* Dessa is slapped by Rufel in much the same way. And so it goes.

The passivity of all the characters who oppose Frederic is underscored by the Bremondian method of structural analysis. Judging from how Child constructs her characters’ choices, it is plain that she believes white men to be the sole creators and beneficiaries of the slave system, while white women and black women and men are their powerless victims. The only choices that Child allows her slave characters are avoidance of the master’s cruelty and the right to try to escape when avoidance proves to be impossible. The powerlessness of the black female slave, emblazoned by the character of Rosa, is total. When Frederic begins his seduction of her, Rosa is stricken with silence; she can not or will not confide in or enlist the aid of her mistress. Overt, armed resistance (dramatized by George’s eventual murder of his master/brother) yields only more abuse, is doomed to fail.

Karcher points out how George’s murder of Frederic with the knife “he [Frederic] had himself been accustomed to wear” (158) is symbolic of the process by which the “slaveholder’s violence [will] come home to him” (1986b: 329). Karcher, however, does credit some of the blame for Rosa’s death on Marion’s account. Mars, she points out, after all, was originally Marion’s slave. However, the structural method I’ve employed shows Marion having no
powers to effect the course of her husband's relationship with the innocent slave. True, Marion slaps Rosa, but she also immediately regrets it, for she knows her friend is not to blame. More to the point, she knows she has no power to correct the situation they are in together. Asking her friend's forgiveness, Marion exclaims that "I am wretched, too," and the scene ends with the two women "embracing each other, and weeping long and bitterly" (153). They are victims of the same man, the same system. Marion's inability to resist her own and her friend's victimization at the moment of its occurrence, however, should not imply that Child believed white women to be powerless in other situations, as we will see below.

"Slavery's Pleasant Homes" is an example of how abolitionist writers were able to use the conventional seduction story—one requirement of which is that plots be neatly closed in marriage or death—to convince audiences of the moral evils inherent to slavery. In the conventional stories, the victim of seduction is expected to control men (never mind the greater power of men), or to die in the process. If she succumbs, she is the one to be blamed. But in Child's story, and others like it, romantic conventions are bent, requiring readers to apprehend that slave women, though they be inherently, naturally moral beings, can not prevent their abuse. The neat closure of romance—in which women get their just rewards—comes undone.
Moreover, Child adds to "Slavery's Pleasant Homes" a tag in which the narrator analyzes other versions--newspaper versions--of the story's events:

The Georgian papers thus announced the deed: 'Fiend-like Murder. Frederic Dalcho, one of our most wealthy and respected citizens, was robbed and murdered last week, by one of his slaves. the black demon was caught and hung; and hanging was too good for him.

The Northern papers copied this version; merely adding, 'these are the black-hearted monsters, which abolition philanthropy would let loose upon our brethren of the South.' (160)

The version that appeared in the Southern newspaper omitted entirely the fact of Dalcho's repeated rape of Rosa and the love between Rosa and George. It dwelt instead on the murder of the master by the slave, presenting it as inexplicable, random violence. The version that appeared in the Northern press added only the statement against abolitionism.

Child's strategy of closure here is powerful. First, she locates her story in the realm of the politically significant. Secondly, she asserts the value of abolitionist fiction, implying it to be even more "true" than newspaper reporting, normally understood as objectively factual. Child assumes that all the stories we tell about life--fictional and non-fictional alike--are politically powerful. She assumes, too, that "the story" is by no means obvious or unambiguous--there is no one story, but many biased tellings. She adds her version to the public debate,
a version she claims is more true because more complete and mindful of the humanity of Rosa and George.

Clearly, Child is arguing that we citizens are always in a process of writing the story of what life means, what acts are possible, and what consequences will follow. Child’s tale also suggests that the stories we hear about the world are uncertain—we often can’t know what has really happened, only what we are told has happened. Child’s story ends with the reader’s necessity to read beyond, to question how we help or hinder the creation of a world in which women aren’t raped, aren’t beaten to death, or sold as chattel. What kind of world are we making? Clearly, Child poses a moral choice for readers—either build a just world or take responsibility for having built this one. Marion’s powerlessness as character is thus contradicted by Child’s insistence that her white women readers assume power and make a difference in the real world.

Rachel Blau DuPlessis has analyzed how 20th century women writers break the hold of formerly traditional fictional plots, a power that dictated that stories of women’s lives end in either marriage or death. In the twentieth century, she says, we see women writers making new kinds of stories about women’s lives, stories that do not focus primarily on heterosexual romance, but instead refocus on woman-to-woman experiences, non-romantic relationships with men, and collective political struggle. As DuPlessis
understands it, use of these plots, which she names "writing beyond the ending," is new to this century. But women writers have always "written beyond the ending"--in the 19th century and even before. Child's strategy of closure in "Slavery's Pleasant Homes" is a powerful example of nineteenth century "writing beyond the ending"--both beyond the ending of the conventional romance and beyond the ending of the story itself and into the world.

Writing into the world, Child makes of her readers characters in the story of the real life of the world. She complains how among all the tellers of tales

> Not one was found to tell how the slave's young wife had been torn from him by his own brother, and murdered with slow tortures. Not one recorded the heroism that would not purchase life by another's death, though the victim was his enemy. His very name was left unmentioned; he was only Mr. Dalcho's slave! (160)

This peroration is an implicit call for women to break silence and join the chorus of voices denouncing slavery. Such speaking will be an act of interracial friendship and sisterhood.

Caroline Healy Dall's "Amy—a Tale," also published in The Liberty Bell in the 1840s, is the most powerful of the early abolitionist stories of friendship between a black slave and her white mistress. The friendship between Amy and Edith is destroyed by Edith's husband and his friend, Hartley, who pressure Edith to sell Amy to Hartley. She tries for a time, but eventually tires of resisting the men.
Finally, albeit with misgivings, Edith signs the papers. Afterward, Amy, like Rosa, is repeatedly raped until Hartley tires of her and sells her as a "fancy." The story ends some time later when Edith, who has since suffered the loss of an infant and her husband's failure in business because of his intemperance, reads a newspaper account of "a terrible suicide that had occurred among [the women about to be auctioned], a suicide committed by the youngest and fairest of them all, who feared the judgment of God upon this act of her ignorant but guiltless hand, less than the tender mercies of those who regard neither law nor Gospel" (16). Edith understands at once that this was Amy's death. She also realizes that there has been an electrifying, irrevocable connection between her own moral weakness (in delivering Amy to Hartley) and her own and Amy's dismal fates.

Dali, like Child, adds a narrative tag to the story in which the power of fiction as a political force is acknowledged and moral choices are posed. Dali explains the truths her story is meant to illustrate: "first, the impossibility of nurturing in the heart of the white man, a religion, a sense of justice, a purity of thought acceptable to God, while under the influence of such an institution as slavery; and second, the horrible necessity while such an institution exists, of legalizing the most atrocious crimes" (18-19). She makes it clear in her final paragraph that her
audience must choose whether to support or to resist slavery—there is no neutral ground. Readers must make that choice knowing the consequence will be a world in which only certain kinds of lives will be lived, only certain stories of lives will be possibly and plausibly told. If we can not abdicate our privilege and responsibility to make and remake the world, then what will we do?

Dall's story, therefore, like Child's, is "written beyond the ending" and into the world. The author's ability to move readers into a morally responsible position vis a vis slavery depends on her ability to cause white women to see that black and white women have common experiences and similar emotional responses to those experiences. The figure of the interracial female friendship at the heart of this story does that cultural work.

Dall situated her characters—mistress Edith and Amy her slave—in the sort of relationship to each other that Dall's white readers would recognize as approaching as nearly as possible, within the constraints of the system of slavery, their highest ideal of female friendship. This narrative strategy was designed to manipulate women's feelings about the passionate, emotional bonds they sometimes shared with their own female friends. Steven Stowe has convincingly argued that marriage posed enormous emotional challenges to young women—challenges involving the negotiation of often conflicting claims made on them by
their female friends and their husbands. Heterosexual marriage had the capacity to estrange female friends, yet female friendship was the bedrock of women's emotional lives. "Amy--A Tale" exploits the tension that caught women between their conflicting desires for women and men. "Amy" argues powerfully for women to honor their loyalties to each other as the original ties, more sacred and more binding than those later contracts that give women's lives over to men.

Like Child's two stories, Dall's "Amy" is profitably analyzed using the techniques developed by Bremond. Dall follows the structure established by Child's abolitionist stories, initially asserting slavery as a satisfactory state that is degraded when the lusts of men are awakened and the conventions of the slave system permit men to satisfy them at the expense of women. Again like Child, Dall as author structures her characters' possibilities for action and choice in such a way as to suggest white men as the architects and beneficiaries of slavery, while women—whether "free" or enslaved—are its victims. But Dall much more than Child holds white women responsible for their acquiescence to the system, their adherence to the culture text of race when they choose loyalty to the interests of white men at the expense of themselves and their sisters in bondage.
"Amy," then, begins as a powerful fantasy of the ideal coexistence of passionate female friendship and heterosexual marriage. The institution of "romantic friendship" is best described by Lillian Faderman's *Surpassing the Love of Men*. Romantic friendships were emotionally charged and highly committed relationships between white women of the upper- and middle-classes. They often lasted for decades and involved the partners in substantial exchanges of material aid, emotional support, and perhaps erotic fulfillment. Romantic friends could even receive social sanction to live together in what was known by the end of the century as "Boston Marriage." It is unfortunate that so much of the recent debates among historians has come to focus on whether or not women in passionate friendships enjoyed sexual relations with each other, for such a post-Freudian obsession with genital sexuality obscures many other important questions we might ask about these women's lives, such as their sources of self-esteem and the qualities of their self-images. Despite literary evidence—for example, the dominance of the heterosexual marriage plot—that white women's emotional lives centered around men, historians have marshalled substantial documentation to suggest that female friendship often surpassed heterosexual marriage as the anchor of women's affecational lives. From this perspective, the "marriage plot" dominates because it involves women's strategies for economic survival, not
emotional fulfillment. At any rate, most women expected and desired marriage with a man and, ideally, female friendship was supposed to complement heterosexual marriage. Lasser, among others, has documented the social strategies of actual women to achieve such a balance in their lives. Yet, for many other women, heterosexual marriage and the mobility of the family in the nineteenth century made friendships between women fragile affairs that often had to be carried out through letters, if at all. Nonetheless, passionate friendship between women was the highest ideal women held of friendship.

The relationship between Amy and Edith suggests this ideal. However, given the strong taboo against representing erotic connections between the races—taboos particularly operative in the nineteenth century when the fear of so-called "amalgamation" reached almost paranoid levels—the passionate nature of Edith and Amy's bond is a muted subtext rather than explicitly narrated in the story.

"Amy—A Tale" begins at that moment when, just after her marriage, Edith, "a beautiful and petted child of wealth was carried to a new home" (4). As I have indicated already, historians have argued that courtship and early marriage was a challenging period of young women's lives. Marrying women had to manage a new social status and the stresses attending the usual change of residence and disruption of family ties; she normally had to assume
additional responsibilities as householder and matron, participate in heterosexual relations (often, but not always for the first time), and in most cases, prepare for the experience of motherhood. However exciting this emergence into adult female status could be, historians such as Steven Stowe (see above) have begun to attend to the losses that marrying women often suffered, particularly the loss of intimacy previously enjoyed with female friends, an intimacy apparently rare in heterosexual marriage. Dall’s fiction begins at precisely this problematic moment of the female life cycle.

Initially, Dall spins a fantasy that would have been compelling to many white women about the benefits that slavery might offer women at this juncture in their lives. For Dall’s protagonist, Edith, the disruptive and potentially painful move into marriage—more disturbing perhaps because of her tender age: she is only 16 when she marries!—was made manageable by Edith’s ability to carry Amy her slave with her to her new home:

... if at any moment Edith Ainslie shrank from the change, and clung to the society and interests of the large city, and tender friends she was leaving, she comforted herself with the reflection, “At least, one friend will be with me. With Amy I cannot feel entirely alone.” (5)

Amy, described later as the constant “companion” of Edith from their first year of age, shares Edith’s “chamber and play-room.” The girls sleep and play together, indulging in
"Epicurean tastes," "embosomed" together in the beauty of the natural landscape. Amy grooms Edith, "un[binding] the redundant tresses of her lady's hair," and Edith becomes "more attached" as they spend their green adolescence together (6-8).

Such erotic imagery suggests both white and black women's identical status as the sexual objects of white men under slavery (a point made forcefully by Child in "Slavery's Pleasant Homes"), as well as a potentially erotic component in their own relationship as friends. The closeness of the women is not threatened by Edith's marriage, but Amy continues to share thrilling, and quasi-sexual moments with her mistress. "[A]t the commencement of the third [year of Edith's marriage]," for example:

Amy laid upon her throbbing bosom her first-born son. The birth of this child brought Edith to the gates of death—and with a trembling spirit had she encountered her hour of extremity. When she came from her sick chamber, it was in the power of renewed loveliness . . . . (6-7)

It was Amy who attended the birth, shared Edith's "hour of extremity," and brought Edith forth in "renewed loveliness." Afterwards, "her babe was constantly cradled in Amy's arms," causing Edith "constantly to unite them in her affection" (8). Thus, the categories of friend, sister, mother, and lover are blurred together in this fantasy of enduring female friendship.
Amy's status as slave, like Rosa's in Child's story, is obscured. Dali presents her as being of one mind with her "friend":

No! Amy could not forsake her mistress; she had not the desire . . . .

Throughout the story, Dali would fuse Amy's with Edith's desires in this manner. As well, Dali partially obscures Amy's slave status, for example, by causing Edith to ask Amy at a later point "when did I ever ask you to do what was repugnant to yourself?" (9). Throughout, Amy is referred to as Edith's "companion" and "friend." Dali does, however, consistently undercut this fantasy of female fusion, as the conclusion of the passage quoted above reveals:

No! Amy could not forsake her mistress; she had not the desire, nor if she had would it have availed, for she was a slave, and taken from her mother's bosom ere she was a year old, she had shared the chamber and the play-room of her companion, from that hour onward. (5)

Everytime Dali evokes the expectations of female friendship, she also violates them, showing Amy to be that oxymoronic creature, the disinterested friend who neither cares about nor attempts to alleviate the sufferings of the other:

It never occurred to Edith to ask whether Amy had a father or a mother. So accustomed was she to the lonely position in which slave girls are often left, that no thought of the matter disturbed her happy heart. (5)

Like Child, Dali, too, conscientiously manipulates the concept of "sister" in the tale of "Amy." As was conventional in abolitionist fiction, Dali created
characters united by blood ties, but fatally alienated by an immoral social code. Like Marion and Rosa, Edith and Amy are sisters--both foster sisters and blood sisters:

Had she been more curious upon the subject, her unanswered questions, and a striking resemblance between the features of the two, might have led her to suspect that a nearer bond than she had hitherto imagined in truth united them. (5-6)

Edith is placidly oblivious to Amy's parentage. In this childish passivity, selfish disregard of others, fragile beauty, and unthinking acceptance of whatever life offers, the character of Edith conforms perfectly to the Southern ideal of the "cult of true womanhood," a version of femininity characterized not only by "piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity" (Welter, 152), but perpetually childlike, naive, self-centered, and morally underdeveloped. Bartlett and Cambor, in their essay, "The History and Psychodynamics of Southern Womanhood," fully describe the type.

Amy, on the other hand, exhibits that strength of moral character valued in the northern ideal of "true womanhood." Yet, despite this important difference between them, Dall's narrator makes plain the extent to which the faculties of will and judgment, or reason, have been stunted in both mistress and slave: Each is "a willing captive" (6) of the patriarchal system. Dall's narrative strategy here--to emphasize the common sisterhood and enslavement of black and
white women—was a regular feature, as I have already shown, of white women's abolitionist and early feminist rhetoric.

Another strategy Dall employs, which Harriet Beecher Stowe would also use extensively in Uncle Tom's Cabin, is to forge links between certain of white women's experiences and the experiences of black women under slavery as a way of creating empathy, sympathy, and compassion for the enslaved.

In particular, Dall strongly states that Edith's trial during childbirth, which brought her close to death, should have sensitized her to the fragility and preciousness of life and the need to protect life at all cost. In the following passage, occurring directly after Edith's betrayal of her "friend," the narrator directly addresses the reader:

Christian men and women of America, can you believe this? Can you believe that a young and tender girl, with an infant at her bosom, with what she believed to be some sense of gratitude to God in her heart, reared without in gentle condition, and recently risen from a sick bed, could thus doom a fellow-creature to a certain life of infamy? (13)

It is a technique that Stowe would use again and again—linking the experiences of white and black women, in this case the experience of sexual vulnerability, and asserting the existence of a natural, sexual-political alliance.

Given this alliance, a bond made even more compelling because of the intimacy of their friendship, Edith's betrayal of Amy is an absolute desecration of the categorical expectations white women held toward their
female friends. As Hartley’s seduction of Amy progresses, as he "torments" her (10), the women’s friendship becomes characterized by more and more silence between them, and Amy’s increasingly deferential posture toward "Mrs. Ainslie," as she comes to call Edith.

This story is a spiritual autobiography in reverse—a story in which the characters do not use their earthly trials as teachers of spiritual lessons, but ignore them and perish. Dali, much more than Child, accuses white women of abusing their power over black women. Whereas Child’s heroines really are powerless, Dali’s is not. It is Edith’s "dishonored name" signed on the Deed of Transfer, giving Amy up to her "fate" as a slave. In the long, painful series of episodes describing Hartley’s seduction of Amy, Dali’s diction obscures agency. At key points, it is absolutely ambiguous whether Edith is being forced to betray her friend, or whether she is choosing loyalty to her husband.

Much is made of Robert’s sense of honor and obligation to his friend Hartley, as though to refuse to sell Amy is itself an accusation of Hartley’s honor and a direct challenge to his manhood. Yet there is no one to protect Edith’s womanhood:

Not only did the whole subject distress her, but to be so besought on such a subject, by one until lately a stranger, was a perpetual wound to her delicacy. She felt herself losing ground in her own self-respect. (12)
Nonetheless, her husband disregards her feelings, only to "repeatedly ask . . . whether her own life was to be worn out in defence of Amy" (12).

This would seem to indicate Edith's active resistance to the combined wishes of the men. At other times, however, we see Edith "entreat[ing] Amy to have some compassion on Hartley's agony" (11). Once Edith allowed Amy not to serve at the dinner table, because Hartley hounded her there. When Amy "was remanded to her post" later, readers do not know whose request it was--Edith's or her husband's? And so on. The ambiguous agency obscures Edith's powers and choices, suggesting Edith's capitulation--she goes along with the system, like the sentences describing their lives, in a passive mode.

Long speeches made by the narrator will be classified by many as "intrusive" and used to devalue this short story. But, another way of looking at this technique is to see it not as intrusive, but engaging. At key points, the narrator engages the reader, judging Edith as guilty:

Alas! the hour was fast approaching when Edith was to prove that the love of God, in her heart, was a vain pretence, since its first fruit was not the love of man,--that her service, rendered to the Father of All, could scarce have been accepted, since it was not offered in that spirit which recognizes first, the Brotherhood of All. (12-13)

The story does not conclude until both women are ruined. Amy, because Edith betrayed her, and Edith, because God has punished her for that betrayal. Her child "perished of a
disease contracted through the carelessness of its nurse," which Amy never would have allowed. Her husband is "seduced to intemperance and dice" just as Edith herself had been seduced to the crime of betrayal. Edith understands, through a "faint suspicion [that crept into her heart], that not without some providence God, some discipline pregnant with results, and conceived in the Infinite Councils, were these things brought about" (16). Thus the destinies of the two women are linked.

Dall's narrator points beyond the story and into the world, asking readers what links to destiny they are forging through their own actions. Dall writes, and requires her readers to read, beyond the ending of this tale.

These three stories are not "realistic," not representative of the lot of the average slave, nor of the kinds of relationships that obtained between white and black women. As I have tried to show, they are addressed to white women and attempt to create fellow-feeling for slaves by manipulating the stress points of white women's own lives. I believe them to be powerful, if fantastic, stories, but many black critics object to what they see as the racism inherent in the portraits of refined and bejeweled slaves like Rosalie, Xarifa, Rosa, and Amy. Whatever power these stories may have had to move readers to take a stand against slavery, critics have argued, is at least partially the power of racism itself.
The White Slave and Racism in Women's Literature

The authors of early abolitionist literature, as we have just seen, created an image of a cultured and petted "white slave" in order to counteract the derogatory images of black people used by the dominant racist culture to justify the institution of slavery. These "white" female slaves were situated in friendships with their mistresses in order to draw on white women reader's categorical expectations of sisterhood and friendship and use those expectations to extend fellow-feeling across the lines of racial difference drawn by the slave system.

Later critics argue that racism is inherent in this idealized image of the black woman. Discussing the "tragic octoroon," Jules Zanger summarizes the complaints lodged against this type:

To twentieth century literary historians, the attack on slavery directed by the creators of the "tragic octoroon" appears thin, unrealistic, and irrelevant. Modern critics point out that the octoroon situation, while possible, was hardly general and that, while enforced concubinage was a Southern reality, it was hardly the paramount evil of slavery. Further, the tendency of antislavery authors to see the plight of the slave in terms of the octoroon rather than in terms of the full-blooded black has been seen as an indication of racial prejudice. (64)

The original reference in this line of critique is John Herbert Nelson's observation that white readers' attraction to the mulatto is an "indirect admission that a white man..."
[sic] in chains was more pitiful to behold than the African similarly placed. [The abolitionists'] most impassioned plea was in behalf of a person little resembling their swarthy proteges. . . ." (83-84). Sterling Brown’s 1933 taxonomy of black character types, in "Negro Character as Seen by White Authors," follows Nelson and emphasizes the apparently enormous need of whites for flattery and self-justification. Brown lists seven major character types, white authors’ exclusive use of which to represent black people is a major tool for maintaining the racial status quo. The types include the contented slave, the wretched freeman, the comic negro, the brute negro, the tragic mulatto, the local color negro, and the exotic primitive. All of these, with the exception of the mulatta type, are the invention of pro-slavery authors and all, as black feminist critics have since pointed out, are gendered images. For example, the contented slave comes in male ("Uncle Tom") and female ("mammy") variants. As we shall see in the next chapter, after the Civil War, these types would reemerge, each with an attached culture text reading as a prescription for the lives of black people. The mulatta image would predominate in the characterization of black female heroines for nearly a century. Brown calls the tragic mulatta "patently absurd," an image "which should be discredited" (160). Virtually all the important male critics after the Harlem Renaissance, including Bone (1958:
EE-E33 and Gloster (1948: 12, 17), have concurred. Surprisingly, pro-slavery writers were also able to read the mulatta character as evidence for their own theories of racial superiority, since none of the "black" slaves of abolitionist fiction appeared discontent with their lot (Zanger, 64).

The mulatta as a character type has also posed problems to both black and white feminist critics attempting to re-read women's literary history with attention to issues of race. Much of the theoretical discussion that follows here applies more to the black-authored fiction of the later nineteenth- and early twentieth century texts than it does to the texts immediately at hand. I am thus momentarily ranging ahead of the issues confined strictly to abolitionist fiction to make several points about the entire tradition.

Mulattas dominate fiction by and about black women beginning with the early abolitionist fiction by Child and Dall and extending well into the twentieth century. Yet these are not characters that either black or white feminists can admire. Most often, the mulatta is read as a construction designed to incite the erotic fantasies of a white audience or accommodate its racism. Male readings define the tragedy of the mulatta as the inevitable result of a divided racial inheritance and thus a divided psyche. Mulattas are neither white nor black, and are misfits and
rejects in both groups. Male-authored fiction posits the life of the mulatta as a model of passivity. In the nineteenth century, such stories are plotted as the conventional dysphoric seduction tale that ends in suicide or death. Later, new plots are added to this repertoire in which mulattas either sacrifice themselves to "mother" the race or pass into the white population. Although the plots of female-authored fiction are not adequately comprehended using the male model (of the fiction we've examined, only Xarifa's story even begins to fit), feminist critics have accepted the pattern nonetheless. And since these scenarios do not provide feminist critics, especially those whose roots are in the black nationalist movement, with an opportunity to advance their political ideologies, literature about mulattas has been devalued as the issue of an embarrassingly compromised and inauthentic moment of literary expression, even as it is revalued as the beginning of a "credible" black women's literary tradition.

In the last several years, a new group of critics has attempted to revise traditional readings of the mulatta character. Retaining the old emphasis on the mulatta as a literary construction, critics such as Emily Toth and Hazel Carby have redefined the mulatta's tragedy, moving away from outmoded racial ideas and refocusing on the mulatta character as an exploration of patriarchy. It is not her divided character, but the combination of racial, sexual,
and economic oppressions that bring her down. Her very existence is charged to the rape of black women by white men, or sometimes to the legal abandonment of black women and children by white husbands and fathers; her attempts to secure creative work, sexual autonomy, and increased possibilities for her children are impeded in white supremacist, heterosexist patriarchy. In a few instances critics have explored how authors use the mulatta as a device to mediate between the races (Carby 1987a).

"The tragic mulatta" as literary stereotype was first defined by the generation of black male critics whose literary sensibilities were shaped during the New Negro movement, the Harlem Renaissance. Particularly influential have been critical essays by Alain Locke and Sterling Brown. Locke is known today as the primary theorist of the New Negro movement and patron of many of its notable artists. Locke's analysis of "the tragic mulatta," written in 1926, draws the parameters of debate and contains its basic assumptions. Much black feminist criticism, such as Barbara Christian's and Deborah McDowell's work, is carried out within Locke's parameters and shares his assumptions.

The fundamental concern in this critical tradition is the relationship between cultural images of black people and their oppression in white society. Critics have not only discerned the content of images, but speculated on the
process by which images work psychologically in support of racism. Scholars have analyzed why specific images, including the "tragic mulatta," were created in response to a particular historical moment, and what effects these images have had on subsequent culture. Locke, Brown, and Christian, among others, maintain first of all that negative images of black people are created by whites, that these stereotypes support racism by reducing the complexity of black humanity into a few simple molds that satisfy white needs, and finally, that the business of black writers is to counter these images, thereby uplifting the race. These critics work within an aesthetic that posits character as the necessary center and focus of black-authored literature. Highly valued fiction does not rely on stereotype, but is a sustained exploration of characters that represent the "humanity" of black people — humanity of course being understood as complexity, desire, and struggle with contradictions.

Implicit in critics' discussions has been the assumption of a primarily white audience for black literature, or white control of patronage and the publishing industry. This white audience has been assumed to be the major limit on black aesthetic expression. In the era of the mulatta's dominance as black female protagonist, white readers and publishers are understood as seeking to identify with characters. In the Harlem Renaissance, that formula
was reversed: white readers were looking for foreign, exotic "others" against which to measure a changing identity in negative terms, especially in the area of sexuality. The white audience for black fiction, then, is never able to see "the Negro as he is" (Locke), but is always looking for self-image and self-definition instead. Amid difficulties and against the designs of her major readership, then, the black artist is seen as struggling to assert her own concerns.

How does all of this relate to the tragic mulatta of abolitionist fiction?

Locke is the first of a great many literary commentators to point out that, of all the stereotypes of blacks, "the tragic mulatta" was the only one created by northern white writers, the abolitionist fictionists, who correctly surmised that the combination of violence and illicit sex embodied in the mulatta would create a scandal among the reading public and inflame their slumbering anti-slavery convictions. Locke asserts that the abolitionist period was dominated by melodrama, as "exaggerated types represent[ed] polemical issues," notably the violence of the slave system (218). After the war, white northerners slipped into complacency about the problems of free blacks and allowed white supremacy to become re-entrenched. Locke says:

It is interesting to note how suddenly [during the late reconstruction period] the 'problem of
miscegenation' became important at a time when there was less of it than at any period within a century and a quarter, and how the mulatto, the skeleton in the family closet, suddenly was trotted out for attention and scrutiny. From 1895 or so on, this problem was for over a decade a veritable obsession.; and from William Dean Howells' Imperative Duty to Stribling's Birthright the typical and dominant figure of literary interest is the mulatto as a symbol of social encroachment, and the fear of some 'atavism of blood' through him wreaking vengeance for slavery. . . . [While less serious literature portrayed the contented, comic, happy darky, the] public mind of the whole period was concentrated on the Negro 'in' and 'out of his place'. . . . But the real basic proposition underlying it all was the sensing for the first time of the serious competition and rivalry of the Negro's social effort and the failure of his social handicaps to effectively thwart it. (221)

Critics after Locke affirm his assessment that the mulatta's prominence as literary type occurred in three periods, the eras of abolitionism, late reconstruction, and the Harlem Renaissance. Numerous critics have marked the decline of the literary mulatta in the transitional work of Zora Neale Hurston.

To explain the appeal of the mulatta as a literary figure, critics have postulated a radical disjunction between ideal female types and the realities of women's lives. The mulatta is thought to "work" as a figure in texts as a dramatization of political issues or as a projection of white fear, not as a depiction of any real or representative black woman's life. Since the business of black literature has been conceived as the depiction of authentic black "reality," mulatta literature has been
devalued as inauthentic. The mulatta character’s appeal has been explained in reference to psychological processes involving identification and desire. The assumption has been that white readers can not identify with a "real" or "credible" black female protagonist, only with one who looks, acts, and speaks as they do. In other words, white readers were intolerant of difference, and demanded similarity. Since the Harlem Renaissance, when the project of black literature was reconceived as the expression of black self without regard to the supposed needs of white readers, literary critics have valued literature that depicts a new ideal of the black female, one that embodies the cultural difference of so-called "representative" black women.

Current critical attention has focused discussion of the mulatta around issues of racial difference, but authors writing fiction before the anthropological work of Ruth Benedict and others in the 1940s labored under the influence of popular ideas about race that should not be discounted. In the passage quoted above, Locke refers briefly to the mulatto’s "atavism" of blood, but this remark is incomprehensible unless we know contemporary beliefs about race. Sterling Brown, in a 1933 essay, explains how common was the idea that race was not just a matter of skin and hair, but an essence of being that determined character as well. The white race was supposed to be aggressive,
intellectual, and achieving; the black docile, sexual, and spiritual. According to Locke,

The stereotype that demands attention, however, is the notion of mulatto character, whether shown in male or female. This character works itself out with mathematical symmetry. The older theses ran: first, the mulatto inherits the vices of both races and none of the virtues; second, any achievement of a Negro is to be attributed to the white blood in his veins. . . . The present theses are based upon these: The mulatto is a victim of a divided inheritance; from his white blood come his intellectual strivings, his unwillingness to be a slave; from his Negro blood come his baser emotional urges, his indolence, his savagery” (160).

Character, then, was understood as a product of racial inheritance, not, as we would most likely view it today, the result of complex and dynamic processes of social construction. Sex was believed to have an effect on the mulatto’s racial inheritance, however, making it a gendered image. The (male) mulatto is tragic because he is a 'man without a race' worshipping the whites and despised by them, despising and despised by Negroes, perplexed by his struggle to unite a white intellect with black sensuousness. The fate of the octoroon girl is intensified -- the whole desire of her life is to find a white lover, and then go down, accompanied by slow music, to a tragic end. Her fate is so severe that in some works disclosure of 'the single drop of midnight' in her veins makes her commit suicide (162).

It bears repeating that the mulatta story is plotted as the classic seduction tale ending in suicide or death.

Black feminist critics have been far less interested in images of madness, suicide, and death than in accounts of the survival of black women and their triumph over
adversity. Barbara Christian, for example, is concerned that readers know that the delicate, blue-veined octoroons of nineteenth century fiction do not adequately represent the lives of strong women documented by historians. Christian is joined by other critics of the mulatta, such as Erlene Stetson and Vashti Lewis, to celebrate the death of the mulatta type in Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and the emergence of "real" black female protagonists in the work of black writers since the 1940s.

Although Barbara Christian's analysis is initially carried out solidly within the limits set by Alain Locke, it is also, by necessity, driven beyond those limits because her subject was female-authored fiction. Locke and Brown described the mulatta only as she had appeared in male-authored works, taking William Wells Brown's *Clotel* (1853) and Dion Boucicault's *The Octoroon* (1859) as paradigmatic of the genre. The only female writer they considered was Harriet Beecher Stowe, and even their treatment of her was not comprehensive, but focused on the characters Cassy and Emmeline. It should come as no surprise that women's fiction diverges formally and thematically from that written by men, and is best understood using models derived from solely from women's texts.

Therefore, my readings of the white slaves of abolitionist fiction have pursued Barbara Christian's
conclusion that the exemplary black female characters were explorations of "the ideal as affected by the real." Given the cultural context that black character was widely interpreted as justification for slavery, abolitionist writers needed a figure that disjoined race as a biological fact from enslavement as a legal fact. The mulatta was a figure that did just that. Whether or not the abolitionist writers themselves believed in the biological determination of character and therefore destiny (and one suspects that Child, at least, did not, while Stowe certainly did), the culturally dominant image of the lady—with her fragile physique and alabaster skin—was the most effective signifier of ideal womanhood these writers could hope to find. To show this type of woman enslaved—regardless of her sterling Christianity and chastity—was to ask readers to consider slavery the institution, not slavery as the deserved fate of inferior beings. So whether the "white" slaves of fiction were white-skinned and able to pass or brown, as in Child's fiction, they were necessarily refined types the authors betted could do the cultural work proposed by the abolitionist movement.

Carby builds on Christian's analysis (even as she disagrees with Christian's premise that the primary purpose of black literature is to discredit white-authored stereotypes). She claims not only that the "white slave" image, including its later incarnations, appealed to white
readers' racism as well as countered stereotypes of black character, but also served as mediating device with "two narrative functions: it enabled an exploration of the social relations between the races . . . and it enabled an expression of the sexual/relations between the races, since the mulatto was a product not only of proscribed consensual relations but of white sexual domination" (1986a: xxi/xxii). This echoes Zanger's earlier contention that the octoroon was "the visible sign of an incremental sin, the roots of which could be seen by Northern audiences as particularly and pervasively Southern" (66). Thus it

flattered the Northern audience in its sense of self-righteousness, confirming its belief in the moral inferiority of the South. The octoroon, to the North, represented not merely the product of the incidental sin of the individual sinner, but rather what might be called the result of cumulative institutional sin, since the octoroon was the product of four generations of illicit, enforced miscegenation made possible by the slavery system. (66)

Also, Zanger claims, the octoroon image effectively uses the strategy of reversal—a riches to rags formula that would have appealed to a culture obsessed with growth and fortune, with building and demolishing.

Finally however, the concern with "representative" characterization at the heart of the black critical tradition I've sketched above is in key ways inappropriate to this early fiction with its demonstrated focus on plot. As characters, the cultured slaves of early abolitionist
fiction are no more than stick figures. But then again, so are the white characters. Whether white or black, they are intended to be vehicles of happenings, not representations of what people are really like.

Images and Reality.

White feminist criticism began with a discussion of the "images of women"--the cultural constructions of female identity--that underlay women's oppression. This is parallel to the concerns of the black critical tradition. When a criticism both black and feminist emerged in the mid-1970s, "images" of black women were not surprisingly its central concern as well. The thrust of all these critical endeavors has come to include not simply the refutation of these images as "reflections" of the real, but the understanding of how they operate in the construction of experience by actual people.

Whereas white feminist work had focused on dichotomous images of women--such as the Madonna/Whore constellation, early black feminist work such as Barbara Christian's demonstrated that idealized images of white women were used to define black female identity as inferior by contrast. White women represented all that is positive and desireable; white women were sometimes seen as the apex of civilization itself. Christian was the first critic to discuss how negative images of black women, the mammy and the jezebel,
for instance, contained those aspects of femaleness, the
grittier aspects of motherhood and sexuality, that would
tarnish the ideal white lady:

Each black woman image was created to keep a
particular image about white women intact. Another
way of putting it is that the aspects of woman that
had negative connotations in the society were
ascribed to black women so white women could be
viewed, as Alice Walker would later phrase it, as
'perfect in the eyes of the world.' (1985: 18).

Thus, lady and mammy are complementary images that also
contained contradictions.

Later work built on Christian's insights. Deborah
White's Ar'n't I A Woman? explores the everyday life of
female slaves, with particular attention to their sources of
self esteem. White contended that cultural images of black
women, particularly the images of mammy and jezebel, shaped
women's concept of self, as well as the perception others
had of them. White's comments on these images echo the
comments of feminist-abolitionists who tried to draw
parallels between the status of white women and black
slaves:

As if by design, white males have been the primary
beneficiaries of both sets of myths [i.e., about
blacks and about women] which, not surprisingly,
contain common elements in that both blacks and
women are characterized as infantile,
irresponsible, submissive, and promiscuous. (27)

Recently, Minrose Gwin has drawn on the tradition of
"images" scholarship in order to illuminate the
relationships between actual black and white women. Her
extended analysis of black and white women as "obverse images" of each other is exhaustive. After examining scores of diaries, slave narratives, memoirs, and some fiction, Gwin concludes that

Real Southern women of both races, bound by their dichotomous images in the popular mind and, in the case of black women, by actual enslavement, often viewed one another as missing pieces of a female identity denied them by the patriarchal culture. Female narrators of the slave narratives reveal their yearning for the chaste respectability of their white sisters, while the diaries and memoirs of the white women show their intense jealousy of the stereotypical sexuality of the slave woman. Each is only one half of a self. What is so terribly ironic is that the missing piece of self so fervently desired by one race of women seems to have caused so much suffering for the other. (11)

Not only have dichotomized images of black and white sexuality divided actual women, but racially dichotomous images of motherhood have negatively affected us, too. The mistress/mammy dichotomy has controlled our perceptions of each other and qualified the possibilities for relationship. White women have sometimes looked to black women for the "strong" maternal nurturance so frequently missing from our own mothers, whose pursuit of white femininity caused them to cultivate and project self-images of fragile helplessness. We have expected black women to be inexhaustibly nurturant "sturdy, black bridges." We have been jealous of what we see as the capacity of black women to survive, to manage the unmanageable—often with apparent ease, generosity, good will, and humor. Or, alternately,
white women have slipped easily into the role of authoritative mistress—"mothering" black women by such forms of "helping" as giving charity and attempting to control. We have assumed, paradoxically, that black women are incompetent and need us to manage their affairs. Black women, of course, resent both these stances, at the same time that they themselves can be jealous of what they see as the "protection" afforded white motherhood and the authority with which white "ladies" can manipulate others to achieve their goals. Black women frequently ascribe to white women, in their authoritative, "maternal" roles, considerably more power than white women ascribe to themselves.

The earliest abolitionist fiction, as we have seen, does not fully reproduce these realities. They do, to a certain extent, touch upon the issue of sexual jealousy (from a mostly white perspective) and demonstrate the hierarchical relationships between white and black women that allow white women to use black women as scapegoats. Marion striking Rosa, blaming her for her husband's adultery, is a good example.

Later abolitionist fiction would cast a wider net to capture more of the spectrum of representations of women's interracial experience. Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, for example, is a novel of epic proportions (Moers 1977, 1978; Tompkins). In writing it, Stowe drew not only on white women's sentimental fiction as a source, but on
black sources, too, particularly the slave narratives (Miller). She combed the non-fictional materials: pamphlets and books, such as Weld's and the Grimkés' *Slavery As It Is*, Child's *Appeal*, black rhetoric from the abolitionist press, and the oral and written, male- and female-authored slave narratives available at the time (including also texts such as "Charity Bowery," which was highly mediated by its white editor, Lydia Maria Child).

Stowe was able skillfully to combine these sources to create a text at once both derivative of the earlier fiction and considerably more "realistic" or "representative." Stowe tries to represent all levels of black society--from the free blacks in the North, to the "privileged" mulatto caste with "cushy" house jobs, down to the despised and uncultured field hands who were worked to death like so many animals. Yet, Stowe also undercuts the idea of a "privileged" caste of slaves: some of her most miserable black characters, in fact, are house slaves: Mammy, Rosa, Prue, whose breast milk dried up when she contracted a fever nursing her mistress, who then would not buy milk for Prue's child, but starved it to death. Like the black authors of slave narratives, Stowe's voice, too, testifies that proximity to the master and mistress is no benefit, indeed is frequently a real liability.

To deal adequately with the enormous secondary literature on *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, one "would need to be a
herd of elephants . . . and a wilderness of spiders,
desperately referring to the animals that are reputed
longest lived and most multitudinously eyed, to cope with
all this" (Woolf 26). From its first publication, Stowe's
novel has generated an incredibly far-reaching and
passionate response--both for and against her project. I
can not pretend to have been able to sift through it all,
let alone to have mastered it.

The major lines of criticism acknowledge the double
structure of Uncle Tom's Cabin, its loose organization in
two diverging stories: the story of Eliza and George Harris
who flee North to freedom, and the story of Uncle Tom's
Southern descent into increasingly evil forms of slavery and
finally destruction (Moers 1978). A major critical
tradition is concerned with what Katharine Sklaar would call
Catherine Beecher's "domestic feminism" in her sister's
novel (Crozier; Ammons 1986a, b; Yellin 1986). This sort of
"feminism" accepts the ideology of "separate spheres" for
women and men. Associating women's sphere with love,
morality, and the family, "domestic feminists" attempted to
extend those values into the corrupt, mercenary, public
sphere of men. Stowe's opposition of so-called "male" and
"female" values throughout the novel has been repeatedly
noted; it fuels, among other incidents, the confrontations
between Mr. and Mrs. Shelby and Mr. and Mrs. Bird.
Another long line of criticism locates the power of Stowe's novel in its moving characterization, even if, paradoxically, the characters are all familiar types (R. Davis; C. Foster). Finally, many critics underscore the racist ideology that underlies Stowe's typology, asserting that whatever "good" may have come from the anti-slavery sentiment in the novel was outweighed by the force of its anti-black premises (Baldwin; Yarborough).

This chorus of contention, I argue, ignores the central concern of anti-slavery stories with plot—not character. As Gwin (1985) and Levy have pointed out, both pro-slavery and anti-slavery fiction featured similar character types "based on identical assumptions about racial and sexual roles in the Old South" (Gwin 1985: 22). The only difference between the two was the abolitionist creation of the "white slave" type, and even that image, as I have already mentioned, was quickly appropriated by the other side as proof of its theory of racial character as destiny.

But the major organizing principle of Stowe's novel, like all abolitionist fiction, is not character, but plot. *Uncle Tom's Cabin* is simply another "action story" in which the force animating characters, the same force that locates the text ideologically, derives from what happens, what actions characters take, not the type of person they are. Reverberating through the book are the questions, "what can be done?" and "what will you do?" The morally upright
characters in the book, such as little Eva, are always urging "Do it papa! Free your slaves!"

The name "Uncle Tom" has become an epithet, for Tom is an epitome of passivity. His Christian patience and suffering kill him. The women characters, on the other hand, provide a salutary corrective to the figure of Uncle Tom. Active and energetic, the "good" black and white women of this novel join forces to resist, in whatever ways they can, the dehumanizing, cash-obsessed system of slavery. They manipulate their prescribed roles; they even break the laws when need be to satisfy the Christian imperative to love one another.

Stowe’s novel reproduces the second major culture text of women’s racial experience: the motherhood text. In these stories, mothers are about the business of raising their children. Slavers disregard this sacred obligation, selling children away from their mothers, beating and abusing mothers in the eyes of their children, and many other atrocities. In the motherhood texts, women do what they need to do to protect their children. Linda Brent, for example, confines herself in the attic of a shed for seven years in order to prevent her cruel master from abusing her children to get back at her; she and her own mother combine forces to save herself and the children.

White women act as good mothers, too. In Stowe’s novel, we see Mrs. Shelby, Mrs. Bird, and Rachel Halliday,
the gentle Quakeress, all claiming in their role of mother an imperative actively to resist the system of slavery. Stowe's stories of heroic women are also versions of the Antigone plot: women must break the laws of man when those laws violate a higher one, the law of God. Throughout Uncle Tom's Cabin, the narrator draws attention to the recently passed Fugitive Slave Law, contrasting it, often heavy-handedly, with the laws she reads in her gospel.

Minrose Gwin has thoroughly analyzed Uncle Tom's Cabin for its representations of interracial female friendship. I have little new to add to this discussion, but would repeat her major points. Female friendship is most forcefully represented in the triangle of characters consisting of Mrs. Shelby, Eliza, and Chloe. Mr. Shelby is no rapist of slaves, but like the husbands of Child's and Dall's stories, it is he, not his wife, who controls the fates of the slaves. His concerns with his honor and his bankbook override the females' concerns with the integrity of their families. Mrs. Shelby is a type of the "best" Southern matron, who accepts the racist premises of her position—that whites are the proper guardians of their black dependents. She sees herself in a maternal role to Eliza, arranging her marriage and supervising the upbringing of baby Harry. She apparently is more of a peer to Chloe, but never once in that friendship departs from her authoritative role. Yet she takes the role seriously and attempts to
reconcile it with her Christian principles. She disobeys her husband in order to help Eliza escape with her child to freedom and then makes what many would see as "enormous" sacrifices to help Chloe redeem Tom from the South. In the process, her own powerlessness is highlighted. Although presumably a wealthy lady, she has not even the purchase price of a single slave. She can not command sufficient resources to prevent the tragedy of Uncle Tom. Yet she feels responsible for what has happened. She pledges to act. Her husband thwarts her again, not allowing her to work for wages outside the home in order to contribute to Chloe's funds. She even begs him, but to no effect. Moreover, there are strong hints that Mr. Shelby might have sold some property other than human property in order to straighten out his financial affairs. But, without even consulting his wife, he finds Tom and little Harry expendable.

Marie St. Claire is anti-type to Mrs. Shelby. Marie is the stereotypically jealous and cruel plantation mistress. She tortures her slaves with every device from verbal abuse to brutal flogging. She breaks up the marriage of her "favorite" Mammy and separates the black woman from her children, but doesn't understand why Mammy is "grumpy" sometimes. To manipulate her husband she has become an invalid (though it is well to remember that he, too, plays sick). Having become strategically asexual, her jealousy of
the beautiful and high-spirited slaves, like Rosa, knows no bounds.

In her household, female friendships are tangled with and attempt to recuperate the pain of thwarted motherhood. Mammy befriends Eva, providing her with the maternal love she does not receive from Marie and compensating somewhat for the loss of her own children. Eva reciprocates, shielding Mammy whenever possible from her mother's abuse. Eva also provides the tutelage in mother-love that Ophelia needs in order to become a good provider for Topsy. Eva befriends Topsy, who has internalized racism and hates herself; Eva awakens in her the first glimmering of self-love.

Moreover, motherhood is the element most effectively used by Stowe in order to create a common female experience across the lines of difference perpetuated by the racial caste system. Throughout this book, we see women's acts of friendship motivated by their compassion for each other as mothers. The poignant scene between Eliza and Mrs. Bird will serve as one example of many that occur in the book:

"What could induce you to leave a good home, then, and run away, and go through such dangers?"

The woman looked up at Mrs. Bird, with a keen, scrutinizing glance, and it did not escape her that she was dressed in deep mourning.

"Ma'am," she said, suddenly, "have you ever lost a child?"

The question was unexpected, and it was a thrust on a new wound; for it was only a month since a darling child of the family had been laid in a grave.
Mr. Bird turned around and walked to the window, and Mrs. Bird burst into tears; but, recovering her voice, she said, "Why do you ask that? I have lost a little one." "Then you will feel for me..." (85-86)

After arranging for Eliza's safe transport to the next stop on the Underground Railroad, Mrs. Bird gives Eliza clothes belonging to her lost baby for Harry. As Mrs. Bird peers into the little drawer with tears beading in her eyes, Stowe's narrator makes the point for readers:

And oh! mother that reads this, has there never been in your house a drawer, or a closet, the opening of which has been to you like the opening again of a little grave? Ah! happy mother that you are, if it has not been so. (89)

The premise of racism is that black people are different, so different as to be inhuman. Their emotions are totally unlike those of white people; therefore they do not feel, or suffer, under oppression as we would. Stowe directly attacks this premise, creating for whites a common feeling vocabulary with which they may sympathize with black experience under slavery. Motherhood is key in this project of Stowe's. In Uncle Tom's Cabin, the powerful acts of friendship are acts of co-mothering.

Elizabeth Ammons, in "Stowe's Dream of the Mother-Savior: Uncle Tom's Cabin and American Women Writers Before the 1920's," discerns amazing parallels between the St. Claire household and the household described by Harriet E. Wilson in Our Nig:

The story Wilson tells echoes—even imitates—the most important antistory about mothers in Uncle
Tom’s Cabin: the Marie St. Clare narrative. . . .
Both give us a vicious mother, a spineless father, a starchy but kindly maiden aunt who is a relative of the father, a dying child who calls others to Christ as she/he leaves this earth, and a black protagonist who is persecuted by the wicked mother and befriended by the child who dies. The parallel between these two sets of character—Marie/Mrs. Bellmon, Augustine/Mr. Bellmont, Aunt Ophelia/Aunt Abby, Eva/James, Tom/Frado—is very strong. Most obvious is the correspondence between Marie St. Clare and Mrs. Bellmont. Although Marie is lazier than Mrs. Bellmont, both are the complete antithesis of the loving Victorian mother. (103)

I concur with Ammons’s thesis that *Our Nig* is motivated by a search for mother-love. Abandoned by her natural mother (a white woman) and abused by Mrs. Bellmont who should have been her foster-mother, much of Frado’s quest is to recuperate these losses. Her main source of support is a young white man, but her sustaining relationships with white women are friendships suffused with maternal overtones and committed to at least some degree of co-motherhood.

Most of this novel is a painful chronicle of abuse.

Donald Leidel, whose comments predate the novel’s "rediscovery" in 1983 by Henry Louis Gates, Jr., classifies *Our Nig* as a pro-slavery novel because of its central image of the "wretched freedman," its portraits of abolitionists as con-men, and especially on account of its ferocious indictment of Northern racism and Northern wage slavery in the characterization of Mrs. Bellmont and the economy of her household. Mrs. Bellmont, indeed, is a monster. She whips Frado, beats her, kicks, slaps, insults, isolates, and
starves the young girl. Her daughter, influenced by the mother's example, even tries to stab her with a knife. Frado works long hours for a decade in the Bellmont home, but has no money in order to leave when she becomes an adult. Although "free," she is like a slave.

Critics such as Ann Allen Shockley, Mary Helen Washington (1987), and Barbara Christian, have emphasized the formal continuity of Wilson's novel with the slave narratives produced at that time. Our Nig has been most interesting to contemporary critics as a "first"—it is now believed to be the first novel written in this country by a black woman—as well as for what it reveals about the problems black women faced in the creation of autonomous black female voices and identities. Such construction of self must assert both individuality and personal achievement, that is, exemplariness, as well as representativeness of the race (F. Foster; Byerman; Doyle 1982; Niemtzow; Jugurtha). The "enclosure" of this black voice in white-authored frames legitimizing and controlling it has also been a major critical concern (Gates; Carby 1987; Yellin; Deck; Hedin). Black critical perspectives have frequently denounced such enclosure, but it is also possible to see it as an act of friendship.

Our Nig, it must be noted, is not strictly or completely enclosed. The author herself wrote the preface to the novel and readers are not subjected to voices other
than hers until after the novel's conclusion. Although Hedin is correct to say that white-authored afterwords to black-authored texts function to allow white people "the last word" on black experience, nonetheless we should not discount completely the value of white patronage, or tally it only as liability. I do not mean to apologize for or condone the equation in white culture of "help" and "control." I only argue the importance of seeing these acts of patronage as sincere attempts to act in resistance to a system that would dismiss and disallow black voices altogether.

The documents at the end of Our Nig are displays of friendship with the author. They also testify to the power of friendship as a social virtue and urge the white public to befriend black people in a general way. These documents do not finally, I think, detract from the power of Wilson's text, or the autonomy of her voice.

Our Nig, like slave narratives, is plotted as a quest. The focus is on the individual protagonist's achievement of freedom. In Frado's case, "freedom" means the ability to support herself and her child, the right to Christian worship, and being able to live unmolested. The book differs from slave narratives in that, already technically "free," Frado has no convenient way to close her story. Typically, at the end of their texts, slave narrators contrast their life of freedom with their life under
slavery. Their own lives are represented as emblems of achievement, while the narratives themselves double back, returning to the subject of slavery in order to argue the case of those who remain enslaved. The closure of Our Nig diverges from this pattern. Gates reads the ending as a fascinating example of the author's psychological "loss of control" over her materials. He explains that Wilson is unable to sustain a coherent narrative voice as the events she narrates approach her present situation, which terrifies her—and rightly so.

But it could also be that Wilson is groping for a form where none yet exists. Her two major sources, the slave narrative and the white female sentimental novel, do not provide a suitable solution. The slave narrative is closed from its author's superior vantage point of having escaped. Wilson—and her self-portrait as Frado—have not escaped, nor is it by any means certain that "they" will. (In fact, Gates' biography of Wilson indicates she failed—her ill child, for whom she was writing the book to raise money, died and she herself ended in miserable poverty.) The closure of sentimental romance calls for punishment or reward of its characters. Wilson's point is to demonstrate her character's virtue, and to make herself (as author) available for reward. But the book didn't sell. The confused closure of Our Nig is an attempt to write the story
into the world, like other abolitionist fiction. It is a plea for help.

Within the text, Frado is helped at several points by white women who befriend her. First, there is the kind school-teacher Mrs. Marsh, who insists that among the school-children no "difference" shall be made between Frado and the others. Frado has been taunted by girls and boys calling her "Nig" and "nigger." Mrs. Marsh intervened, reminding

them of their duties to the poor and friendless; their cowardice in attacking a young innocent child; referred them to one who looks not on outward appearances, but on the heart. "She looks like a good girl; I think I shall love her, so lay aside all prejudice and vie with each other in shewing kindness and good-will to one who seems different from you." (32)

By contrast, the evil Mrs. Bellmont attempts to exaggerate racial difference, or even creates it. Frado is light-skinned and more beautiful than the Bellmont daughters. The mother will not let Frado protect her skin, but makes her work long hours in the sun to darken it. She then abuses the girl verbally on account of her color, seeing Frado's blackness as an opportunity for exploitation. Consequently, Frado wants desperately to be white.

As in the autobiographies of many slave women, Frado's emancipation begins with spiritual awakening. Mrs. Bellmont's sister, Aunt Abby, helps Frado in this regard, seeing that she gets to church, for example. She also tries
to buffer the worst of Mrs. Bellmont's jealous and hateful abuses, but like the rest of this extremely dysfunctional family, she has little effect on the mistress of the house. In fact, her own position in the household is one of dependence. When Mrs. Bellmont threatens her with being put out, she tempers what she is willing openly to do for the child.

When Frado finally does leave the Bellmont home, other white women befriend her, to the extent that they can. She is sometimes offered shelter or a place to live temporarily. But when Frado is ill, and unable to work, the impoverishment of these "kind" women prevents them from giving her the care she needs.

White women function in Our Nig, then, like they do in the slave narratives—they can either hinder or help the black woman on her quest. Friendship between black and white women is never the major focus of these narratives, though frequently a relationship of enmity is—as in Our Nig or Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl (though here, Mr., not Mrs. Flint is Linda's most formidable enemy). This pattern, which makes white women peripheral to black women's concerns, but a frequently significant barrier to their achievement of their goals, would be extended through the nineteenth century and into our own. Not until the 1980s, with the publication of Sherley Ann Williams's Dessa Rose,
would friendship with a white woman be a major concern of any black woman's novel.
Endnotes to Chapter I

1. In addition to the U.S. women writers discussed here, Elizabeth Gaskell, the Brontë sisters, George Sand, Geraldine Jewsbury, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Harriett Martineau, Frances Trollope, and Fredrika Bremer also wrote abolitionist fiction. "The peculiar institution" was the phrase used by contemporary apologists for slavery (Stampp, *The Peculiar Institution: Slavery in the Antebellum South*, p. 3).

2. Joanna Russ's *How To Suppress Women's Writing* is a taxonomy of critical categories and standards deployed to exclude women writers from the powerful institutions such as publishing and education which affect literary production and construct lines of literary influence. Paul Lauter's work on "Race and Gender in the American Literary Canon" demonstrates the broad institutional, theoretical, and historiographic "processes [which] were set in motion [in the 1920s] that virtually eliminated black, white female and all working-class writers from the canon" (19). Numerous other critics, male and female, feminist and others, have fleshed out this framework with studies of individual authors. For a selection of the feminist criticism, see the entries under "Literary Tradition, Women's Absence from" in Frost and Valiquette's *Feminist Literary Criticism: A Bibliography of Journal Articles, 1975-1981* (1986). In "A Map for Rereading," Annette Kolodny has argued that reading is a process of engaging shared interpretative strategies to produce meanings. Such strategies are "learned, historically determined, and thereby necessarily gender-inflected" (47)--and I would add, inflected according to race and class as well. Kolodny's discussion underscores the difficulties facing women writers who can not "depend on a fund of shared recognitions and potential inference" among readers (58). As Kolodny suggests, women writers "too easily became isolated islands of symbolic significance" (54). And their texts continue to float about today, unattached to what Harold Bloom has called the "whole system of texts" in, through, and between which meanings are socially forged (as quoted by Kolodny, p. 46). Such conditions create readers hard put to value women's abolitionist fictions.

3 See Nelson, Brown, Locke, Zanger, Christian, and Toth for the major discussion of the formulae associated with the tragic octoroon.
4. For example, there was unexamined overlap and conflict between the roles of "caring" and "controlling." Frequently the recipients of women's benevolence were also the victims of women's control. Wolloch's summary of this episode of women's social history makes this point nicely; it is also made with some frequency by a variety of women's groups targeted for "help," such as prostitutes, welfare mothers, and pregnant teenagers.


6. Plato's opinion is revealed in The Republic (see especially, Book II). There, he describes narrative as a powerful--and female!--force which can be turned for or against the state in its function of creating warriors of men. Thus, Aristotle argues, literature must be controlled by men of the elite class: "our first duty is to regulate the story-makers" (24).

7. Mary Wollstonecraft and Margaret Fuller are feminists who argued against women's traditional reading matter for its negative effects on feminine character.

8. Ante Arne and Stith Thompson were the first folklorists who attempted to classify the enormous collection of folktales according to tale type and the presence of motifs. This ambitious work, undertaken early in the twentieth century, was nonetheless marred by inconsistencies of organization. Some tales are classed on the basis of their protagonist (e.g., hero stories, animal stories), others on the basis of plot (e.g., relative's flesh eaten unwittingly), and still others according to motif (e.g., rectum snakes). The great Arne-Thompson system, however useful for the first generation of professional folklorists, strikes students of today as a great chaotic jumble of fascinating trivia.

Vladimir Propp attempted to provide theoretical consistency to the classification of Russian fairy tales by specifying their "functions," by which was meant a combination of characters and actions. Alan Dundes built on Propp's work by providing a vocabulary of terms ("motifeme," "motifemic slot," "allomotif," and so on) with which to specify structural patterns. The quotations here from Bremond refer to his "Morphology of the French Folktale" (1970).
of the French Fairy Tale: The Ethical Model" (1977) and "The Logic of Narrative Possibilities" (1980).

9. See Mieke Bal's discussion of Bremond in this regard (19-23).

10. For biographical information, see Karcher (1986a; 1986b) and her forthcoming biography of the artist as activist. See also Patricia G. Holland's "Lydia Maria Child as a Nineteenth-Century Professional Author." There are also entries on Child in the standard references used in women's studies: one by Roberts in Lina Mainiero's American Women Writers and an anonymous entry in Notable American Women, 1607-1950, ed. Edward T. James et al., 3 vols. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1971), 1:330-33. Articles such as Lloyd C. Taylor, Jr.'s "Reader I Beseech You" (1956) are less than helpful; Taylor paints Child as only the help-meet of Garrison and her husband. Child's letters have been collected by Patricia G. Holland and Milton Meltzer (1982). See also Helene G. Baer's biography, The Heart is Like Heaven (1964) and Milton Meltzer's Tongue of Flame (1965). For the discussion of Child's degree of control over the presentation of Brent's life-story, see two articles, one by Jean Fagan Yellin, "Written By Herself" (1981), in which Yellin claims the voice of Brent predominates, and Alice A. Deck's "Whose Books is This?: Authorial Versus Editorial Control of Harriet Brent Jacobs' Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl: Written By Herself" (1987), in which Deck advances her thesis that two voices--Child's and Brent's--are clearly discernible. See also Yellin's 1985 article "Texts and Contexts of Harriet Jacobs' Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl: Written by Herself," in Davis and Gates, Jr., eds, The Slave's Narrative. A selection of Brent's correspondence to friend Amy Post about the affair is reprinted in Dorothy Sterling's We Are Your Sisters (1984).

11. This mother-daughter chain is the major structural principle for U.S. women's kunstlerromanen, stories of artists lives. See Elizabeth Stuart Phelps' The Story of Avis and Fannie Hurst's Star-Dust for nineteenth- and twentieth-century examples. Virginia Woolf put it this way: women writing think back through their mothers.

12. The passages quoted here are from the version reprinted in 1846 in Fact and Fiction. Copies of the 1841 Liberty Bell in which the story first appeared are
rare and the version reprinted by Koppelman in her widely available 1984 collection of stories about The Other Woman does not include textual notes. Textual criticism of Child is underdeveloped.

13. The quadroon type is variously called "the tragic octoroon" (Zanger) or "the tragic mulatta." As Toth points out, the terms "octoroon," "quadroon," and "mulatta" are interchangeable everywhere but New Orleans; Child herself uses them indiscriminately.

14. This passage is quoted from the Koppelman edition. It was left off the version reprinted in Fact and Fiction. My guess is that Child wanted to tone down the obvious links to the abolitionist movement with her "come-back" volume, designed to reach the popular audience. See Karcher's discussion of Letters from New York for a similar argument (1986a).

15. See Nancy F. Cott's arguments in The Bonds of Womanhood (1977) that women of Child's era evolved a kind of "group consciousness" organized around their biological identity as women. This consciousness "consisted in a common sense of their shared weakness relative to men" (202) and a sense of shared suffering. The imperative to "help" each other followed. See especially Cott's pp. 201-04.

16. Leidel asserts that this is the preoccupation of all of what he calls "white slave" literature.

17. Lasser's work extends previous work on the categories of female friendship, notably, Lillian Faderman's Surpassing the Love of Men: Romantic Friendship and Love Between Women from the Renaissance to the Present (1981), Nancy Cott's The Bonds of Womanhood (1977), Deborah Gray White's Ar'n't I a Woman? (1985), and Carol Smith-Rosenberg's "The Female World of Love and Ritual: Relations Between Women in Nineteenth-Century America" (1975), the title of which I adapted for this dissertation. All these feminist analyses discuss the categorical expectations for female friendship of nineteenth-century women and demonstrate how friendship was frequently articulated in kinship terms and overlapped with familial relationships such as sisterhood and the mother-daughter bond. Critical problems with this material include the extent to which women's friendships both contained and allowed the expression of an erotic, "lesbian" component.

18. See note 17 above.
19. This statement is not intended as a homophobic dismissal or denial of the issue of lesbian sexuality. Those of us who are not homophobic recognize the importance and the beauty of lesbianism. It is instead a call, echoing Leila Rupp's in "'Imagine My Surprise': Women's Relationships in Historical Perspective" (1980), to understand sexuality as an historically specific form of intimate expression. Our present culture's obsession with genital sexuality, and our use of it to anchor sexual and gender identity, may not be an appropriate grid for understanding the lives of women in other historical periods. There was no category "lesbian" in the nineteenth century.

20. This movement is also occasionally called "The Negro Awakening." Generally, critics are referring to the years between 1917 and 1929, sometimes through the 1930s if they want to include Zora Neale Hurston's work.

21. See also Bell and Cobb.
Introduction.

As we have seen, literary conventions governing images of the races solidified in abolitionist and pro-slavery fiction of the antebellum period. These conventions, especially the ones having to do with character and scenario, would heavily influence the subsequent representation of interracial friendship. The characters of abolitionist fiction—whether they represented black or white women—were not fully developed, but briefly indicated by a set of conventional formulae such as the "pale blue eye," the "glossy ringlets," or the "single drop of midnight" in one's veins. Such formulaic techniques cannot function as vehicles for the exploration of female psyche, but are exhausted in a gesture toward an ideal of womanhood. In abolitionist fiction, the interest is not character, therefore, but action or plot. Abolitionist stories focus attention on the moral issues of slavery by showing the fate of ideal womanhood when confronted by real life situations.
Abolitionist writers appealed to their readers' best image of themselves and used that image to draw readers into discussions of ethics. To represent women's sense of available choices for action and resistance, writers developed two scenarios in which they forced a confrontation between the ideal and the real: the rape/"seduction" scenario, and the motherhood scenario. Abolitionist fiction drilled its audience with these questions: if you were a slave, what would you do to avoid being raped by your master, and what would you do to protect your child?

After the war, new trends in the practice of literature might have converged radically to change the conventions governing the representation of relationships between black and white women. The period beginning at the end of the Civil War is often described as "the age of realism" or, alternately, the age of regionalism and local color writing. As Eric Sundquist has pointed out in his essay on "Realism and Regionalism" in the Columbia Literary History of the United States (1988), "realism" and "regionalism" are overlapping terms, differentially applied to writers according to their class, race, and sex:

... economic or political power can itself be seen to be definitive of a realist aesthetic, in that those in power (say, white urban males) have more often been judged "realists," while those removed from the seats of power (say, Midwesterners, blacks, immigrants, or women) have been categorized as regionalists. (503)
Whatever their classification by subsequent critics, realist writers of the age abandoned many of the conventions of "the historical romance or the sentimental melodrama [in favor of writing that] would be anchored in its own time and place, accord psychologically mimetic attention to the customs and actions of common people, and rely on observation and a 'neutral' dramatic method of narration" (Sundquist, 504). Realist authors entitled themselves to speak of whole new classes of characters and events in a serious way; thus the scope of literature expanded enormously in the second half of the nineteenth century, and in this expansion literature might have come to include characters more representative of the actual diversity among newly freed slaves than the image of the refined octoroon of the previous period ever could be.

A second event with an enormous impact on women's literary production was the publication of Jane Eyre in 1848. Readers and writers were increasingly interested in fiction that probed the inner, psychological life of characters. They were losing the preoccupation with "what happened" and beginning to understand character as more than a one-dimensional vehicle of happenings—although "what happened" is always important to a certain degree in the representation of life. Jane Eyre both mirrored and created new literary ideals; after mid-century, readers expected that characters of "great" literature would be
instruments for the exploration of internal, subjective, psychological reality. In the kind of women’s fiction most characteristic of the earlier 19th century, feelings were simply assumed. In 1851, for example, Harriet Beecher Stowe without embarrassment could make her narrator ask rhetorically about Eliza Harris "what mother wouldn’t know" what she (Eliza) felt at the moment when her child was about to be sold away from her. Stowe was able to assume uncontested agreement about what feelings are and how they work, but by the end of the century, this kind of assumption about feelings would be impossible. Indeed, it became one of the important jobs of literature to make up for this lack of consensus about the workings of the human heart by supplying particular details about individuals’ emotional reactions to specific life situations.

These two factors, then—the rise of realism and the development of psychological fiction—might have converged in a woman’s literature as deeply involved in exploring the nuances and complexities of race relations as it was in exploring gender. However, this was not the case. Women’s literature remained segregated, and interracial relationship, if treated at all, was often treated superficially. With few exceptions—in either black or white-authored texts—black characterization of the period continued to rely on outworn stereotypes, or was locked into battle with those stereotypes. In both cases, authors'
capacities to develop the characters’ relationships with others into believable and interesting plots were severely limited. As in abolitionist fiction, black characters after the war were defined primarily as mere sets of gestures, formulae designed to promote political agendas by exploring the fate of ideals, or types, of womanhood in real life. Moreover, these types were inevitably linked to specific scenarios encoding the narrative expectations for the lives of black women and for relationships between black and white women.

After the war, the scenarios changed. The powerful rape/seduction scenario of abolitionist literature, in which black women were cast as the sexual victims of white men, was almost totally abandoned. Black women writers would refer to it, but not center their fiction upon it. They would be more concerned to create fiction which refuted two new scenarios which rapidly came to dominate the age: the scenario of the seductive and sexually insatiable black woman, and the scenario of the black male rapist who must be lynched.

Stories of black women driven by supposedly primitive African appetites to seduce white men could now be told again. This scenario, as old as the slave trade itself, had become untellable by Southern writers during the decades of heated abolitionist propaganda which focused attention on the slave-owning South as one huge brothel. As counter-
image, Southerners stressed the Christian conduct and orderly sexual relations of the patriarchal family under slavery. With slavery removed, old ideas about black and white sexuality, the relations between the races, and the nature of rape made new stories not only tellable, but politically expedient to the slave owners. Black women, according to this position, could not be raped; their sexual relations with white men must therefore be consensual. White women, on the other hand, passive and eminently vulnerable to rape, would never consent to relations with black men, because that would violate the "Great Chain of Being" which ordained white women's sexual desire to be only and always for white men. Along the same lines, black men, like black women, were supposed to crave white flesh in a bid for evolutionary improvement. White men, according to this position, could not be expected to resist the sexual advances of any woman. In abolitionist writings, the mulatta's tragedy consisted of her vulnerability to rape, seduction, and abandonment. After the war, mulattas are no longer depicted as tragic in that way. Instead, they are imaged as seductive, or, alternately, racist writings revision their tragedy as the necessary conclusion to their frustrated sexual desires for white men. The black man, unleashed (literally and figuratively), came to be known as the rapist of innocent white women.
The motherhood scenario underwent equally radical changes after the war. Racist writers understood that the powerful potential of the black mother's caretaking must be severed from the concerns of black community and redirected to satisfying white needs. The image of the mammy was pressed into service to demonstrate the moral superiority of black women who remained faithful to their white former owners after emancipation. White narrative expectations for black lives after the war were thus embodied in two new scenarios, variants of each other. Faithful blacks who knew their place (i.e., subservient to whites) would be taken care of and would prosper. Rebellious blacks who sought self-determination after the war would be ruined. Some of the most interesting fiction of the period written by black women would reform this mammy image, drawing from the extensive oral folk traditions in which mammies were also militants (Christian 1985: 5).

Yet, black women writers of the age lacked a tradition of self-representation. The characters with positive connotations available to them as literary models were types invented by the abolitionists: the vulnerable mulatto and the long-suffering mammy. Black women significantly reformed these images and the scenarios attached to them, yet not in ways that strike readers today as representing authentic persons. That would remain for the writers of New Negro movement beginning in the late 1920s—Nella Larsen,
Jessie Fauset, Zora Hurston, and others. Nonetheless, the emergence of black women writers during this period was a significant event. It laid the foundation for what would come.

Several Northern white women were sympathetic to the struggles of black people. They, too, like the black women writers, attempted "authentic" representation of black female characters. The best of these stories attend to the psychological processes which shape identity according to gender and race, as well as attending to the material, social organization of black and white women into distinct, antagonistic groups. But these white Northern women were often hindered by their lack of first-hand social experience with blacks, so that despite their abolitionist and pro-black sentiments, they too often write naively, in response to stereotypical images. After the 1870s, in the general disillusionment about Reconstruction, the Northern women who used black characters were more interested in understanding the lives of white Southern ladies and sympathizing with them. Sundquist is one of many historians who note how "By the 1880s ... the sections of the country were becoming reunited culturally and economically if not politically, so much so that Tourgée could write in "The South as a Field for Fiction" (1888) that American literature had become 'distinctly Confederate in sympathy'" (512). White Northern women writers, by the end of the
period, exhibit these Confederate sympathies, with the
dissenting voices, such as Tourgée's and De Forest's, being
those of men.

Southern white women did not write the most virulent
racist literature of the age. That would be the achievement
of Southern white men such as Thomas Dixon. But neither did
Southern white women apparently do much in the way of
dissent. They expressed instead racial solidarity with
white men and believed, judging by their literature, that
the need to promote the white racial agenda was best served
by the use of simplistic and derogatory images of black
women. Their literature exhibits images of the faithful
mammy, and mulattas are frequently cast as exotic sexual
others who pose a threat to the domestic tranquility of the
white home. However, some of the stories authored by white
Southern women raise significant questions about the
conditions of literary production for them. It is unknown
how much control they had over their own texts and it is
therefore premature and far too easy to assert the whole-
hearted complicity of white women in the so-called "triumph"
of the Southern point of view.

Whatever the case, few stories of interracial
friendship were either written, published, or survive from
the period. On the contrary, the age was notable for the
intensification of segregation which was reflected in the
literature. Whites could write realistically of all-white
communities and most frequently did just that. Or, they could use black people as things, indicators of local color, to establish a sense of scene and setting. As Sterling Brown points out, "local color Negroes" are never more than stick figures (1933; 1965). Their narrative function is simply to advance the plots focused on white people; they are rarely associated with "functional events" of the narrative. Blacks, however, were not permitted the luxury of a black literature unconcerned with whites. When Zora Neale Hurston would write in 1937 a novel set almost completely in black communities (Their Eyes Were Watching God), she would be accused by the black literati of political irresponsibility and escapism because she had wasted an opportunity to refute the destructive images of blacks held by the dominant white culture. This attitude was even more pronounced in the period after the Civil War, when black literature was considered a crucial front of the struggle for black civil rights. In this context, black women writers, as we shall see, most often cast white women as enemies, not as friends. White Northern women tended to depict interracial friendship either so naively as to appear embarrassingly self-congratulatory, or they depicted it as a hindrance to black women's self-realization. White Southern women, as might be expected because the South is not as racially segregated as the North, wrote stories in which friendships between black and white women were central.
These stories, however, usually only supported white supremacy by reinforcing the image of the good black woman as faithful servant of white needs. Important exceptions are certain stories by Kate Chopin.

From Louisa May Alcott to Constance Fenimore Woolson: The Death of Abolitionism.

After the war, several Northern white women continued their literary activity on behalf of the newly freed slaves. Lydia Maria Child was one of these; she wrote and compiled textbooks, like The Freedman’s Book, for use in Southern literacy projects designed to fit the ex-slaves for freedom. According to Ida B. Wells, there were scores of other less famous, but equally idealistic and committed white women who traveled South to teach in the newly begun freedman’s schools. Also, the small black communities in the Northern cities, with a degree of white patronage, were actively engaged in the political and cultural work necessary to "uplift" the race just emerging from bondage.

Apparently, however, this anti-racist political activity was not considered a fit subject for literature by white women. My research has located no literary texts authored by white women in the North which render the progressive interracial experiences documented by historians. In fact, I could find only a handful of texts which speak from an anti-racist perspective about black
lives at all. Of these, only one novel and a few short stories treat relationships between black and white women and, unfortunately, these relationships are depicted superficially rather than in depth. The previously canonized Northern white women writers—such as Edith Wharton—and those now being recanonized by feminist literary critics—writers such as Elizabeth Stuart Phelps, Rose Terry Cooke, Mary Wilkins Freeman, and Sarah Orne Jewett—created no black characters and consequently no fictional relationships between black and white women. Their work reflects the severe racial segregation of Northern culture which allowed most white women to live their lives blinded to the presence of black women and ignorant of the relationships between black and white female experience.

Yet, when the soldiers laid down their rifles and the smoke cleared, a few white literary women in the North still considered themselves to be abolitionists. In the first decade after the war, influenced by the gathering energies of the local color movement, these women attempted the "realistic" characterization of black people and experience in their art. Louisa May Alcott is exemplary of this tiny minority.

Alcott’s stories about blacks are intensely sympathetic to them, but despite her sympathy, Alcott’s black characters are finally less than successful, if by "successful" we mean
a character which signals human complexity and captures a sense of the multiple contradictions which real people face as we live our lives. Revealing the author's lack of experience with black people in everyday life, Alcott's black characters are little more than stick figures which do not surpass the cultural images of black people available to whites living under conditions of segregation. Letters to friends reveal that Alcott was dismayed by the complexities of contemporary race relations; the simplicity of Alcott's interracial plots reflect that dismay. Her stories about blacks and whites together mostly rework the ground covered by the older generation of abolitionists. Alcott does, however, occasionally venture beyond her elders. Her best interracial work—the short stories "M.L." and "My Contraband—is courageous in its frank treatment of white women's erotic attractions to black men—a subject that would be unspeakable by the turn of the twentieth century. By contrast, Alcott does not characterize black women as sexual beings, nor does she explore the possibility of black and white women as each other's peers, or age-mates. Her one black female character is an aged ex-slave who functions for the teen-aged white heroine as teacher and surrogate mother.

Alcott is best known, of course, for her mother- and home-centered Little Women (1868), the novel which earned her the right to make a living by her pen and which has
endeared her to generations of adolescent female readers ever since. Alcott's parents were "feminist, abolitionist communitarians" who kept their daughter close to "the center of many of the radical movements of her time" (Yellin, 527). As a young woman, Alcott was a member of the circle of women writers who gathered around Annie Fields, the wife of influential publisher James Fields. After her husband's death, Fields lived with Sarah Orne Jewett for some thirty years, making their home in Boston a "mecca" for famous literary women and providing a nourishing atmosphere for young aspirants such as Louisa.

Despite this promising beginning and the presence of support for artistic risk-taking, the progress of Alcott's career was frequently frustrated by her classification as a children's writer and the necessity that her work be commercially successful. Alcott's biographers have all emphasized the writer's proud sense of responsibility to provide for the family which was almost ruined after Louisa's famous father, educator Bronson Alcott, refused to exclude black students from his school. This act of resistance to the racial status quo was among the acts of noncomformity that some critics cite as having "destroyed his teaching career and ended forever his economic support of the family" (Yellin, 530). Much later, it would be Louisa's writing ability that permitted the family to survive; she even earned enough to send her celebrated
younger sister to art school in Europe. Alcott struggled all her life, however, to negotiate her conflicting emotions about her parents, her place in the family, and the value and the cost of principled action. She was frequently ill, fatigued, resentful, and angry that her self-sacrifice was both necessary and unjust. In addition, she felt she needed to mask the disturbing of emotions she felt in connection with her roles as daughter, sister, and public spokeswoman for domesticity.  

Accounts of Alcott’s life and work appear in the earliest feminist criticism of the 1970s, such as Ellen Moers’s *Literary Women* (1977), dedicated to finding and reevaluating the work of "lost" women writers. In the 1980s, critics such as Nina Auerbach and Ann Douglas wrote new feminist introductions to *Little Women*, which of course had never been out of print. But beginning with Judith Fetterly’s 1979 reading of the subversive elements in Alcott’s classic tale for girls, the feminist critical interest in the author’s work began to shift away from the popular stories sold only to keep food on the family table—*Little Women, Little Men, Aunt Jo’s Scrap-Bag, Eight Cousins, Jo’s Boys* and the like. In the 1980s, the "other" Louisa May Alcott was "rediscovered": the Alcott who wrote (under a pseudonym) sensational and lurid gothic thrillers, the woman who questioned gender and was very likely bisexual
herself, the subverter of domestic conventions, the radical feminist, in short, the "alternative" Alcott.\(^9\)

In all this work of feminist revision, few critics have attended to Alcott's ideas about race and race relations, or to the racial significance of her fiction. Jan Cohn notes Alcott's self-characterization as "a red hot abolitionist" whose abolitionism was nonetheless a matter of principle untested by direct experience with slaves or free blacks.

Cohn notes Alcott's remark:

> But more interesting than officers, ladies, mules, or pigs, were my colored brothers and sisters, because so unlike the respectable members of society I'd known in moral Boston. . . . Here was the genuine article--no, not the genuine article at all, we must go to Africa for that--but the sort of creature generations of slavery have made them: obsequious, trickish, lazy, and ignorant, yet kind-hearted, merry-tempered, quick to feel and accept the least token of brotherly love which is slowly teaching the white hand to grasp the black, in the great struggle for the liberty of both the races. (572; 575-76)

Alcott's theoretical abolitionism, judging by the above, included disparate elements: a feeling of brother- and sister-hood with blacks and a recognition that the struggle for liberty involves both races side by side with acceptance of a conventional view of black personality and a shameless curiosity about blacks' difference from "respectable . . . moral" white Bostonians. This image of black people--as exotic and immoral--would be defined by black feminist social philosophers as both source and justification of racist oppression. But if Alcott was racist (and it is
inevitable that she would be—for we all are in the sense that racism is inescapable, a condition of our subjectivity), hers was at least a benevolent racism. She recognized an essential humanity of black people, she opposed slavery, and she credited the peculiar institution—nurture, not nature—for producing those traits which made the race vulnerable to its detractors. Alcott's short stories about the war, collected in *Hospital Sketches* (1863) and *Camp and Fireside Stories* (1869), contained according to Cohn "the appropriate antipathy for the rebel, the requisite sentimental admiration for the Northern soldier, but a frank confusion in the face of the black man, who was, after all, neither a respectable adjunct to Boston's abolitionist societies nor a realization of Mrs. Stowe's Uncle Tom" (572). However embarrassing it may strike readers today, mingled in that dismayed confusion at "the genuine article" was an essentially respectful attraction to and curiosity about race that led the young Alcott, along with a few other white women writers of the decade, to experiment "in the increasingly realistic depiction of Negro characters" (Cohn, 573).

Alcott's *Work*, a semi-autobiographical novel for adults, contains the best portrait of friendship between black and white women of the age. In *Work*, Alcott poses the feminist question of female independence. A bildungsroman, it concerns the life of Christie, a spunky New England girl,
whose first act is to make a "new Declaration of Independence" from her uncle's household in which she labors, but is seen as a burdensome dependent:

I mean that, being of age, I'm going to take care of myself. . . . I don't intend to wait for [Uncle to tell me to go], but, like the people in fairy tales, travel away into the world and seek my fortune. I know I can find it. . . . I'm old enough to take care of myself; and if I'd been a boy, I should have been told to do it long ago. . . . I'm sick of this dull town, where the one idea is eat, drink, and get rich. . . . (239-40)10

And so she sets out. Each subsequent chapter of Book One treats one of Christie's "experiments" in independent living. Loosely patterned after Alcott's own early experiences, Christie works as a servant, an actress, a governess, a companion, and a seamstress before she finds herself unemployed, sick, and helpless. Rescued from suicide by another woman, Christie is sheltered in a variety of unconventional homes until she marries and turns to charity work and the work of running her own home. The novel's end, however, is a new beginning. At forty, Christie will enter politics. "[C]haracterizing herself as 'strong-minded' a radical, and a reformer,' [she] commits herself to women's rights and announces that she will try to bridge the class divisions within the women's movement" (Yellin, 535). To do this work, Christie gathers around her a circle of women friends, including Hepsey, the fugitive slave with whom Christie works as a servant in Chapter 2.
Yellin claims that the portrait of Hepsey was fashioned after Harriet Tubman, whom Alcott had met briefly and admired. Yellin is disappointed at the discrepancies between Hepsey and her real-life model, finding the former "bland," and unfavorably comparing Alcott's "gentle" treatment of abolitionism in her fiction to the risky and complicated business Alcott knew it to be in actuality.11

The reader's first glimpse of Hepsey reveals "a tall, gaunt woman, bearing the tragedy of her race written in her face, with its melancholy eyes, subdued expression, and the pathetic patience of a wronged dumb animal" (252). Though this is certainly no portrait of militance such as we associate with Tubman, neither is it a stereotyped or implausible image of an old former slave severed from black community, isolated in a white household, overworked, and with no viable alternatives for employment. We are next told that Hepsey "received Christie with an air of resignation" which Alcott soon explains as the expectation of abuse. Hepsey's belief that Christie will assume superiority is immediately confirmed when Christie objects to cleaning the boots of the master because, as service to his body, it is "degrading" work. Hepsey counters the argument:

"Dere's more 'gradin' works dan dat, chile, and dem dat's bin 'bliged to do um finds dis sort bery easy. You's paid for it, honey; and if you does it willin, it won't hurt you more dan washin'
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dee marster's dishes, or sweepin' his rooms."
(253)

Christie continues to object on the basis of gender—there ought to be a boy to do it, Christie thinks, and presses Hepsey to agree. Hepsey responds:

"Dunno, chile. I'se shore I'd never ask it of any woman if I was a man, 'less I was sick or ole. But folks don't seem to 'member dat we've got feelin's, and de best way is not to mind dese ere little troubles. You jes leave de boots to me; blackin' can't do dese ole hands no hurt, and dis ain't no deggydation to me now; I's a free woman." (253).

Hepsey's use of the pronoun "we" in this passage to refer to their common womanhood is unaccountable and unmotivated. But even more unbelievable is Hepsey's offer to black the boots herself, accompanied as it is by the simultaneous assertion of her own racial inferiority ("blackin' can't do dese ole hands no hurt") and her equal status as "a free woman."

The creation of Hepsey is both bold, then, and confused; bold because attentive to the psychopathology of everyday racism and its effects on victims, confused where its author is unable to pursue the implications of those effects. Hepsey thus reveals the limits of Alcott's understanding of black women and race relations, as the writer retreats from the complexity of her characters' situation into the safety of stereotype. By the end of the passage, Alcott draws Hepsey closer to the image of mammy, whose cardinal trait is a desire to serve white people.
But the mammy of myth is supposedly motivated by love of her white "family," whereas Hepsey has only just met Christie. Moreover, we know she expects abuse from the newcomer, for the girl whom Christie is replacing used to distinguish herself from Hepsey, requiring the black woman to serve her meals and not allowing her to eat at the same table. When Christie learns this, and other particulars of Hepsey's story, she is shocked and ashamed. She takes back the boots, exclaiming

"But I don't like it that way, and I won't have it. I suppose Katy thought her white skin gave her a right to be disrespectful to a woman old enough to be her mother just because she was black. I don't; and while I'm here, there must be no difference made. If we can work together, we can eat together; and because you have been a slave is all the more reason I should be good to you now." (254).

Christie's innate sense of fairness allows her to reach out to Hepsey across the barriers of race and class. Christie is also separated from Hepsey by age, but rather than a barrier, this seems, at least for Christie, to be the bridge between the women. Christie is attracted to Hepsey's "motherly heart" and wins the woman's "confidence by bestowing her own" (257). The two exchange life-stories, but Alcott does not embed a slave narrative in Work. Hepsey's story is a mere outline, but nonetheless affects Christie greatly:

Her story was like many another; yet, being the first Christie had ever heard, and told with the unconscious eloquence of one who had suffered and
escaped, it made a deep impression on her, bringing home to her a sense of obligation so forcibly that she began at once to pay a little part of the great debt which the white race owes the black. (257)

This episode supports feminist anti-racist thinking of the 1980s in which it is maintained that personal contact between white and black women will be a key to eliminating racism. White women are able to oppress black women because they don’t think of them as individuals in a personal way, but as a mass of impersonalized others. In this context, when white women are able to see the human cost of oppressive social systems, guilt can be productive of change. Christie’s exemplifies the ideal case in which racial guilt is not a stinking, paralyzing affair, but leads to commitment to resistance. Alcott’s heroine shares Bronson Alcott’s communitarian principles which do not limit one’s sense of social responsibility to the welfare of one’s nuclear family or clan. She immediately recognizes the applicability of these principles to the race question and acts accordingly. Moreover, this episode is not an isolated case, but one of many. The communitarian ethic winds all the way through Alcott’s novel, providing at last even the motivation for its closure.

Of all the portraits of interracial relationship in later nineteenth century literature, Alcott’s picture of Hepsey and Christie most closely resembles friendship. Alcott makes plain that whatever intimacy the two women are
able to share depends on Christie's ability to reject the racist behaviors which contribute to structure the institution of women's work. Then black women, the portrait of Hepsey assures white readers, will be "quick to feel and accept the least token of brotherly love which is slowly teaching the white hand to grasp the black, in the great struggle for the liberty of both the races." Yet, despite its obvious strengths, the relationship between Hepsey and Christie also reveals the contemporary limits of interracial friendship.

Despite her admirable abolitionism, Christie does unconsciously adopt the role of white patron, inherent in which is a great capacity to reinforce social inequality and thereby undermine the relation of friends. Christie's patronage takes the forms of teaching Hepsey to read and write and regularly giving her a portion of her own small salary to be used in the work of the Underground Railroad (this happens even after Christie leaves that particular job and is no longer face to face with Hepsey). To be sure, Christie's patronage is not objectionable, but welcomed by Hepsey. Again, the difference in the women's ages functions as a bridge between them. Christie always approaches Hepsey as a mother—the black woman's role least threatening to white women. Christie's "help," therefore is of a daughterly sort in which the authority of the elder is respected; it is unencumbered by the attempts to control
that frequently accompany charity. More disturbing than
issues of patronage is that what Christie receives from
Hepsey in exchange is a subtle sense of superiority and
gratitude that her life, however hard it has been, has not
been as hard as Hepsey's. Very subtly, pity and repulsion
are mixed up with the great respect Christie feels for the
bravery and strength of the old woman.

Although she rejects the grossest forms of racism,
Christie clings to more subtle signs of race and class.
Whether she wants to or not, Christie does continually "make
differences" between herself and Hepsey. Though her
language garbles the categories of race and class (for
example, she faults the mistress for "consider[ing] herself
to belong to a superior race of beings," i.e., "mistresses"
as opposed to "servants"), when Christie is asked to leave
the household for being "'an impertinent baggage,' . . .
Christie retired in great disgust, resolving not to be a
slave to anybody" (262). The condition of white women as
wives was frequently equated to slavery in the feminist
rhetoric of the nineteenth century. Less frequently,
slavery is a metaphor for white women's waged work, as in
Alcott's novel. This is a gesture toward solidarity between
women of different classes and races, but one that masks
important differences between them.

Christie's ambivalent racial attitudes are similar to
her telling attitudes about class noted by Yellin (1980).
The critic's analysis of *Work* underscores Christie's refusal to seek industrial work, or even to acknowledge it as an option, at the same time that she asserts her origins, however remote, in the class of "gentlemen." Alcott thus maintains the class privilege of her heroine, which Yellin understands as seriously undermining the optimistic, even utopic, closure of the novel. How, Yellin asks, can Christie hope to repair the class distinctions between women when she purposely ignores an important class of women--industrial workers?

Similarly, I read Hepsey's inclusion in Christie's circle at the end of the story as a gesture to racial solidarity which naively trusts as sufficient a base in white women's sympathy toward and patronage of black women without confronting the real conditions which separate and differentiate them. The story proves that Christie, after all, can change professions, albeit within a tiny range of options, or she can marry out of her plight. But what can Hepsey do? Nowhere in *Work* does Alcott confront the hard facts about black women's work in the nineteenth century. This includes the reality that opportunities for black women were even more limited than those which white women found so insufferable. Black women's hopes for improvement via higher education were frequently dashed as even educated black women were squeezed out of nearly every occupation except domestic work. Nor does the portrait of Hepsey
signal the lack of freedom that constrained the so-called "free" black women in the antebellum north. After all, they could be and often were kidnapped on the streets and sold back into slavery. Christie's flouncing out of the Stuart household, however strongly it indicates her fighting spirit, is also an assumption of white privilege. That Alcott never makes Christie aware that Hepsey has to stay and put up with being a "slave," even though "free," undermines her antiracist position and qualifies the possibility for cross-class and interracial solidarity toward which the novel's ending yearns.

Finally, the presence of the black female elder--but not a woman representing Christie's age-mates--in the reconstituted female community which closes the novel raises other questions about Alcott's ability to imagine black and white women as peers. It could be that Alcott avoided confronting the sexual energy which sometimes draws black and white women together, or it could be a simple failure of the imagination. Alcott's two short stories, "M.L." and "My Contraband," contain erotically charged encounters between white women and black men. "M.L." is a twist of the tragic mulatto story. Originally serialized in the Boston Commonwealth of 1863, the Journal of Negro History reprinted it in 1929 as an abolitionist document. "M.L." is a simple love story in which the fateful "drop of African blood" is discovered in Paul's veins. His betrothed, Claudia, does
not commit suicide or descend into madness in response, but like the exemplary heroines of black women's novels of this period she calmly decides to cast her lot with the despised race by marrying and living with Paul in the black district. "My Contraband" is one of Alcott's *Hospital Sketches*. A lurid tale with many gothic elements, it is the story of how a white woman prevents a black ex-slave from murdering his white half-brother when the two nurse the white man's fever through the night. She is deeply attracted to the black man as he draws out of her certain passions which she had not before acknowledged. Although the image of the mulatto in "My Contraband" does contain conventional elements--such as references to a divided personality--it goes far beyond convention. "My Contraband" and "M.L." are brave stories of passion which perhaps sustain the speculation that Alcott felt similarly attracted to black women, but could not convert that attraction into publishable stories of black and white "sisters." Or the absence of black and white women as age-mates and peers could also be explained as evidence that Alcott most easily thought of black women in their more comfortable role of mother or mammy.

Whatever the case--and one is never sure when reading an absence--the portrait of Christie and Hepsey is an important text in the tradition of white women's literary anti-racism. It is the fullest depiction of both the
potential and the limits of friendship between black and white women in the nineteenth century.

Harriett E. Prescott [Spofford]'s story "Down the River" is also retrospectively set in antebellum times. Published in an 1865 number of the highly respected literary magazine, the Atlantic Monthly, "Down the River" demonstrates a remarkable break with the white stereotypes governing black characterization. Its heroine is a young slave woman, Flor, who bears no resemblance to the refined octoroons of abolitionist fiction. Prescott's narrator tells us that Flor was of pure race, black as her first ancestor,—if, indeed, she ever had an ancestor, and were not an indigenous outcrop of African soil,—so black that the sun could gild her. (468)

Although Flor does possess some of the attributes stereotypically associated with dark-skinned black women—specifically, she is associated with nature and is "as unlovely as it is possible for one to be that owns the cheeriest of smiles and the most dazzling of teeth" (468)—her youth, her occupation of dancer rather than mammy, and the narrator's central focus on her as a serious heroine, rather than merely a source of "local color," distinguish the picture of Flor from other nineteenth century images of dark-skinned women.

"Down the River" tells the story of Flor's awakening consciousness of her condition as a slave and her decision
to seek freedom and self-hood. In this theme, Prescott’s story is similar to certain classic black women’s texts. Like Janie of Zora Neale Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937), Flor is initially presented as a woman stripped of identity. Just as Janie, growing up in the white folks’ yard, didn’t know she was black and was nicknamed “Alphabet ’cause so many people had done named me different names” (21), so Flor’s identity is uncertain and she is called “Dancing Devil, Spinning Jenny, Tarantella,” and finally simply “Salome” (469). But her real name is Flor. Prescott, like many of her nineteenth century peers, frequently wrote in “the language of flowers.” This character’s name therefore suggests something floral and potentially blossoming, but yet cramped tightly in the bud.

Flor’s lack of an empowering sense of herself is emblemized by her friendship with her mistress Emma, a white girl as thoughtless and silly, if more physically constrained and repressed, than her slave. Flor “loves” Emma, brings her flowers daily, dances for her, and follows her everywhere. This, and the unrestrained quality of her dancing, loses friends for her in the slave quarters, but Prescott insists on Flor’s “happiness.” Flor is not greatly abused and derives a sustaining feeling of kinship with the earth, the sun, and the fragrant breezes which carry her thoughtlessly through purposeless days.
The crisis comes when the two girls disobey orders not to leave the plantation and become lost in a swamp. Emma, whose character Prescott does not develop beyond the stereotype of the white Southern belle, weakens and finally breaks under the stress of being cold, hungry, and lost. Flor, on the other hand, is energetic and resourceful. While Emma sleeps, Flor climbs a tree to look for a way out, and pursues her vision of a path which leads her to the hide-out of a run-away slave. Sarp, a powerful and intelligent black man, talks to the girl in the murky and dangerous swamp which emblemizes the heart of slavery, prodding her to think for the first time about freedom and self. But at first Flor refuses to think Sarp and his words are anything other than crazy, until after he delivers the two girls out of the swamp and Flor is punished for not keeping Emma at home.

The master, Emma’s father, forces a separation between the black and white friends, and Flor, lonely and miserable, engages in a long internal monologue on the subject of freedom. Prescott’s use of Flor as a naive narrator uncovers some startling resemblances between the degrees of freedom allowed the white mistress and black slave—neither can go where they will, marry who they will, or work at what they will. Finally, the sense that Flor is being unjustly punished for something over which she had no control compels her decision to escape and seek freedom.
The rest of the story relates Flor's abortive attempt to flee bondage. Flor steals a little boat and begins the journey down river hoping to be picked up by Union soldiers. Her ignorance is pathetic; she knows so little about how to take care of herself, she cannot steer her craft and, ironically, floats further and further South into slave country until she is lost in the open sea. She dies of exposure and starvation, hallucinating at the last her moments of glory dancing in the sun.

The interracial episode of "Down the River" is brief, but important in that it represents a form of false consciousness for the slave. The degree of Flor's attachment to Emma is only the measure of her ignorance of herself. Prescott's acknowledgement here of the opposing class interests of white and black women, as well as her suggestion that black women need to break from whites in order to find themselves, is an amazing rupture of the continuity of white woman's literary tradition. Because of this, Jan Cohn's assertion of the "essential racism of the story" seems unsound (584). Cohn's thesis is that Nearly all the Negro characters [of the period] who escape stereotyping . . . embody something tentative, as if drawn out of an unresolved ambivalence in the writer. In fact, to the very extent that a character does emerge from the stereotype, he may be accorded unpleasant or immoral traits that are racially motivated or explained. Thus, the alternative to the benevolent racism of the Northern stereotype is often the expression of another and deeper racism. (575)
Cohn faulted as stereotypical "the trite patriotism of [Prescott's] plot" (Flor wants to be saved by the Union) and the characterization of slaves as pious and loyal. However, Cohn fails to acknowledge that none of the characters is pious—Flor's religion is an amoral kinship with the sensual world, with other dancing creatures. Nor is anyone besides Flor particularly loyal. As I have argued, Flor's loyalty and affection for Emma are not positive traits, but the measure of foolish self-abandonment and ignorance. In fact, it kills her, for she could have escaped successfully with Sarp, but chose not to abandon Emma.

Cohn also objects when Flor's character deviates from stereotype, reading her absorption in the mindless dance as expression of Prescott's "deeper racism." But perhaps Cohn was unaware that Flor's character in this respect is quite similar to certain white characters in Prescott Spofford's other fiction. "Amber Gods," for example, concerns a white woman completely absorbed in jewelry and grooming. Cohn attributes to racism certain elements of "Down the River" which are, in my opinion, more properly credited to Prescott's heavy, florid writing style more generally. Prescott's characterization of Flor and her failure to bring the heroine to freedom seem in this context not the residue of racism, but an assertion of the kinds of personalities white and black women are forced to develop in racist patriarchy to suit them for their limited possibilities. In
Spofford's "Her Story," first published in 1872 and reprinted in Koppelman's *The Other Woman* (1984), the heroine is shut up as a lunatic by her husband who wants only to remarry a younger, more attractive girl. Her husband is acting legally; she, on the other hand, is both legally disenfranchised and hindered by that learned helplessness considered so sexually attractive in women. Similarly, Flor does not survive because she too has been so severely damaged and deformed by the slave system.

Whereas Harriet E. Prescott Spofford, as a member of the Annie Fields circle and a minor author of unconventional fiction, has received a trickle of attention from feminist critics revising the canon, Helen Pierson, author of "Queen's Good Work" is virtually unknown.

Pierson's story appeared in *Harper's* in 1866 and is an early example of the sort of interracial fiction which would come to dominate by the century's close, fiction which reconciled North and South and praised the loyalty of black ex-slaves to their former owners in a reconstituted white-dominant social order. As in Prescott's "Down the River," the interracial episode of "Queen's Good Work" is brief and not fully developed. But whereas Prescott's undeveloped character was the white woman, Pierson is more traditional in her failure to develop the black character instead.

"Queen's Good Work" is an allegory of post-war social transformations, with individual characters representing
classes of society. "Queen" is the nickname of the young white daughter of slave-owning parents. The parents conform to Northern types: the mother is a whimsical, selfish, ineffectual invalid and the father is cruel and hard. The story takes place in the last days of the war. The family's slaves have all run off, except for loyal Naum Rina and her son Scipio. Queen has not been petted and spoiled, but neglected; she is lonely. The crisis comes in the father's absence (he is fighting at the front). Sip brings a wounded Union soldier to be nursed at the house by his mother and Queen falls in love with him. Most of the story concerns the transference of her political loyalties from the Confederacy to the North. Pierson makes plain that the rebellion of Southern white women was not a reasoned political stance, but an "inherited" loyalty to kin. In a symbolic marriage between North and South, Queen marries her Captain, after first defying her father and suffering being beaten and turned out of doors. She faints, only to regain consciousness after the war is over and her father is dead. At the end of the story, when Pierson dispenses the post-war fates of the various classes, Queen will travel North to be educated and Naum Rina and Sip will stay behind to care for Queen's invalid mother. It is a traditional and conservative ending which holds no interest for the present study.
What is interesting about "Queen's Good Work" is the brief description of the relationship between Queen and Rina. The attraction of Rina as surrogate mother for lonely Queen is poignantly drawn, but more startling is Rina's response to Queen's question "Do you love me?":

"Sakes alive! . . . I nussed yer, an it stans to nature dat I tinks a heap on yer. But lovin! Ye see, chile, I'se been de mudder ob six livin chilen, an ebbery one ob dem cept Sip bin done sole away from me. God Didn't took em, Miss Queen. He gin em to me; He lef em in my hans--but Marse Bevil wanted money. I tell ye, honey, ebbery one dat was took gin me a blow--a blow right on de heart, chile--so dat now dis poor old heart hain't got no life in it; 'tain't gwine to set itself on yethly tings agin. Tank de Lord it's sot on Him, what can't be sole or took away."

This passage alone separates Maum's character from the stereotypical mammy. This is realistic depiction of the emotional violence practised by whites on black mothers, first selling their own children away and then forcing the maternal care for themselves. Maum's refusal to play mammy for Queen is in some sense heroic. Instead of making Rina a monster, as Cohn contends, it supports an allegorical interpretation of the story. Pierson is making plain that white Southern women can expect no solace in anything of the past; their hope for the future must be with the white Northern man. If we accept that (white) Woman symbolizes the culture generally, then Pierson's stripping Queen of all support and removing her throne to the North is merely a political expedient, not a reflection of black female
personality. Nonetheless, Pierson does not seize the opportunity to explore the one authentic moment of black and white women’s mutual emotional history that she has created in "Queen’s Good Work." Whether this is because she didn’t recognize the importance of her creation, or because she consciously avoided its implications by reducing Rina to an unconvincing image of the loyal mammy (after all, Rina’s desire to stay with the petulant and foolish Miss Clara is inexplicable except as a kind of mindless and self-destructive "loyalty"), is unknown.

Cohn claims that the 1870s saw the end of "independent" characterization of blacks by white writers in the North. Cohn explains that after 1870 the Northern magazine market was reopened to Southern writers, the civil war lost its popularity as a topic amidst the disillusionments of the Reconstruction period, and the Northern audience, "eager for reconciliation," rapidly adopted the Southern point of view about race (574). Ida B. Wells, writing at the turn of the century, concurs that the Southern perspective reemerged to dominate national policy and social philosophy. In literature, this perspective emerged in idealized portraits of the Old South, infused with nostalgia for days gone by, or in virulently racist celebrations of the Klan, as in the novels of Thomas Nelson Page.

Constance Fenimore Woolson’s short story, "In the Cotton Country," demonstrates this shift and documents the
end of effective Northern abolitionism. Woolson, a native of New Hampshire, characterized herself like Alcott as "a red hot abolitionist" (Weimar, xvi), but judging from her fiction, her concern that slavery be ended did not apparently extend to an effective concern for the quality of black lives after the war. "In the Cotton Country" has recently been praised by feminist critic Joan Myers Weimer as an exploration of the "exiled" female imagination and the ambivalence of the literary woman. But what Weimer sees as Woolson's creation of "a terrifying image of immobilized despair" (xxxii) is also a terrifying image of white racist hatred and bitterness at the loss of white privilege.13

"In the Cotton Country" was first published in Appleton's in 1876, then collected by the author in Rodman the Keeper: Southern Sketches in 1880, which was reprinted again in 1886. Woolson was a friend of Henry James and other famous literary men of the age. Her work was both enormously popular and also taken seriously as high art. Weimer, Woolson's biographer, notes the artist's rejection of important women in her life, such as her mother and other women writers, as well as ambivalent relationships to men as mentors and literary competitors. "In the Cotton Country" was written during the period of Woolson's life when she was gaining confidence in her skills as a writer and beginning to use female narrators, even though they are consistently made to narrate themes of self-sacrifice and female failure.
"In the Cotton Country" is a framed story. The first narrator, according to Weimar, is a slightly fictionalized version of Woolson herself at that time: a displaced Northerner in the post-Civil War South, a "solitary pedestrian" whose own sense of homelessness is so great that she follows a flock of crows, thinking, "The crows at home—that would be something worth seeing." (xxxii)

She is led to a delapidated old slave cabin from which she expects to see emerge "a swarm of funny little black faces" (136). Instead, she sees a white woman and a mysterious child. Obsessively, she returns day after day, until the other agrees to tell her story. It is the Southern white woman whose story is mediated by the outer frame. And she is a woman who has lost everything except her hatred for the freedman and her contempt for herself at being unable, like them, to either work or die.

Cassy is her former slave who stays with young missis after the end of the war. It is to Woolson's credit that she does not motivate Cassy with any moralistic loyalty to her former owners. Cassy wants clearly only to survive. The unnamed Southern white woman who narrates the inner story says about Cassy's death:

Yes, Cassy is dead. She was buried by her own people, who forgave her at the last for having been so spiritless as to stay with 'young missis,' when she might have tasted the glories of freedom over in the crowded hollow where the blacks were enjoying themselves and dying by the score. In six months half of them were gone. They had their freedom—oh, yes, plenty of it; they were quite free—to die! For, you see, madam, their masters,
those villainous old masters of theirs, were no longer there to feed and clothe them. Oh! it was a great deliverance for the enfranchised people! Bitter, am I? Put yourself in my place.

So on the one hand as the very real problems facing black women—homelessness, disease, lack of work—are depicted here, the character Cassy emerges from stereotype. But the thrust of this passage, indeed of the whole story, is to encourage white readers to "[p]ut yourself in my place," that is, the place of the ruined white woman aristocrat. Except for this one passage, Cassy's story is untold—she is simply there. Her character has little thematic significance, but functions primarily as a structural device to move the story of the white woman along its course (Mallard). The narrative is constructed not to probe the plight of blacks after the war, but in order to provide sympathy for "those villainous old masters of theirs" instead.

The passage in which the first narrator, the Northern woman, surrenders the story-telling function to her Southern friend is instructive:

In time I succeeded in building up a sort of friendship with this solitary woman of the waste, and in time she told me her story. Let me tell it to you. I have written stories of imagination, but this is a story of fact, and I want you to believe it. It is true, every word of it, save the names given, and, when you read it, you whose eyes are now upon these lines, stop and reflect that it is only one of many life-stories like unto it. "War is cruelty," said our great general. It is; It must be so. But shall we not, we women, like Sisters of Charity, go over the field when
the battle is done, bearing balm and wine and oil for those who suffer? (138)

First she entitles herself to speak on behalf of the dispossessed Southerner by claiming merely to reproduce to latter’s own words. Further, she says this is "fact," not "a story of imagination," and that it is exemplary of "many life-stories like unto it." White Southerners are singled out as the casualties of a "cruel" war and the narrator implies it is the moral duty of readers to respond with sympathy. Folklorists would recognize the elements of legend here: assertion of the story’s truth, documentation of the narrator’s relationship to the story’s characters, and its promise of unusual significance.14

Woolson’s "achievement" is to reduce her black characters to providers of "local color" (S. Brown 1933) and aggrandize her white characters by showing them as victims. Woolson’s concern is with the intersection of race and class, for the narrator implies that there would be nothing remarkable about the presence of "a swarm of funny little black faces" in the ramshackle cabin. Indeed, she expects to see blacks here, just as elsewhere in the story her Southern friend, apparently with her endorsement, asserts that narrative expectations for black lives include poverty and failure as a matter of course. But the story of how a cultured white woman could be reduced to such a life must be told. Remarks such as the following repeatedly define who suffers:
We suffered, of course. We lived as very poor people live. The poorest slaves in the old time had more than we had then. But we did not murmur; the greater griefs had swallowed up the less. (143)

Incident is mounted upon incident until the deposed lady cries in despair

Retribution, do you say? It may be so. But love for our State seemed loyalty to us; and slavery was the sin of our fathers, not ours. Surely we have expiated it now. (144)

Here Southern rebellion is translated into a patriotic feeling accessible to Northern sympathy. The symbolic deaths of so many Southern "fathers" in literature clears the ground for those who remain to project themselves as innocent bystanders to the slave system, not complicit with the oppression of the slaves. Only the most callous reader (such as myself) could read this story and not be moved toward its acceptance of the white supremacist position: that the "tragedy" of the war consisted in the fall of the mighty and that they have certainly been forced to suffer enough already. It is time to welcome them "home."

Thus were smothered the tentative beginnings of a white female literary tradition of authentic, or "realistic," black female characterization. It was deflected into sympathy for white Southern ladies (not, by any stretch of the imagination, for white Southern working women). These workings in the world of literature paralleled happenings in the contemporary feminist movement that would betray its
origin in Northern abolitionism in a bid for solidarity between whites on the basis of perceived or unconscious interests of class, at the expense of black women.

White Women in the South.

Historians writing in our own century concur with contemporary observers, such as Ida B. Wells, that the period during and after Reconstruction witnessed the withdrawal of white Northern support for black civil rights and the reinstatement of a white "Southern" point of view regarding race relations. Causes cited to account for this apparent ideological shift include Northern economic dependence on certain Southern products (for example, the reliance of the Northern textile industry on a cheap source of cotton), political manipulation by the powerful class of aristocratic planters, the incapacity of Northerners realistically to face the problems posed by the existence of needy ex-slaves, and an essential unwillingness to do so because of (unacknowledged) Northern racism. The literature authored by white Northern women supports this general thesis, as we have seen. Some of the white Northern texts, despite the abolitionist commitments of their authors, reveal a certain naive dismay toward black characters, while other texts bid for a consolidation of white women’s class interests across lines of regional difference. Texts in this latter category reveal sympathy for white Southern
women and disinterest toward blacks, casting them simply as indicators of local color or, more aggressively, reinforcing the myth of the Old South purported by white Southerners. Similarly, the texts of white Southern women embody a thrust toward consolidation of white women's class interests shared with white men.

Such texts are based on a set of interlocking premises: the centrality of the need for reconciliation between North and South, the innate inferiority of blacks to whites, and the need to reassert white control of the black population (Lamplugh 177; Baker). Literature was pressed to serve this political agenda as white writers developed the "myth of the Old South," a myth very much with us still today, as can be seen in the glossy publications of the tourist industry which beckon travelers to "come back" to the way it was. According to scholar George R. Lamplugh,

The men and women who purveyed this doctrine in the pages of [white Northern] magazines [between 1875 and 1900] had grown to maturity after the Civil War. Hence, their knowledge of the ante-bellum South was limited to either the recollections of their own childhood or to the reminiscences of their elders. Such information, mixed with imagination and heavily laced with the sentimentality so beloved by Americans of the late nineteenth century, transformed slavery from an economic institution to a human one, a means by which poor, benighted blacks could perform useful work in exchange for food, clothing, and shelter provided by their betters. (177-78)

Donald G. Baker extends this insight, showing how since blacks are viewed as inferior to whites, [Southern] authors dispute the argument that
slavery precipitated the War. Rather, they see abolition as a smokescreen behind which an aggressive, industrializing North, bent on subjugating the South economically and politically, destroyed a superior southern "way of life." Thus the War [is] viewed as a political contest for power [and writers] contrast an idyllic prewar South with a defeated and oppressed white society in the Reconstruction period. (338-39)

An important implication of this myth of the Old South was that the racial consequences of the war, especially the opening up of the possibility of social equality between blacks and whites, were entirely unfortunate. To contain this possibility, Southern white writers almost universally depicted blacks, whom they believed to be innately inferior to whites, as unable to cope with the "freedom" which had been thrust upon them by the North. Southern whites embodied their disparaging narrative expectations for black lives apart from slavery in two scenarios, one a euphoric and the other a dysphoric variant. In the euphoric variant, "grateful blacks would submit once more to white tutelage in order to help restore the South to its former position of eminence in the Union" (Lamplugh, 178). And in the dysphoric tale, rebellious and ungrateful blacks run to ruin:

The black who continued to live with his "folks" tried to repay his former master's kindness by sharing wages and food with the economically straightened Colonel. On the other hand, the wretched black who chose to put the last vestiges of slavery behind him found himself either defeated by obstacles which his limited mental powers prevented him from overcoming or bothered
by pangs of conscience at his ingratitude toward the kindly white man who had provided for his creature comforts for so many years. Whichever crisis this freedman faced, the end result was nearly always the same—he returned to Old Master and took up his former mode of existence as though nothing had happened. (Lamplugh, 185).

Although Lamplugh's androcentric diction obscures the participation of women in Reconstruction history, his general thesis does apply to certain literary texts by white Southern women. It is in these pro-Southern texts that representations of close interracial friendship between women are most easily found.

The best example is Sarah Barnwell Elliott's "Faith and Faithfulness," one of three short stories collected in An Incident and Other Happenings (1899) concerning the fate of Miss Maria, an aristocrat whose once wealthy slave-owning family has fallen on hard times since the war. "Miss Maria's Revival" is an unremarkable tale, but "Baldy," a crude comedy about selling a horse, reveals the virulent racism which characterizes the period. In "Baldy," we see Miss Maria, still in her prime, bravely warding off an encroaching poverty. In the process, she controls and manipulates her black servants as though they were still slaves. The portrait of Jack is ludicrous and humiliating; although an adult, he plays foolish pranks and gets into trouble like a grown-up child. In one incident, Jack tries to prevent his mistress from being laughed at by the other whites by refusing to drive her carriage harnessed to the
unsuitable old nag Baldy. Miss Maria is angered and locks Jack in a cellar wherein he cringes and cries, but not because Miss Maria has mistreated him; rather he is afraid of the verbal abuse he can expect from Kizzy, his wife, when she hears what has happened. In "Faith and Faithfulness," Miss Maria’s household is reduced to only herself, Kizzy, and Kizzy’s four children. With the help of the loyal Kizzy, Miss Maria survives what might otherwise have been an intolerable old age.

"Faith and Faithfulness" refer to the two main characters, Miss Maria and Kizzy. Elliott’s story is a commendation of the mistress’s faith that her fortunes will once again be reversed and her servant’s faithfulness through good times and bad. The plot, roughly, traces how the two women bear increasing deprivation. At first, Kizzy takes in laundry and sewing, but when that work becomes scarce she seeks work in a private home. Mrs. Jarvis, the minister’s wife, hires her. With careful attention to the management of the peculiar role reversal which attends the change, the two decide that Miss Maria will care for the children while Kizzy is gone during the days. The Jarvises hear of Miss Maria’s plight and, unaware that their own Kizzy is the loyal retainer boasted about town, they contrive to send Miss Maria a load of household supplies. Kizzy has manipulated circumstances so that Miss Maria will not be caught by another white person in the act of caring
for black children. Visiting Miss Maria, Mrs. Jarvis is shocked at the extravagant show of "waste"—for in order to impress and honor the clergyman and his wife, Miss Maria has lit two fires and all the candles at once.

"Faith and Faithfulness" is a story about giving, about the rewards of generosity. Miss Maria’s extravagance of former days is contrasted with the present necessity of scraping and pinching; the stingy giving of the minister’s wife, accompanied with its judgments and its attempts to control the recipient, is contrasted with the generous giving of both Miss Maria and her maid. It is the story of the fate of certain values in "a wellnigh unknown world" (62). Cloaked in the nostalgia for which the period is so famous, "Faith and Faithfulness" offers the image of Miss Maria and Kizzy as emblems of all that is worth preserving in those times of rapid change. The epigraph from Browning’s "Pippa Passes"—"God’s in His heaven,/All’s right with the world!"—expresses the major idea, as the disposition of all the characters in the story’s end reinforces its moral theme (faith and faithfulness will not go unnoticed in this world, but be rewarded—so press on!).

"Faith and Faithfulness," like so many other stories of these decades, may be read as an allegory. It proposes a world in which narrative expectations for black lives are attached to their loyalty to whites. After the war, one by one, Miss Maria’s former slaves "desert" her—all except
Kizzy. Miss Maria is mortified by this, saying: "They are very ungrateful, Kizzy . . . and forget that I have cared for them all their lives, and that now they ought to care for me. I hope that you, Kizzy, will be better behaved . . . . " (56). This social contract embodies an uncomplicated moral order in which two possibilities exist for blacks: "good" ones will know their place, serve whites, and prosper; "bad" ones desert their white patrons and are ruined. "Faith and Faithfulness" follows this simple logic as, surely enough, the story shows "faithless" ex-slaves one by one meeting a drastic end. Some starve, some die of fever, for all are nothing more than "uncared for negroes" (60). Kizzy, however, shares the fortunes of her mistress. Not only does she survive, she prospers with all her children. The ending, which, to repeat, may be read allegorically, poses the reinstatement of the aristocratic class. Unlike Northern allegories, such as "Queen’s Good Work" which eliminate Southern "fathers," Elliott’s tale allows a young Southern white male to rescue the distressed females and reconstitute the family as patriarchy. Absent from Elliott’s fiction are any black males in positions of social authority.

Kizzy can be a hero in such a world because her identity and interests are conflated with those of her mistress. There is never any conflict between the black and white women; the narrator never hints at the possibility
that their interests are not identical. Kizzy is not a character representing an autonomous black woman, nor is she pictured as having significant ties to black community, but derives her identity solely from her relationship to Miss Maria. One can imagine her saying to the white woman, like Ruth to Naomi, "where you go I will go" and "your people shall be my people." Like Jack in "Baldy," Kizzy bristles indignantly when another white woman judges her mistress as "po' buckra," for that implies, since she herself "belongs" to Miss Maria, her own inferiority as well. This identity of interests apparently accounts for Kizzy's loyalty through the times when Miss Maria does not "care for" her servants, but is instead cared for by them. Given the black woman's derivation of identity from her white mistress, Kizzy working for Miss Maria is the same as Kizzy working for herself.

Yet there is more than a little incongruence in the picture of Kizzy, during the tense period when her laundry work is dwindling and before she hires herself out to Mrs. Jarvis, a frenzy of work and anxiety to survive, while Miss Maria sits in her parlor and reads a novel. The narrator asks us to accept that the two women are bound by a long history of family connections and habits of mutual dependence. Kizzy is initially characterized as looking after her own self-interest (for Miss Maria seems to offer food, clothing, and shelter), yet she eventually becomes the
sole support of the household, with Miss Maria contributing nothing. This state of affairs, of course, is not long lasting, for when the laundry work fails entirely, the relationship between Kizzy and Miss Maria of necessity becomes again characterized by a degree of mutuality. Miss Maria needs Kizzy to work for her and Kizzy needs someone to watch her children so she can work.

This moment of the story is in important respects its crisis and climax (as well as that point at which the deconstructionist would begin her work of unraveling the contradictory "logic" of care and dependence upon which this text is based). At this moment, the traditional relationship between the races of dominance and subordination threatens to be toppled from its precarious foundation in the role of Miss Maria as benevolent caretaker. The narrator poses the necessity of a role reversal between the two women as unacceptable to both. Kizzy is made to express the inappropriateness of it: "... for her to ask Miss Maria to let her children stay there all day while she was gone seemed to her to be preposterous--to be reversing things and asking Miss Maria to serve her!" (72). This violation of Miss Maria's priority is problematized as an insurmountable barrier to the household's survival. Kizzy resolves it by verbally manipulating her mistress so that the babysitting nature of her work is concealed. They "agree" that Miss Maria will
teach the children—whom the narrator consistently calls "the little black idols" who "worship" the white lady—while their mother works. The role of "teacher" to black children is apparently an acceptable role for fallen aristocrats—Ida B. Wells's comments about "nigger teachers" notwithstanding (see below). It "save[s] appearances and embarrassment" at least (72), by preserving the appropriate social distance between the races and the relationship of white authority to black subservience which both Miss Maria and Kizzy require. This narrative strategy—in which black women are made the advocates of racist social convention—is one frequently employed by white women writers.

Sarah Barnwell Elliott's use of the white supremacist scenario to generate "Faith and Faithfulness" could be interpreted straightforwardly as one more instance of the attempt to recuperate white status after the war. Yet biographical information about Elliott and her family complicates this interpretation somewhat. Clara Childs Mackenzie, a great-niece of Elliott and her aunt's biographer, makes much of the Elliott's "liberal" traditions regarding race. Other family traditions include "a deep commitment to the religious and moral vision of the Anglican church, a belief in the righteousness as well as a recognition of the need for living on the fruits of individual intellectual labor rather than by the agricultural labor of others, and a strong sense of social
responsibility, of noblesse oblige" (Koppelman, unpublished
ts). Opposed to slavery on principle, Sarah’s father (an
Anglican bishop) nonetheless owned slaves until business
failure required him to sell his property to pay debts.
Thereafter, he advocated gradual emancipation of slaves
accompanied by a program to make them fit for the
responsibilities of freedom. Also, the Elliotts were widely
known to have broken the laws prohibiting slave-owners from
teaching their slaves to read or write. MacKenzie claims
that Aunt Sada’s stories about blacks were written close to
events she had observed in everyday life, which could
explain certain puzzling details of "Faith and
Faithfulness"—such as the unorthodox teaching career of
Miss Maria.

Despite the reputation of Sarah Barnwell Elliott and
her family to take "liberal" positions on race, Elliott’s
stories presuppose and advocate white superiority. Indeed,
regardless of whether the relationship between Miss Maria
and Kizzy is descriptive of reality (i.e., based on
relationships obtaining between actual women of Elliott’s
acquaintance) or instead is prescriptive allegory, the point
seems to be that the kind of intimacy these friends achieved
was based on their mutual acceptance of white supremacy and
the social conventions supporting it. Absent from Elliott’s
canon of published fiction is any depiction of interracial
relationship based on the friends’ mutual assumption of each
other's essential equality, and therefore classifiable as truly anti-racist.

Elliott's work is nonetheless noted in some of the early, basic reference tools designed to stimulate feminist criticism of "lost" American women writers, tools such as Mainiero's four volume dictionary of American Women Writers (Gaskill) or the Twayne series of literary biographies (Mackenzie). Elliott is recognized and valued for her work in the suffrage movement (she led the fight to have Tennessee ratify the nineteenth amendment, for example, and was instrumental in arranging the first convention of the NAWSA in the South). But feminist scholars have found it possible to discuss Elliott's feminist political work without reference to her attitudes toward race relations—even though historians of the feminist movement are well aware of the series of political compromises, made at the expense of black women, which made the feminist movement viable in the South in Elliott's day.\(^{15}\) Elliott's fiction has also been labeled "feminist" for its treatment of themes of gender. Yet critics such as Mackenzie do not turn a feminist critical lens on Elliott's black female characters. It is as though the author's "racial" stories are of another order entirely from her "feminist" ones. This is a disturbing lapse of white feminist self-reflection.

Also disturbing is Elliott's attitude toward black men. In particular, the title story of An Incident, in which a
black man is accused of raping a white woman and is almost lynched, raises important critical problems for the study of white Southern women's literature of the period, particularly if we want to determine the extent to which white women were willing and able to resist the racial status quo of the time, or the extent to which they were complicit with white men as a consolidated racial class. "An Incident" is a story concerned with the ethics of lynch mobs, a tale which ultimately seems to justify the actions of white men who lynch blacks. Certain techniques of local color writing, however, tend to obscure the political nature of the text. In particular, the technique of asserting the narrator as nonjudgmental and non-intrusive reporter, the narrator as a camera's eye which simply records, creates doubt as to the attitude which Elliott holds toward her materials. Internal evidence from the story, however, suggests that Elliott was, at least partially, at odds with the official white position. Either of the following two possibilities seems likely: Elliott may have been constrained by her publisher to create a story fitting the rape-lynch scenario which was emerging at the time, or her own contradictory ideas about race prevented her from resolving, or even fully articulating, the problems which generated "An Incident" and were generated by it. Because the story contains no friendships between black and white women, I will not treat "An Incident" thoroughly here. But
I do want to use it to raise important questions about the autonomy of Southern white women as producers of literature and, consequently, as producers of other social texts—in particular, the culture texts qualifying friendships and other relationships between black and white women.

Mackenzie lists many literary "firsts" as Elliott's achievements. Among these is the first creation of a black man as a criminal in literature. Mackenzie is referring, of course, to "An Incident." For the first three quarters of the story, however, the criminal nature of the black man is not determined or known, but only assumed. The story opens with a missing white woman, a cringing black "gal" who not reluctantly informs on Abram, the field hand who is also missing, and a husband who immediately assumes his wife has been raped and murdered by him. The husband alerts the sherriff, who gathers a posse to search for and find Abram. Most of the story centers on the sherriff's attempt to prevent the lynching which everyone expects as a matter of course. The main conflict of the story takes place within the sherriff. He is torn between his sense of official duty—he is committed to upholding the law, which prohibits lynching—and his conviction that the black man should be swiftly and surely punished, that lynching is correct. The conflict, in other words, is between two forms of justice, the official legal system of the United States and the older form of "folk justice" which the white townsmen want
immediately to administer. The sherriff's other conflict is
whether black men can properly be thought of as "citizens,"
and whether the protection of black life is worth dying for
as one would willingly die for one's country.

The white woman is absent throughout most of the story,
which allows it easily to be read (as I read it) as
confirmation of what Ida B. Wells stated so often: that the
charges of rape which justified the lynchings of so many
black men were never investigated, nor could often be
proven. "An Incident" can therefore be read as a blatant
expose of white men's need to bond with each other, to
recuperate the appearance of their own lawlessness, and to
support each other's practice of mayhem on the black
population. It is a brilliant deconstruction of white
Southern male "honor."

That is, until the story changes.

Toward the story's end, abruptly, the white woman
appears and explains "He didn't touch me." But, she goes on
to testify, he did threaten her with a hatchet, which caused
her to flee. After this revelation, all the voices of the
text are made to agree that there is a problem: what to do
about the criminal black man who makes life so unsafe for
that flower of Southern civilization, the white lady. The
black man, when finally allowed to speak for himself,
asserts that it doesn't matter what he says. It doesn't
matter if the white mob kills him now, or if he spends his
life in prison, or is released a "free" man—for, as Mackenzie points out, for a black man in 1899, life anywhere in the South is equivalent to a death sentence.

What is astounding about this story is the abrupt shift which relocates "the problem." Initially, at least as I read it, the problem is the hysterical reaction of white men to the (imagined) possibility of a black man raping a white woman and their subsequent lawlessness and violence. But by the story's conclusion, this problem is displaced. The black man, revealing his criminal nature, justifies in a sense the attitude of the whites and becomes himself the problem. Elliott's allowance of one small speech to her black male character is not enough to dispel that—thus it would remain for a greater artist such as Richard Wright in *Native Son* (who essentially has written the same story) fully to explain what Abram means when he says nothing matters and to reformulate "the problem" as the social system which creates such criminals.

The confused qualities of the text after the white woman's appearance in it suggest the possibility that Elliott was pressured by her publishers to write a story which would not contradict the emerging scenario of the black rapist, a story which she perhaps did not fully endorse. Support for this speculation includes Elliott's need for her work to be commercially successful, for she had by 1899 three adopted nephews to support and she took her
duty toward them seriously. Or, her own loyalty to the white community could have caused her to retreat from the implications of her own fictional creation of the dynamics of the mob. Thus, by hastily bringing in the white woman as key witness for the prosecution and then forcing all the voices of the text to cohere in agreement about the black man's guilt, she might stave off her own uncertainty about the nature of the white man's system of justice in so many other cases. Unfortunately, at the present time there exists no concrete evidence on which to base these speculations.

Elliott's fiction raises important questions about the complicated and ambiguous racial heritage of Southern white woman, a heritage which includes personal liking for individual blacks, yet little encouragement to recognize the possibility that black and white people may be social equals. It includes sexual fear of black men, yet perhaps an unwillingness to have black men murdered in one's name. Another Elliott story, "The Heart of It," which the author was either unwilling or unable to publish in her own lifetime, highlights some of these tensions in its account of a white woman's lifetime patronage of a "black" girl. She has raised the girl, her niece, as white in order to save the family honor after her brother has so foolishly married a woman with "a drop of black blood" in her veins. When the "black" niece wants to marry a white cousin, the
aunt reveals the girl’s identity to her and she flees, suddenly confused. The aunt, driven by the same noblesse oblige for which the Elliotts had become famous, had taught her thoroughly the important lesson of black inferiority. No one follows the girl’s reckless and self-destructive flight; the aunt is especially relieved that the burden she has so patiently born all the years of the girl’s life has now been lifted. The fact that this story was not published raises serious questions. Could it be that fiction representing complex racial relationships and based on plots not generated from the emerging scenarios were simply unpublishable? Who decided what fiction saw print? More research is necessary to discover the extent to which white Southern women controlled the use of their public voices in this period.

We do know that fiction by white women which reinforced the emerging rape-lynch scenario, or which hearkened back to the older plantation tradition, was frequently able to find an audience. Mollie Moore Davis’s stories are of this type and were quite popular. Moore’s story "A Bamboula" is remarkable for its representation of another scenario which controlled ideas about interracial relationships between women. In "A Bamboula," which takes place in the Reconstruction era rather than the antebellum period, a gorgeous, sensual, light-skinned black woman seduces the fiancé of the white woman whose maid she is. The white
woman, after struggling silently with the jealousy and anger and sense of betrayal she feels, instructs the huge, full-blooded African whose loyalty to her is unquestionable to kill the black woman. He does the murder, despite the fact that he has loved his victim since they were children together. The white woman languishes after sending her faithless lover away.

This is one of many stories in which the relationship between a white and black woman is primarily jealous. The sexual jealousy of white women toward black women was frequently discussed in black women's slave narratives and early fiction such as Our Nig. In those early texts, black women emphasized their own unwillingness to be white men's partners, a theme which would be repeated by black women writers of the Reconstruction and after. Yet, these refutations that the black woman is a sexual threat have always had to compete with stories such as "A Bamboula" that claim that she is. And by the 1960s, black women would be able to express the same idea in reverse: that white women are a sexual threat to themselves. Interracial sexual jealousy, essentially similar to sexual jealousy between women of the same race, is made still deeper, more complicated, and more painful by the history of antagonism between the two groups. Many women feel especially powerless when confronted by a rival of another race because less able to compete against the other--seen as so much more
sexually desireable because sexually exotic—to regain her man. In addition, white women can be jealous of the image of black women's sexuality—unrestrained, passionate, primitive—because white culture forces such severe penalties on white women's sexual expression. White women aren't allowed to be seductive or passionate. But, white women who feel this way ignore black women's testimony to the degradation they suffer on account of this image, and how "unfree" they are too to seek autonomous and satisfying sexuality. This jealousy frequently finds expression in violence. It remains far easier to attack the other woman than it is to confront the man. In "A Bamboula," the white woman does confront him, but he suffers far less than the black woman who is made to forfeit her life.

Finally, this survey of white Southern women writers in the period between the Civil War and the Harlem Renaissance would be incomplete without consideration of the stories of Kate Chopin. Chopin's short fiction departs from that of her peers in its amoral, and apolitical, intent. By this, I do not suggest the possibility of a politically neutral fiction, only that Chopin detested preaching and did not consider her work a form of social criticism, nor an attempt to change people's minds about the issues of the day. Her writing was avant-garde and experimental. She did not write allegory with a politically efficacious moral tag; she wrote "slice of life" stories, or fiction with "scarcely any story
She seems to have been more interested in individual consciousness and experience, in the social processes which shape it, in characters' perceived choices and values, and in the meanings they are able to draw from their lives. Of course, these issues are profoundly "political," but Chopin's stories never prescribed behavior, were never didactic, nor did the writer attempt to regulate others.

Although in her own day her short fiction was assessed as her superior work, Chopin is most famous today for her second novel, *The Awakening* (1899). Prior to its publication, Chopin had moved through two fairly distinct periods of literary production. Her first novel, *At Fault* (1890) is conventional and unremarkable. After its publication, Chopin wrote short stories of local color, many of which depict interracial friendship. By 1897, "Kate Chopin had virtually given up writing dialect stories and using Blacks as major characters: she was more interested in exploring the psyches of white women" (Toth, unpublished ts). In the years between 1894 and 1897, Chopin's personal showcase was the magazine *Vogue*, whose editors encouraged her to experiment with form and to treat unconventional themes. By 1899, Chopin had succeeded in establishing an admiring female audience for her daring tales of emancipated and passionate women characters. It was the male critics
who bashed *The Awakening* and silenced Chopin in the twentieth century.

After many decades of critical neglect, in the 1940s renewed attention was given to Chopin's work. By the 1960s, her reputation was reestablished as a major writer. In 1969, Per Seyersted's edition of her *Complete Works* was released, and in 1976, Norton issued a critical edition of *The Awakening*. Feminist scholars of the 70s celebrated the novel, claiming it to be an "ovular" achievement. Most criticism of Chopin since then has been both feminist and directed to *The Awakening*, although several anthologies of her short stories have been reissued in the last five years and are attracting new readers.19

In a pattern similar to that which has governed the reception of Sarah Barnwell Elliott, Chopin's stories about race and interracial relationships have rarely been analyzed from a feminist perspective. "Desiree's Baby," Chopin's frequently anthologized short story, is the exception (this story, by the way, is the work that kept the tiny flame of Chopin's literary reputation burning after *The Awakening* was disgraced). Emily Toth (1981) has analyzed "Desiree's Baby" as a political analysis of slavery as a distinct form of patriarchy which develops only certain kinds of human personalities. Toth and other major Chopin critics such as Richard Potter (1971) and Per Seyersted (1969a; 1969b), point out that the author's stories, while certainly
containing racist elements, ultimately depart from the racist stereotypes dominating the literary representation of blacks and relationships between the races. Chopin offers instead black characters who are individuals or whose stereotypical traits are the scars of slavery. Among these stories are several containing interracial friendships among women. 20

"Tante Catrinette," one of Chopin's stories of interracial friendship, in many ways presents the conventional image of the devoted servant so beloved by white supremacists of the age. First published in the 1894 volume of the Atlantic Monthly after having been written in February of that year, "Tante Catrinette" was subsequently collected in A Night in Acadie (1897) and the Collected Works. The story concerns Catrinette's decision to leave her home to care for the young Kitty, granddaughter of her former master. At Kitty's birth, she is not expected to live, but Catrinette nurses her to health. Grateful, her grandfather frees Catrinette and gives her land and a house. Since then, Catrinette has been devoted to the family. When the story opens, Catrinette is in danger of losing the house to the city, which wants to develop the property. The ex-slave has decided not to leave, and to fight anyone who tries to remove her. She hears that Kitty is sick and at first believes it is a trick to induce her to leave so that in her absence the house can be demolished and the property
seized. But her love for Kitty proves to be stronger than her desire to stay. Judging the time between midnight and dawn to be the safest, Catrinette travels through the night to nurse Kitty, now a married woman with children of her own. On the way home, in the dark hour before dawn, Catrinette has a vision of the old grandfather and returns to Kitty’s cabin. She decides to sell the house and give the money to Kitty’s husband for Kitty to have after her old Tante is dead. The story ends in a celebration.

What prevents this story from finally being nothing more than the orgy of black self-sacrifice to white need we have come to expect from writers of this age is the psychological depth of the character Catrinette. As Chopin writes her, she is not only devoted to Kitty’s family, but also deeply aware of self and capable of identifying and protecting her own interests. Kitty and her husband treat Catrinette with genuine affection and respect; they are grateful for her attention and don’t demand it. It is possible to imagine Catrinette living on in this household with no loss of self-respect or personal freedom.

In “Old Aunt Peggy,” a story which does not depict friendship between black and white women, Chopin departs even further from the image of the devoted slave. Written in 1892, “Old Aunt Peggy” first appeared in Bayou Folk (1894). The story opens at the end of the war, when Peggy is already an old woman. She announces her intention:
Massa, I ain’t never gwine to quit yer. I’m gittin’ ole an’ fæble, an’ my days is few in dis heah lan’ o’ sorrow an’ sin. All I axes is a li’le co’ner what I kin set down an’ wait peaceful fu de en’. (193)

At Peggy’s display of loyalty, “Monsieur and Madame were very much touched” (193) and give her an endowment. Peggy proceeds to live years and years after that, at the white people’s expense, and to their amazement. Peggy, then, is a sort of trickster who uses the racist role to her own advantage.

Elsewhere, in Chopin stories, such as "The Benitous’ Slave" or "For Marse Chouchoute," the devoted servant is depicted not as hero, but as victim of a certain mental illness which prevents him from knowing how or being able to take care of himself. These stories, with their male characters, are beyond the scope of this study, but are mentioned here to point out how Chopin used conventionally racist materials only in order to lead readers beyond the standard meanings. The Benitous’ slave and Wash, Marse Chouchoute’s devoted servant, are portrayed as creatures so damaged by slavery as to be tragic; in Chopin’s fictional world, the self-effacing psyches of devoted servants are presented as evidence of that damage.

Chopin also inverts the powerful and destructive image of the black rapist. "In Sabine," also first published in Bayou Folk, is a story of wife abuse in which a black man, Mortimer, protects the young white woman from her husband.
Mortimer is no devoted servant, but the husband's equal; the two are partners in a sharecropping venture.

"La Belle Zoraide" is not a story with a happy ending, such as William Dean Howells would have approved, but recalls instead the abolitionist stories of Lydia Maria Child, whose mulatta heroines go mad and destroy themselves. It was first published in Vogue in 1893. An outer narrative frame presents a black woman devoted to the sensual pleasure of her white mistress; she bathes her, kisses her feet, prepares her for bed, and tells her the story of Zoraide. La Belle is a fair-skinned slave whose mistress wants her to marry the mulatto manservant of her own suitor. Zoraide dislikes him because he is white-looking; she prefers Mezor, a black-skinned field hand. Mistress forbids the union as unfitting. Zoraide asks "Am I not white?" by which she means to assert that she recognizes no class distinctions among slaves. She makes love to Mezor despite her owner's objections and soon becomes pregnant. Madame has Mezor sold far away, steals the child, tells Zoraide it has died, and eagerly awaits the time when Zoraide would again be "at her side free, happy, and beautiful as of old" (306). The mistress's use of the word "free" in her fantasy of a restored "friendship" between herself and her slave reveals her amazing capacity for self-delusion. The white woman wants to see herself as the generous patron of exceptional slaves, but in the end, when Zoraide is mad--she has a
bundle of rags she carries everywhere, believing it to be her lost child—it is too late for her to repair the damage she has done.

"La Belle Zoraide" moves far beyond the racist image of the tragic mulatta who pines for the love of a white man. Chopin's Zoraide is clear about her race, her identity, and her preference for black men. Her tragedy is the institution of slavery which gives her mistress the power of life and death over her and her family.

As in so many other of Chopin's stories, there is much untold. What, for example, is the relationship of the white and black women in the frame? Is Zoraide's story the black woman's ironic and slanting criticism of her own mistress, or is it an affirmation of something different between them?

"Odalie Misses Mass" speaks of Pinky, an old ex-slave who has had two meaningful friendships with white women. When the story begins, Odalie, a young girl of thirteen, visits the cabin of her "old friend and protegee" Pinky, who was her grandmother's slave. Discovering there is no one to watch Pinky, who is so advanced in age that she falls from her chair often enough to alarm those who love her, Odalie herself decides to stay. At first, Odalie is angry that she must miss an important ceremony at the cathedral, the great feast of the Assumption. She places her chair far from Pinky on the porch and rocks "furiously" (408). Throughout the afternoon, she moves her chair closer and closer to
Pinky as they talk, until the old woman can touch her and stroke her hair. Then Pinky lapses into a senile chain of remembering; she mistakes Odalie for Paulette, "who seemed to have held her place in old Pinky's heart and imagination through all the years of her suffering life" (409). Pinky tells an old story Odalie has heard so many times she co-narrates it with the old woman. Paulette, a spoiled and petted girl-child, to whom Pinky had been companion and playmate, had once prevented Pinky from being sold when the family needed cash. And another time, Paulette threw tantrums until her father bought Hiram, the slave Pinky wanted to marry. The day is so warm, and the stories so familiar, that the two fall asleep, but when Odalie's mother comes to awaken her daughter, Pinky has died, with Odalie's head on her lap.

This story has no moral, is just a "slice of life." But along with Chopin's other interracial fiction, "Odalie Misses Mass" is of critical importance. It reveals, for one thing, that a greater variety of interracial relationship must have existed than the limited number of scenarios repeated in the fiction of the age would otherwise suggest. We see several possibilities here. One is that white women before the war might have used their limited powers as daughters (or wives) to protect, insofar as they could, the interests of the black women they considered their friends. Perhaps Odalie's being a child qualifies our sense of this
relationship with Pinky as a friendship, for it is not unusual for young white girls easily to relate to black women they see somehow as mothers or surrogate mothers. Yet, there is a genuineness about Odalie’s attitude toward Pinky—perhaps in its impurity, for we see Odalie not only indulging sentimentality, but also angry at the old woman and bored with her repetitive stories. The relationship simply goes beyond stereotype.

In this, "Odalie Misses Mass" and Chopin’s other interracial fiction discussed above bears witness to a white Southern female consciousness out of step with the dominant racial ideas of the day. Her work testifies to the existence of fissures in the wall of white racist solidarity, fissures which we hope our work will widen.

Black Women Writers: The Emergence of a Tradition.

Ann Allen Shockley has written that "[t]he significance of the period from Reconstruction to the century’s end lies in the emergence of Afro-American women writers" (109). After the war, black women perceived that their situation was urgent. Not only did they share with whites the experiences of wrenching dislocations, homelessness, and unemployment, but as ex-slaves they faced the challenges of reuniting families that had been fragmented under slavery, achieving literacy, and providing for themselves the basic needs such as food, clothing, and medical care. As the
period progressed, the newly freed slaves were betrayed by politicians, so that by the turn of the century, "Afro-Americans [were] at their lowest ebb in their pursuit of social, economic, and political justice" (Shockley 277). Black people suffered near total political disenfranchisement and lived under conditions characterized by forced segregation (Jim Crow) and pervasive racial violence in the form of lynchings, house-burnings, and other Klan activity. Black women responded by organizing in a variety of ways to "uplift" the race.

Literary activity was an important part of the overall political agenda. Black women writers of the age produced not only fiction, but ex-slave narrative, spiritual autobiography, history, biography, poetry, drama, and political theory. The authors' purposes were to protest injustice, inculcate the principles of moral living, cultivate white acceptance, and provide models of black leadership. "They did not realize they were also planting the seeds for the New Negro Movement, which espoused [the formation of] black identity" unconstrained by the matrix of white values and standards (Shockley 283).

Although a significant aspect of black women's literary mission was interracial, then, the representation of interracial friendship, judging by its absence from black women's literature, was not considered an effective tool for accomplishing the cultural work proposed. The most
powerful black women's fiction of the age is centered in black community. Race relations are certainly the issue; that is, the problem is how to survive in the context of incredible white hostility, how to recover the losses incurred during slavery and during the attack on Reconstructionist progress. But black women's primary interest seems to be the development of intragroup strategies for the achievement of racial solidarity. In Frances E. W. Harper's *Iola Leroy* (1892) and Pauline Hopkins' *Contending Forces* (1899), the interracial episodes depict moments in which the heroines discover their black heritage and either transfer all loyalty to black community, or die. In other texts, recently rediscovered after nearly a century of critical neglect, white women are the opponents of black women and agents of oppression. One short story only, Charlotte Hawkins Brown's "Mammy" (1919), depicts interracial friendship between a black woman and several generations of women in a family of white aristocrats. In Brown's story, the betrayal of "Mammy" by her white "friends" is a significant revision of one of the most powerful racist stereotypes of the age: the faithful servant.

Black women writers saw themselves warriors, battling on two fronts--against racism and sexism--and in two modes--defensive and offensive. By creating exemplary black female heroines, black women writers hoped to defend the race
against the destructiveness of the cultural stereotypes we have seen evident in white literature, especially the racist formulation of the white sexist madonna/whore dichotomy that categorized black females as either mammies or jezebels. The exemplary black women characters intended as a counter-image, like their models in abolitionist fiction, were white- or near-white-looking women whose moral conduct—especially their sexual conduct—was unimpeachable. These characters illustrated all that was best in the race as they dedicated themselves, like their creators, to the work of uplifting it. Reforming the nineteenth century romance, black women writers created new plots for these heroines which subordinated courtship to politics.23

The representation of political activity constituted fiction's offensive function. The claim made by Hazel Carby (1987b) for the fiction of Pauline Hopkins can accurately be generalized to account for other major writers of the period such as Frances E. W. Harper.24 Carby's thesis is that Hopkins' plots displace the dominant narratives justifying segregation and imperialism in its forms of Manifest Destiny and overseas colonial expansion. Hopkins' novels work by asserting "an alternative fictional history of close blood ties through miscegenation. Social Darwinism and the discourse of racial inferiority were replaced by an attack on the barbarity of the practices of rape and lynching" (128) and on "the mythological pretensions of the American
story of origins" (106). The literature being recanonized
by black feminist critics today also includes Miss
Garrison's *A Ray of Light* (1889-1890), Sarah Lee Brown
Fleming's *Hope's Highway* (1918), Mary Etta Spencer's *The
Resentment* (1921), Lillian Wood's *Let My People Go* (1922),
and Zara Wright's *Black and White Tangled Threads* (1920).
Not all of these are feminist, or even female-centered
novels, but all are "political" novels proposing agendas for
dealing with the problems black people faced at this
critical moment of history.

The black women authors' new concern was to create the
valid characters and plots necessary to fulfill the
potential of fiction to be a powerful vehicle of social
change. By the end of the period in the 1920s, more
"authentic" black women's texts emerged concurrently with
the development of an autonomous black press and a growing
public familiarity with the category of "race literature."
In these texts, authors reformed the vicious and oppressive
stereotypes of black women and altered the narrative
expectations embodied in fiction concerning possibilities
for black women's lives. From the tragic mulattas and
mammies faithful to white folks, black women writers moved
toward representations of self-respecting black women who
find ways to become powerful and effective political
advocates for their own black communities.
The new theoretical framework for interpreting early black women's fiction locates two major interracial relationships. The first is between black author and white reader; the second is between black author and white-dominant literary tradition. To these interracial relationships are attributed all the weaknesses of this group of texts (and by "weaknesses" I mean simply those elements which alienate specific readers). The defensive characterization in this period of black female heroines as white or nearly white has been discussed by every feminist critic, with black female authors' perceived need to appeal to white readers (and be acceptable to white publishers) widely assumed to explain the centering of their fiction around such "inauthentic" constructs. The problems associated with this device need not be rehearsed again here, as they are the same ones raised in connection with white women's abolitionist fiction before the war. Suffice it to say, with Ann Allen Shockley, that it is certainly "a pathetic interval in literary history when black women writers were conditioned to think that white readers would not relate to lives unlike their own" (112).

Similarly, the absence of a black women's literary tradition and the consequent reliance of black authors on white models have been used to explain the halting quality of much of this fiction, the contrived and melodramatic elements of plot, and the stilted representation of black
speech. Beginning with Alice Walker's "In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens," critics have speculated about the damage done to black women writers who have no models on which to base their work. The image emerges of black women writers laboring heroically with unwieldy and recalcitrant white-authored forms to "throw up a highway through the wilderness" for literary daughters. Critical attention has been refocused on black sources of the early novel such as slave narrative and public speaking in order to underscore the offensive, assertive, and self-creating work of black women's fiction.

The representation of political activity, as I have said, constitutes this offensive function and has been revalued as the most significant criteria of aesthetic worth. Hazel Carby's assessment of Contending Forces has already been cited in this regard. Similarly, critic Mary Helen Washington concludes that Harper's Iola Leroy, being much more "progressive" than Contending Forces because its author is more readily able to express anger toward whites and more militant, is the major text of the period. Recent black feminist criticism, in strict opposition to the aesthetic developed since the Harlem Renaissance that would devalue the early black women writers, is committed to understanding the different aesthetic which powers the political impulse of black women's fiction. The strategy of reading this early fiction in the context of the black
feminist social philosophers and political theorists of the
day, such as Anna Julia Cooper, Ida B. Wells, Frances Harper
herself, and Mary Church Terrell, confirms this.

Black feminist theory at the turn of the twentieth
century contains remarkable images of white women. A
powerful body of writing, early black feminist theory
interrogates the convergence of racism with sexism in the
oppression of black women, a point which white feminist
theory has yet fully to appreciate. Anna Julia Cooper,
like many abolitionists, grounds her black feminist theory
in a Christian theology of liberation. In *A Voice From the
South* (1892), her most famous work, Cooper asserted the need
for black women to speak for themselves. She located
women’s power in their ability to influence others and
faulted white women as mothers and wives for tolerating, if
not encouraging the racism of their sons, daughters, and
husbands. Cooper developed her ideas about the separate
spheres of women and men finally to critique the internal
colonization of blacks at home and racist imperialism
abroad. Her linkage of male aggression to the practice of
war would be echoed later in the twentieth century by
radical feminist theorists of the anti-nuclear movement.
According to Cooper, women’s influence could save the world
from "the beast" (Cooper’s phrase, drawn from the Christian
Bible’s chapter of "Revelations"). But women’s saving
influence could only work if they detached their loyalties
from men and "exercise[d] sensitiviy and sympathy toward the poor and oppressed" (Carby 1987b: 102). Furthermore, Cooper, in essays such as "Woman versus the Indian," attacks white feminists for advancing their own interests at the expense of other racial groups and condemned the exclusionary practices of white women’s organizations. She underscores the racial prejudice of white women who would not accept free black women as social equals and understands white women’s clinging to the privileges of race and class conferred on them through their associations with powerful white men as a betrayal of their own stated feminist ideals. Cooper sees white women as extremely powerful, a view white women did not hold of themselves, nor do we yet—a fact that could explain much of white women’s reluctance to see ourselves as agents of racial oppression and revise our actions accordingly.31

Similarly, Ida B. Wells, in her more limited analysis of the practice of lynching, indicts white women as members of white community. At key points in her text, Wells seems to be speaking only to white men—for example in the frequently quoted passage below:

Nobody in this section of the country believes the old thread bare lie that Negro men rape white women. If Southern white men are not careful, they will over-reach themselves and public sentiment will have a reaction; a conclusion will then be reached which will be very damaging to the moral reputation of their women. (258).
But by implication, Wells faults white women for not speaking up with the truth (i.e., that their sexual relations with black men are consensual). Silent, white women condone lynching and permit it to continue. Both Wells and Harper joined Cooper's condemnation of the racism of white feminism, characterizing white women generally—whether their political tendencies were conservative, liberal, or radical—as champions of racial oppression. Ida B. Wells was almost alone in acknowledging that there were exceptions to the general rule, in particular the committed white women who traveled South after the war in order to help "uplift" the black race:

From every nook and corner of the North, brave young white women answered that call and left their cultured homes, their happy associations and their lives of ease, and with heroic determination went to the South to carry light and truth to the benighted blacks. It was heroism no less than that which calls for volunteers for India, Africa and the Isles of the sea. To educate their unfortunate charges; to teach them the Christian virtues and to inspire in them the moral sentiments manifest in their own lives, these young women braved dangers whose record reads more like fiction than fact. They became social outlaws in the South. The peculiar sensitiveness of the southern white men for women, never shed its protecting influence about them. No friendly word from their own race cheered them in their work; no hospitable doors gave them the companionship like that from which they had come. No chivalrous white man doffed his hat in honor or respect. They were 'Nigger teachers'—unpardonable offenders in the social ethics of the South, and were insulted, persecuted and ostracised, not by Negroes, but by the white manhood which boasts of its chivalry toward women" (259-60)
But these exceptional white women do not figure prominently in turn of the century black feminist accounts of the structural relationships of black to white women, nor in accounts of the possibility of change. Overwhelmingly, black women saw whites as possessing an unfulfilled capacity to influence white culture to eliminate racism, a potential whose promise was frequently betrayed, making white women a formidable enemy.

This theoretical position is reflected in early black women's fiction. In this literature, the predominant image of white woman is that of enemy and opponent. Before explicating this image, however, I would like to reemphasize that relationships between black and white women are marginal in these early black women's texts, centered as they are on black women's power to advocate for and serve black community. It could be argued that black women's early fiction thus reflected the contemporary politics of segregation in which black and white social worlds are completely disjoined. Dexter Fisher, in her "Introduction to Black Women's Literature," has suggested a sexual division of labor within the black writing community. Severing the world into "public" and "private" spheres, this division allots to black men the subject of "public" confrontational relationships with the white power structure, while consigning women writers to the subject of "private" relationships within black families and
communities (143). Historian Jacqueline Jones has demonstrated that black men and women in the nineteenth century, having obtained freedom, reasserted traditional sexual divisions of labor which had been blurred, at the expense of the black family, to meet the labor needs of white owners. Jones' conclusion could be construed in support of Fisher's observation of literary work. However, to claim a strictly "private" interest of black women's fiction is to ignore the profound revision undertaken by black women writers of the grand narratives that dominated public discourse.

While Hopkins' *Contending forces*, for example, is loosely speaking a romance, significant sections revise the dominant narrative of lynching. In the public meeting scene in which the black community congregates to discuss their response to a lynching that has just occurred, desirable black male characters, such as Luke Sawyer and Will Smith, assert the authority of personal experience to expose the rape-story as a fabrication. Luke Sawyer replaces that lie with the truth of his own life, in which he saw with his own eyes the rape of his mother and sisters by white men. Admitting the possibility that black men may rape white women, Will Smith claims that these rapes are the outgrowth of racial hatred which white people can control by stopping oppression. Furthermore, he claims that the reverse situation--when white men rape black women--is much more
common and as proof Smith offers the rainbow of "black" complexions—again, the authority of personal experience. As can be seen, *Contending Forces* shares with Harper’s *Iola LeRoi* an imaging of interracial relationships as mostly sexual. An effective political strategy, given the powerful dominant images of black men raping white women and black women seducing white men, is to marginalize such liaisons, representing them as unwanted, unsought, and unsound. Will Smith asserts flatly: black people don’t want miscegenation, but the chance to live in black communities unmolested by whites. Exemplary heroines such as Iola LeRoi or Sappho Clark, are not tragic mulattas who die rather than accept black identity, nor do they attempt to pass, but proudly accept and cherish blackness and seek black men as life-partners in the work of racial uplift.

Although friendship between black women is a crucial aspect of black women’s literature of the period, as Mary Helen Washington has pointed out (76), interracial friendship with white women is nearly absent. To the contrary, most interracial contact is abusive and threatening. At the very least, contact with white women leaves black women feeling defeated, exhausted, and despised. The episode from Lillian Wood’s *Let My People Go* (1922) anthologized by Shockley represents a white woman as agent of racist oppression. Helen, the young black protagonist, is traveling and doesn’t want to sit in the Jim
Crow waiting room because there are drunk, rough men. She sits quietly in the white section until a white woman is alerted to her presence by "a child's voice":

"See, Daddy, theuh's a nigguh gul!"
"O John! Baby's right. How scandalous! Why do they permit such things? Do go and have huh sent out..." (395).

John obeys and the station-master evicts her.

Occasionally, however, white women can be reeducated. In Miss Garrison's *A Ray of Light*, for example, a novel serialized in the *A.M.E. Church Review* from July 1889 to April 1890, a young girl leaves home to sew for white families in order to support her own. Designed to protest racism in the church, Garrison's novel features a heroine who learns "firsthand about white northern prejudices and discrimination against those of her color" (Shockley 152). Shockley anthologizes a fragment in which the daughter warns her mother away from going to an all-white church because of the Jim Crow restrictions on seating. In another episode a white door-to-door evangelist urges the mother and daughter to attend. The two black women, in didactic, crisp, and flat speeches, lecture her about why they don't. The white woman is incredulous to learn that pews aren't being sold to black people by the church elders (all white men). The white woman's complicity in oppressive white institutions is thus represented as a form of ignorance. A more insidious form of white female ignorance is demonstrated when the
stranger begins mouthing platitudes about how the servants she has known were treated "almost like one of the family" (158), a phrase which Alice Childress would still be angry about in the 1950s nearly a hundred years later. Childress's 1956 novel Like One of the Family anatomizes the racism practised in such white homes with black servants. In Garrison's story, Mrs. Leland and her daughter refute each of the white woman's mistaken ideas about the relationship between the races. She, in turn, is passive and receptive. Before she leaves, she has agreed to investigate church policy and thanked her teachers: "I am certainly obliged for the instruction you have given me this afternoon" (161). This exchange may contain the seeds of a friendship, for, in leaving, the white woman invites the Lelands to visit in her home.

One story, "Mammy" (1919) by Charlotte Hawkins Brown, contains relationships called by the narrator "friendships"—that is, at least initially. Like "Aunt Lindy," a short story self-published by activist Victoria Earle [Matthews] in 1893,33 "Mammy" features as protagonist an older, identifiably black woman who speaks in dialect. These two stories are a remarkable achievement in black women's literature, for they each revise the "Mammy" stereotype in significant ways. Earle's Aunt Lindy is not the devoted servant who remains faithful to her former owners after the war, but an angry woman, a woman who still
grieves for her children sold away years before. A Christian story with a moral, "Aunt Lindy" tells of a woman's triumph over her urges to murder her ex-master. Charlotte Brown's "Mammy" revises the stereotype in a different way. Brown grants the stereotype's premise—that some blacks did remain faithful to their former owners—but does not reward her character for this behavior. Drawing on her observations of real life, Brown narrates how Mammy was "left destitute in old age by those she has been faithful to unto death."

"Mammy" is propelled toward its conclusion by a series of contrasting images. Initially, white wealth is contrasted with black poverty as the narrator describes the grounds of the old plantation and the two structures which still are standing: the Big House and Mammy's cabin. As the story progresses, the white characters' high valuation of material wealth is contrasted with the black characters' high value placed on moral integrity and the spiritual life. Throughout the story, Brown juxtaposes whites' nostalgic memories of former grandeur, a significant component of which is their self-image of benevolent caretaker of blacks, with the reality of their neglect and usury of the former slaves.

The plot relates the last days of Mammy's life in which characters recollect the past so that readers finally know a great deal about the black woman's history. She has nursed
four generations of Brethertons, and formed extremely close
friendships with Edith, the youngest Bretherton, and her
great-grandmother, who is Mammy’s age-mate and who dies at
the same time. Edith has gone to school and challenged the
teacher’s "abolitionist" version of antebellum and
Reconstruction era "sociology" by claiming the close and
mutually supportive relationships between the races
manifested in her own household by the devotion of her
family and Mammy’s to each other. This makes Edith
instantly popular, and she invites a gaggle of schoolgirls
home for the holiday to see firsthand how they all live
together.

Before her guests arrive, Edith is worried about the
impression that Mammy’s rundown cabin will make on her
friends:

"Mother," said Edith, "it would never do to
carry the girls down to the ‘ole cabin.’ I know
it’s spotless, but it looks as if it would tumble
down every minute, and when I was there last fall,
Mammy had a wash tub on top of the bed to catch
the large drops of rain."

"Why didn’t you tell your papa?" said her
mother.

"Mother," Edith answered, "I did, but papa
said the old folks hadn’t long to live, and as
soon as they were dead the cabin would be torn
down and the property would be for sale, and he
said it was useless to spend any money on it."

"Well, don’t let the situation worry you,
little girl," remarked her mother, "your friends
will be having such a gay time that the question
of sociology in these quarters will not enter
their thoughts." (370)
Despite her attempt at gaiety, however, Mrs. Bretherton suffers a pang of conscience. She recalls the closeness of the friendship between Mammy and Edith's grandmother:

"Listen, Edith," said her mother, "we ought to do more for Mammy. This winter when your papa's business was about to fail, Mammy somehow or other noticed that something had happened. It was really necessary to cut down the food supply. She sought the confidence of your grandmother, who loves Mammy as a sister, you know; Granny told her all. Edith, it would have brought tears to your eyes if you had seen them weeping on each other's shoulders. I saw Granny count out ten one hundred dollar bills that Mammy handed to her which she said she had kept as her son's 'surance money'". (370-71)

But the white women's impulse of guilty concern is short lived. In all the excitement of the vacation, they forget about Mammy. But Mammy doesn't forget about them. On the day Edith is supposed to leave for school again, there is a freak snowstorm. Mammy ventures out in it to deliver to Edith a basket of fresh-baked biscuits, is buried in an avalanche of snow, and freezes to death. At the same moment, the white Granny dies in the plush comfort of the Big House. The story's final set of contrasting images is the huge marble monument which honors Granny's burial place against the image of the weathered board which marks Mammy's grave.

In Charlotte Brown's story, friendship is a central device for moving the narrative, because it provides the motivation for the devotion of Mammy's character. The point would not be lost on black readers that such extreme loyalty
to whites as Mammy felt is inappropriate at best, and
dangerous at worst, for it clearly contributed to Mammy’s
poverty, and her death. White readers would be affected in
a different way. Like abolitionist fiction, "Mammy"
exploits the reverence felt by nineteenth century white
women toward the institution of female friendship. Brown’s
strategy is to provoke the conscience of white women to
fulfill the demands of their own stated social ideals. The
idea that Brown expected a white audience is suggested by
the preface and dedication of the book to the author’s "Good
Friend Mrs. Chas. Duncan McIver":

It is with gratitude I acknowledge her personal
interest in he colored members of her household
and trust that many others may follow her example
(364).

This prefatory frame underscores the image of friendship in
the text of the story itself. It also provides another
powerful contrast: between the type of true friendship
manifest in Mrs. McIver and the false friends the
Brethertons proved themselves to be to Mammy. Brown
appealed to the loftiest self-image of white women, assuring
them in the character of Mammy what Louisa May Alcott had
declared earlier in the century: that black people would be
"quick to feel and accept the least token of brotherly love
which is slowly teaching the white hand to grasp the black,
in the great struggle for the liberty of both the races."
Conclusion

"Mammy" will be valued with "Aunt Lindy" as a significant landmark in the tradition of black women's writings because of the revisions of the Mammy stereotype undertaken by Brown and Earle in their texts. In the same way, the characters of Harper and Hopkins attempted to rescue the figure of the mulatta for their own political uses. Nonetheless, these characters are no more satisfying to readers today than the ones created by white authors less able or committed to destroying the old images.

Black women writers of the age labored within tight constraints limiting "authentic" black characterization. Most important of these constraints were the perceived need of white audiences for "black" protagonists similar to themselves in all important respects, joined with black women's own lack of a history of self-representation. Nonetheless, the disruption of stereotype attempted by these writers is the same impulse which powers the major works of black women's literature of the later twentieth century. As we will see in the next chapter, the characters created by black women writers of the Harlem Renaissance would be centrally concerned with the ways in which stereotype conditioned the perception of black people by whites and deformed black people's own self-images. After the Harlem Renaissance, to move beyond documenting the damage done to black women by cultural images to the act of disrupting
stereotypes and replacing them with new modes of perceiving black women would be the major task of black women writers. Although much poststructural theory, as Deborah McDowell has pointed out,

calls into question "naive commonsense categories of 'character,' 'protagonist,' or 'hero'" and rejects the "prevalent conception of character in the novel" which assumes that "the most successful and 'living' characters are richly delineated autonomous wholes" . . . imagining the black woman as a "whole" character or "self" has been a consistent preoccupation of black female novelists throughout their literary history. (1987: 203)

Stories such as "Mammy" or "Aunt Lindy" are the first fruits of this tradition which attempts to move beyond stereotype to grant black women the fullness of literary personhood and citizenship.

Northern white women writers such as Louisa May Alcott or Harriet E. Prescott Spofford, in the first decade after the Civil War, shared this goal of black women writers. Although their attempts at "independent" characterization of black females starkly reveal the cultural limitations of white women, at least the attempt was made. Although it would not be wise to overestimate the importance of such writings and in the process create an inaccurate impression of the extent of white women's literary anti-racism, it is wise to nourish the history, however minor the trend it narrates, of white women's nay-saying to the racial status quo.
The major trend of the period, as Albion Tourgée, Ida B. Wells, and others have pointed out, was the increasing dominance of literature by a set of premises which were racist. This so-called white Southern point of view regarding race had regained control of the literary representations of blacks by the end of the century and continued to control it for some time after. Although, as the case of Sarah Barnwell Elliott makes plain, we do not know the extent of white Southern women's resistance to the dominant point of view, we do know that it would not be until the 1940s—in the person of Lillian Smith—that white women writers who devoted their energies to the anti-racist project of black women would again be published.

Historians offer somewhat different of a picture. Jacqueline Jones, for example, in Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow, devotes critical attention to the several instances in which

A few women of the two races did come together in situations that held the promise of enhancing mutual respect and appreciation—for example, when they participated in the southern Farmers Alliance in the 1880s and 1890s, or when black 'grannies' attended white women during childbirth. (107)

Jones adds, however, that "these opportunities were rare." Still, the autobiographies and other personal documents of black and white women reveal that interracial friendship did occur during the period, perhaps not frequently, but sometimes.
Friendship existed between Charlotte Hawkins Brown and her white patrons, such as Mrs. McIver and Alice Freeman Palmer, the second president of Wellesley College who paid for Brown's education (Shockley 365). An interesting sketch by Martha McCulloch-Williams describes "A Black Settlement" for the readers of Harper's in 1896. Erroneously classified as fiction by Lamplugh, McCulloch-Williams's piece is narrated by a white woman who describes herself as a neighbor and friend to the black settlers she describes. Lamplugh, I think unfairly, calls this a racist article on the basis of one passage in which a black folk dance is described. Granted, the language is jarring to modern sensibilities, but it is not racist. Indeed, McCulloch-Williams expresses the same astonished incomprehension that marks the attitude of many whites to black forms of folk dance (even today whites are astonished at the "break dancing" and the movements accompanying "rap"). But she also evidently appreciates it, finding it both beautiful and moving. McCulloch-Williams's is a unique sketch by a sympathetic white woman of a black attempt at independence after the war. Finally, a famous friendship existed between Mary Todd Lincoln and Mrs. Keckley, an independent seamstress who worked in Washington, D.C. and wrote a famous memoir of the Lincoln years, Behind the Scenes; or, Thirty Years a Slave, and Four Years in the White House (1868). "This friendship between two women of different races and
background—one black, a former slave, and the other white, of old-line Kentucky stock and the first lady of the land—is unparalleled and makes a captivating story of women bonding despite their differences" (Shockley 137). And there is no reason to assume that these few were the only interracial friendships of the age.

What is striking about Keckley’s memoir is the absolutely unstereotypical nature of her self-image projected in the text. It is far removed from the few molds from which black characters in fiction were created. Why fiction should be a genre so incalcitrant to innovation in black characterization, when other forms such as autobiography do not seem to have posed similar problems, is an area for future research. Suffice it to say here that literature between the Civil War and the Harlem Renaissance offered fewer and more simplistic portraits of interracial friendship than exist in other genres. Literature about race continued the same battle of images that had begun in the abolitionist period, and this struggle would continue for many decades to come. Anti-racist women claim that these images were disjoined from the realities of women’s everyday lives, while those more content with the racial system claimed to be writing realistic fiction.

In the next period, as we shall see, black women writers would create complex characters better approaching their ideal of whole black female personhood, but a major
theme of black writers would be their characters' struggles to be seen as something besides the standard types. White women would be much slower, as a class, to realize the impoverishment of the racist point of view.
Notes for Chapter II

1. This point is made forcefully and persuasively by Nina Baym in her *Novels, Readers, and Reviewers* (1984).

2. There is extensive debate among feminist theorists about the conventions of plot as among those elements of fiction which feminist writers need to resist. Joanna Russ articulates the problem succinctly in her ovular essay, "What Can A Heroine Do?." Russ here suggests that, because women's actions are so constrained, "what happens" is never as important as what those events mean to characters. She redirects attention away from structuralist analysis of plot—which she says are usually "plots against women"—toward the moments when authors rupture plot, allowing their characters lyrical moments of internal monologue. For an extensive play on this idea, see the novel by Norwegian Ebba Haslund entitled *Nothing Happened*, a novel, by the way, centrally concerned with friendship among women.

3. See Winthrop Jordan's two studies, *White on Black* and *The White Man's Burden*, the first a scholarly and the second a popular account of European racial attitudes having an impact on interracial American culture.

4. In making such a statement, however, it is important to avoid what Susan Koppelman has labeled "epistemological solipsism," a procedure in which the scholar assumes that because she hasn't read it, it doesn't exist. The fact is, feminist revisionist literary historians are far from having re-read and re-valued all the literature produced by women of any age.

5. The phrase is Roland Barthes's, first appearing in his "Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narrative." See Mieke Bal for a good introductory discussion of this concept (15-16).

6. A few white Northern men did write of such experiences. See the articles by Lamplugh and Sundquist for a discussion of the works of Albion Tourgée and John William De Forest.

7. For a provocative account of the Annie Fields circle and its impact on women's literary production,

8. Alcott's feminist biographers include Madeleine Stern, whose introductions to *Behind a Mask* (1975) and *Plots and Counterplots* (1976) are good syntheses of the nineteenth and twentieth century sources. See also Elaine Showalter's introduction to *Alternative Alcott* (1988), as well as entries on Alcott in the standard sources such as Mainiero's *American Women Writers*.

9. The phrase is Showalter's. See note 8 above. See also Fetterly's 1983 discussion of Alcott's "radicalism."

10. All page numbers cited here refer to the text of *Work* reprinted by Showalter in *Alternative Alcott*.

11. Similarly, Yellin faults Alcott's mild treatment of sexual harassment, underpayment of female workers, and prostitution. She comments on the bolder stands Alcott took in her essays, such as "How I Went Out To Service," an essay reprinted in both *Alternative Alcott* and the *Norton Anthology of Literature by Women* (1985) edited by Gilbert and Gubar.

12. There is an entry on Spofford in Mainiero's *American Women Writers*, for example, and her writings are anthologized by Edwards and Diamond (*American Voices, American women*, 1973), Koppelman (*The Other Woman*, 1984), and Judith Fetterly (*Provisions*, 1985).

13. This is the kind of feminist scholarship that infuriates black women, for it discounts the presence of blacks as characters in the fiction, it discounts race as a source of female identity, and it discounts the possibility of black readers of white women's work—in short it universalizes white female experience as the norm for all female experience.


15. The fullest account of this political configuration that I know of is Paula Giddings' *When and where I Enter* (1984).
16. Mackenzie lists Elliott's other achievements as follows: She was the first Southerner to publish a postwar novel, with the exception of Twain. She was "the first Southern woman writer to view her region as part of the national scene." She is the earliest champion of woman's rights in Southern literature. "She was also one of only three southern writers recognized for the manner in which she wrote of the economic abuses of the agrarian revolt period." She was an early naturalist who "may have influenced bolder writers working in the same style, such as Frank Norris" (vi-vii).

17. In addition to "A Bamboula," see Davis's "The Centre Figger," as well. For biographical information on Davis, see Thadious M. Davis's article in American Women Writers.

18. This was the complaint lodged against Chopin by H. E. Scudder, editor of Houghton, Mifflin and The Atlantic when he rejected Chopin's work for publication (Toth, unpublished ts).

19. The critical reception of Chopin's work has been traced by Thomas Bonner, Jr., Tonnette Bond Inge, Marlene Springer, and Seyersted (1969a; 1969b). Biographical information is also in these sources, in Thelma Shinn's article in American Women Writers, and in entries in the Contemporary Authors series of reference works. All of these sources will be superceded by the forthcoming critical biography of Chopin by Emily Toth.

20. The publishing information for all the stories discussed here are from Per Seyersted's biography of Chopin (1969a). Page numbers cited in the text are from Seyersted's edition of Chopin's Complete Works (1969b).

21. The recovery and republication of nearly lost black women's texts is proceeding at a rapid pace. Shockley's critical guide (1988) is the most comprehensive single source of information about black women writers of this period. Shockley divides into two periods (1865-1900 and 1900 to 1924) the era I am treating as one. Other critics involved in canon revision include Carby, Christian, McDowell, Paula Giddings, Mary Helen Washington, and Loewenberg and
Bergin. See the bibliography for specific critical works.

22. Again, it is important to avoid epistemological solipsism.

23. See Bell, who points out that romance was by no means the only source for early black American literature.

24. Carby's book, Reconstructing womanhood, and her introductory essay to Iola LaRoi contain the most recent and comprehensive biographical data on Hopkins and Harper. See also Jane Campbell's essay on Hopkins, and essays by Maryemma Graham and Cheryl A. Wall on Harper. Shockley's critical guide also contains biographical information on them both.

25. See Pierre Macherey's discussion in A Theory of Literary Production of the "normative fallacy," an error that prompts the critic to attempt a restoration of the text to an ideal form (15-19).


27. These are the words of Nanny, Janie's grandmother in Zora Neale Hurston's Their Eyes Were Watching God. See also Shockley's comment about foremothers throughout her critical guide. Shockley considers Amelia Etta Hall Johnson, Emma Dunham Kelsey-Hawkins, Marie Louise Burgess, and Alice Ruth Moore Dunbar-Nelson to be literary foremothers who "created models for others to follow" (118) even though they wrote fiction containing all white characters. Shockley examines the publishing industry's racism and sexism to demonstrate the reasons black women writers employed these writing strategies. They are not unlike the self-masking techniques used by white women writers documented by Gilbert and Gubar in their monumental The Madwoman in the Attic. See also McDowell's 1987 essay on "Generational Connections" between black women writers in which she discusses the need of some contemporary writers, such as Alice Walker, to reclaim these "inauthentic" moments of black women's literary history by bringing them forward, incorporating them in contemporary literary texts.
28. For a fuller account of this process, see Carby's introduction to Frances Harper’s *Iola Lerou*.

29. This is true despite the succinct recent formulation of the position by the Combahee River Collective in their "Statement on Black Feminism," an essay widely anthologized in works frequently cited by white feminists.

30. See, for example, the writings collected in Pam McAllister, ed., *Reweaving the Web of Life* (1982).

31. This is one of the famous "common differences" between black and white feminist perspectives. (The phrase is from Gloria I. Joseph and Jill Lewis, whose groundbreaking study of differences in black and white women's cultures should be extremely influential in the next phase of feminist scholarship.) Differences in black and white women's notions of power—their own and each other's—must be interrogated, for they underlie a great many of our theoretical assumptions and political agendas. One potentially fruitful line of inquiry might be the conceptions and representations of "patriarchy" in white as opposed to black women's texts. Carby, for example, drawing on the work of Nina Baym, asserts that white women writers "did not represent in their texts the institutionalization of patriarchal power; heroines negotiated their way between individualized fathers, brothers, and potential lovers. The consequence for women's fiction was that 'the shape of human life was perceived not as determined by various memberships, but by various private interactions'. [Black women writers use heroines] as a means whereby a reader could identify the plight of a people and their struggles against the institutionalized hierarchies of racial power" (1987b: 73-74).


33. See Carby's *Reconstructing Womanhood*, Shockley's critical guide, and essays in the standard sources, such as Hutson's in *Notable American Women* for information on Matthews.
Chapter III:

The Arrogant Eyes of White Women:

Literature from the Harlem Renaissance to 1940

Introduction.

In the later nineteenth century, women writers remained locked into battle with the stereotypes of black character and the plots attached to them that fixed black identity as destiny that had been developed earlier. Whether or not these constellations of character and plot were descriptive of reality, or prescriptive instead, was an issue hotly debated. Whatever one's opinion, the images and scenarios of race were so firmly fixed in the public mind that no writer whose subject was black people or "the race problem" could ignore their presence.

As a consequence, a new interest in racial identity emerged in the literature of the Harlem Renaissance. At this time, we see the beginnings of an awareness of race, not as an essence determining character and destiny, but as a sign with unfixed meaning, subject to interpretation. Nella Larsen and Jessie Fauset wrote novels which waver between these two models of racial significance. The main characters in their novels struggle to be seen as something other than the standard types, but are unable fully to do
so. Sometimes they consider race as a fact of nature with certain social consequences, or they struggle to understand the essential "racial" qualities in themselves. Alternately, they sometimes begin to understand racial identity as an arbitrary social construct disjoined from biological essence and therefore subject to reformulation. In this model, racial "difference" is produced by the interpretative strategies of human beings "reading" each other for racial significance. Thus, race is simultaneously an artificial construct and so deeply impressed upon everyday life as to seem an inescapable aspect of nature.

Additionally, in black women's texts, identity is not one-dimensional, but has its sources in several other categories of "difference" as well, the most important of these being sex and class. The black feminist literary criticism of the 1980s has refocused attention to issues of sexual politics in these novels.

Black women writers resist received definitions of racial and sexual difference, which come, they assert, from outside themselves, from men and from the white community. Joanne S. Frye, drawing on Bakhtin's work in The Dialogic Imagination, speaks of narrative as a hypothesis about experience which can never fully represent the "surplus of humanity" that actually exists (the phrase is Bakhtin's). Black women writers create heroines who are aware of that "surplus" in themselves and who are seeking a way of life
which will allow its manifestation. Some characters understand it as a natural difference which must be nurtured. Others argue for the essential similarity of blacks and whites. They don’t want always to be confined by preconceived notions of their "difference," by what others see as their "natural" capacities and limitations as black women. They want the real variety that exists among those classified as "black" to be acknowledged. They want the same freedom for self-development that Margaret Fuller claimed for white women in the nineteenth century. The original title of Fuller’s Dial article—"The Great Debate: Man vs. men, Woman vs. women"—captures the spirit. "Woman," or in this case, "Black Woman," is a restrictive categorical image through which real women (black women) are seen, and against which they are interpreted and judged.

The cognitive strategies by which racial difference is produced harden into stereotypes which then themselves determine cognition. Black women’s fiction of the period shows black protagonists frustrated by "difference." Their strenuous attempts to be seen as subject are continually thwarted as they are objectified by others who organize their perceptions of black women according to their own needs and at black women’s expense. No matter what their qualities or what their actions, black women are inevitably seen as types ready for exploitation. And there is an insistent power in that gaze which paralyzes black women’s
own powers of self-definition and self-determination. This
type of looking is a function of what Marilyn Frye, a
lesbian-feminist philosopher of the 1980s, has called "the
arrogant eye." The arrogant eye sees in order to oppress
and in order to conceal one's status as oppressor from
oneself.

Black women writers of the Harlem Renaissance do not
always know how to escape the gaze of the arrogant eye, but
they successfully anatomize its workings and document its
victims—an important beginning.

White women writers of the age continue for the most
part to ignore the relevance of black women's experience to
their own, as well as ignoring race as a social problem even
in abstract terms, as the abolitionist writers treated it.
Occasionally, however, a white woman would create memorable
and important black female characters. Fannie Hurst is one
such writer. Hurst's *Imitation of Life* does not fully
qualify as "writing against racism," for it ultimately does
not affirm the impulse for black women's liberation in a
sustained treatment of black women as subjects. The black
women in *Imitation of Life* are seen instead primarily as
objects. On the other hand, the novel contains episodes
which show contradictions of certain white constructions of
black identity. Ultimately, Hurst is more concerned with
gender identity as negotiated between white men and women
than she is with issues of race that divide black and white
women. But she is almost alone among white writers in offering an extended exploration of the way whites use images of blacks to shore up their own identities. This mutual dependence of images of black and white women is a cornerstone of early black feminist literary criticism (Christian 1980). *Imitation of Life* is a detailed documentary of the functions of "the arrogant eye."

**Issues of Identity and The Arrogant Eye**

Identity is a definition of oneself or of other human beings as individuals or members of groups. Identity is built of images, beliefs about human qualities and capacities, and "scenarios," including both histories and narrative expectations for the future. Identity also concerns networks of alliances, affiliations, and oppositions. In other words, identity is a collection of concepts about what we are, what we are not, and how we are related to others. It is also the emotions which we attach to these concepts. Identities are social constructs, formed by dynamic processes and able continually to be reformed by the actions of individuals and groups.

The social construction of identity, however, has not always been explicitly recognized. Identity is often thought of as a static thing, an essence derived from nature, such as femaleness or blackness. As such, it may be accepted or rejected, but not substantially changed.
The women writers discussed here, who were the first to conduct a sustained exploration in literature of women's racial identities on a psychological level, for the most part used a static model of identity as essence. Critics working close to the texts recapitulated this viewpoint in their interpretations. Indeed, this viewpoint was not just the creation of women writers and their critics, but saturated culture generally (and still does). Certainly, the concept of identity as static has dominated feminist thinking about women. Since so much of women's literature is concerned with identity, with women's senses of themselves as unique individuals linked in various ways to the lives of others, it is possible to trace the development of the concept of identity in feminist literary criticism. While the dominant terms of this discussion have put forth the idea that one's identity is a received thing, a heritage of fixed qualities, the premise of feminism is that change is possible. The idea of identity as a social construct has always been incipient.

The feminist reassessment of the novels treated here—Fannie Hurst's *Imitation of Life*, Nella Larsen's *Quicksand*, Jessie Fauset's *Plum Bun*, and (very briefly) Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*—locates them as classic texts in the tradition of novels centrally concerned with issues of identity: novels of female awakening. Like other novels of this type, these four books feature female
protagonists on a quest. As it is usually understood, the task of each is to forge a fulfilling identity for herself, one moreover that is not wholly private and personal, but acknowledged and affirmed by others. Thus the hero successfully establishes a viable place for herself in the social world. Typically, women characters such as Bea Pullman, Helga Crane, Angela Murray, and Janie have multiple and overlapping concerns: work, marriage, sex, family, and friendship. Also typically, they seek an integrated identity within a community which satisfies their two overriding and potentially conflicting needs, one for autonomy and one for nurturance. Put another way, the female heroes of novels of awakening seek both social security and fulfillment as individuals.

Concerned as they are with women's potential for self-realization, it is not surprising that "awakening novels" have attracted so much attention from feminist critics. Since the 1970s, feminists have read these novels in order to examine the social structures which operate to limit female autonomy and to create a one-way flow of nurturance from women to others. In such readings, female characters are pitted against "society," the machinations of which hinder the hero in her quest for a fulfilling (individual, personal) identity. Insofar as the protagonist is a creature of social convention herself, it is said that she has "internalized" the dominant values of the culture.
A theory of identity is implicit here. Identity is formed when "society," which is male-dominated, imposes restrictions on females, training them to be, and especially to work, only in ways that benefit men. The early assumption was that women were the powerless victims of this process. Men, on the other hand, had all the power to define femininity and to force this definition on women. In the feminist "folk culture," a vocabulary developed to account for women's response to this. Women who accepted the male-authored vision of women's identity were called "male identified." This refers to women whose psychological constitution (including their self-concept, self-esteem, and ideas about sexuality), as well as aspects of their physical being itself, are structured by men and function to benefit men. Critics frequently conclude their readings of dystopic awakening novels such as Quicksand (or Kate Chopin's The Awakening [1899] or Edith Wharton's The House of Mirth [1905]) with a call for women readers to throw off such "false" identities which have bound them to "unreal loyalties" (the phrase is Virginia Woolf's, from Three Guineas) and to seek instead that authentic affiliation with other women (called "woman-identification") that will tend to their liberation.

This agenda for the reading of women's literature was shared by contemporary social scientists reading women's everyday lives. Feminist sociological theory since the
1970s has been primarily concerned with the concept of "socialization," and "the multitude of influences by which the socialization process shapes the roles that most women and men come to accept as entirely natural" (Weitzman, 157). That which comes to be accepted as natural is "identity"—the way I am, the way we are, or you, or them. The project of feminist sociologists was to make the unnaturalness of this process evident, so that women could better resist it. In this way women could become more truly "themselves," rather than allowing others to "push [them as] individuals into unnatural molds" (Weitzman, 172).

Black feminist scholarship used the same basic model of identity, only complicating it to account for the intersection of two bases of oppression: race, as well as sex. The black female protagonist and real-life black women were described as beings forced into molds which doubly defined and doubly oppressed them, first as black people, second as black women.

Two contradictory images of the human person are contained in this concept of identity. The first is the image of the human being as so much putty ready passively to receive the imprint of whatever is pressed upon it. The second image, undoubtedly the more compelling of the two, is that of the "natural," unmolded human being—a sort of seed containing within itself everything essential to an autonomous "self-definition." A human being, imaged as a
seed, needs only the proper external environment in order to unfold according to its own inner logic, the essential truth of its being, its "true" identity.

Contradictory as they are, these two images coexist well in early feminist readings of awakening novels. The first image is evoked in order to condemn the violence inherent in the process of turning females into white (or black) male-serving "women." The second is evoked further to denounce the tragic effects of that process: that women are unable to be "themselves," that women are thwarted and destroyed by "society" (men, white people, the enemy). Ultimately the second image is given a privileged status in accounts of the problem so that what emerges from this sort of reading is a vision of the female individual formed by, yet constrained within and straining against society.

Perhaps the reason that these contradictory images can coexist so easily is that they both rest on a notion of identity as static. Identity is either a thing that results from a process of training—and once that process concludes, identity is fixed—or identity is an unchanging essence always already contained within the self.

Marilyn Frye coined the term "the arrogant eye" (in her essay "In and Out of Harm's Way: Arrogance and Love") to explain how it is that women can come to ignore their own interests as individuals and as members of the class of females. She examines the extreme case of female sexual
slavery, the normative case being simple male-identification. Her purpose is to discover the mechanisms by which a woman's will and her perceptions of herself and the world can be bent to serve the interests of one who means to exploit and enslave her. Specifically, Frye is concerned with the formation of a type of female identity which reproduces the sexist system and which paralyzes women's powers to resist and to act on their own behalf. Frye intends her work to reempower those women. Writing within and for the American feminist movement, her concept of identity formation is one shared by most of the literary critics who have restructured the way the novels treated in this chapter are now being read. Although Frye does not directly address issues of race here, the main features of the model she proposes to account for sexual slavery easily extend to account for aspects of racial exploitation and enslavement, too.1

Frye grounds her analysis of sexual enslavement in the facts of physical coercion. First there is brute force, which one uses to capture the other, to compell her labor, and to separate her from the supports and resources which may contribute to her resistance. Any measures are likely to be taken—even killing the other if need be. Words come only after. Arguments, narrative accounts, and visual images of the other are fabricated and employed to justify one's violence against the other (if justification is
necessary at all) to one’s peers in the oppressor group and
to "manipulate the situation so that the world as perceived
by the victim presents the victim with a range of options
the least unattractive of which (or the most attractive of
which) in the judgment of the victim is the act one wants
the victim to do" (56-57). Thus the conditions of long-term
exploitation are established. Frye emphasizes the tension
which balances two needs of the oppressor: "that the will
and intelligence of the victim be disengaged from the
projects of resistance and escape but that they not be
simply broken or destroyed. [Instead they must be attached]
to the interests of the exploiter" (60). In this way, the
services of others are acquired and the oppressor is able to
align "more than one body’s worth of substance, will and wit
. . . behind one’s [own] projects" (66).

Frye traces a long history of the arrogant male eye; it
is at least as old as the biblical imperative that woman be
man’s helpmeet:

Woman is created to be man’s helper. This
captures in myth Western Civilization’s primary
answer to the philosophical question of man’s
place in nature: everything that is is resource
for man’s exploitation. With this world view, men
see with arrogant eyes which organize everything
seen with reference to themselves and their own
interests. The arrogating perceiver is a
teleologist, a believer that everything exists and
happens for some purpose, and he tends to animate
things, imagining attitudes toward himself as the
animating motives. Everything is either "for me"
or "against me." This is the kind of vision that
interprets the rock one trips on as hostile, the
bolt one cannot loosen as stubborn, the woman who
made meatloaf when he wanted spaghetti as "bad". .
. . (67)
The essence of arrogant perception is that it is completely organized according to the needs and interests of the perceiver. The arrogant eye sets "norms of virtue and health . . . according to the degree of congruence of the object of perception with the seer's interests" (69). Frye obviously believes that arrogant seeing enormously falsifies one's perception of the world (and indeed, put that way, the idea of hostile rocks is blatantly absurd). Absurd or not, however, members of oppressor classes are trained in arrogant gazing—and, as Frye would emphasize, they have "the cultural and institutional power to make [their vision] stick" (70). It is power that is important, the ability of the arrogant perceiver to "coerce . . . the objects of his perception into satisfying the conditions his perception imposes" (67). In this way, arrogant perception, backed by what Foucault would call the power of life and death, becomes a circle all but closed to effective challenge.

According to Frye, among the specific mechanisms of arrogant perception is expectation. Frye draws on the work of Naomi Weisstein, who synthesizes a number of studies of fieldwork methodology in psychology documenting the effect of investigators' bias on their ability to observe. Such studies are often cited, have even passed somewhat into the public domain of "commonsense" knowledge; they involve
investigators asked to observe the activity or passivity of babies they were told were either boys or girls, or asked to grade papers with male or female signatures, and so on. In each case, regardless of the actual sex of the subject being observed, investigators' observations conformed to cultural images and stereotypes appropriate to the sex they believed themselves to be observing. Frye affirms Weisstein's conclusion that "[h]ow one sees another and how one expects the other to behave are in tight interdependence, and how one expects another to behave is a large factor in determining how the other does behave" (67).

"Reality," under the gaze of the arrogant eye, is made to conform to cultural images. What one sees, quite simply, is what one expects to see, what one has been trained to see, and what is in one’s interests to see. By the same token, sensory data that doesn’t fit one’s images of reality are, quite literally, unperceivable. Or they are only perceivable as things crazy, chaotic, unnatural, or bad.

As Frye describes it, the arrogant eye sees through a glass, darkly; and the arrogant seer is an unregenerate solipsist, one unperturbed by doubt as to his own centrality in the universe. Although a substantial tradition in philosophy asserts that we are all necessarily solipsists because we can never perceive reality directly, but only as a function of sensory response (in other words, what we perceive is not reality, but only our own response to it),
Frye herself holds out for at least the possibility of perceiving an other with "the loving eye" as opposed to the arrogant one. She is making the more limited claim that not only is it possible, but ethically imperative that we learn to perceive others as organized primarily to meet their own needs—which may or may not be linked to or coincident with our own.

Frye's concept of conditioned, or structured, knowing—and its ethical implications—is not exclusively hers. Social philosopher Walter Lippmann, in *Public Opinion* (1922), synthesizes a wealth of popular and scientific writing on the subject of stereotype. Building on the insights of William James, Lippman discusses the human infant's world as "one great, blooming, buzzing confusion" (80). Gradually, babies are taught to see so that by the time they are adults, "[they] do not first see, and then define, [they] define first and then see" (81). What we see are "stereotyped shapes" derived from art, moral codes, and social and political philosophies. These shapes, "the accepted types, the current patterns, the standard versions, intercept information on its way to consciousness" (85) so that "we do not so much see this man and that sunset; rather we notice that the thing is man or sunset, and then see chiefly what our mind is already full of on those subjects" (88).
Lippmann understands stereotype as an "economy" of seeing, "[f]or the attempt to see all things freshly and in detail, rather than as types and generalities, is exhausting, and among busy affairs practically out of the question" (88). Rather than stopping with that, however, Lippmann devotes an entire chapter of *Public Opinion* to the idea of "Stereotypes as Defense." In it, he affirms what Frye asserts, that structured knowing is also frequently attached to a political agenda:

A pattern of stereotypes is not neutral. It is not merely a way of substituting order for the great blooming, buzzing confusion of reality. It is not merely a short cut. It is all these things and something more. It is the guarantee of our self-respect; it is the projection upon the world of our own sense of our own value, our own position and our own rights. The stereotypes are, therefore, highly charged with the feelings [of like and dislike, fear, lust, strong wishes, pride, and hope] that are attached to them. They are the fortress of our tradition, and behind its defenses we can continue to feel ourselves safe in the position we occupy. (96)

Frye adds to Lippmann's perspective by grounding the idea of defensive stereotype—or, as we have called it, arrogant gazing—in the material power of the oppressor to coerce the oppressed. Arrogant gazing is not merely a cognitive process, but a potent weapon in the arsenal of oppression.

So what does stereotype have to do with identity? Quite simply, identity is itself a pattern of stereotypes which defines a human being (or, in literature, a fictional character). All knowing is structured, or constructed; and
identity is structured knowing of ourselves and others. Sometimes this structured knowing is acceptable to both parties of the relationship, the self and the other--each accepts the content of the perceptual pattern. These are uneventful and uninteresting cases. Feminists are concerned with those other cases in which there is disagreement and contest.

The novels discussed here all focus on the struggles of members of subordinate groups to resist the identities created for them by members of oppressor groups. Women resist definitions of womanhood imposed on them by men and blacks resist definitions of blackness imposed on them by whites. The texts, or criticism of them, recapitulate the images of identity previously discussed: the "falseness" of the identity imposed on one and the "truth," or the "naturalness" of one's own construction. Whereas I would argue that all identities--of self and of other--are equally "false" because constructed and attached to various (political) agendas, it would not be wise to ignore the power of the image of the "natural," unmolded human being. More than once in the readings that follow, we will attend to claims about what is natural as clues to what values writers hold most deeply and what emotions are experienced as compelling.

In the novels discussed here, the interracial relationships do not all qualify as "friendships." What
they have in common is that they are effected adversely by the arrogant eyes of white women. What each novel describes is the social power that white women have to fix the identity of black women such that white, but not black agendas are fulfilled. From a strictly theoretical perspective, we may be able to see these identities as flimsy chimera having only the slightest connection to the real. But black female characters experience the power of white women’s constructions as almost absolutely compelling and controlling. I imagine that these characters would concur with Lippman, who writes:

Those whom we love and admire most are the men and women whose consciousness is peopled thickly with persons rather than with types, who know us rather than the classification into which we might fit. For even without phrasing it to ourselves, we feel intuitively that all classification is in relation to some purpose not necessarily our own; that between two human beings no association has final dignity in which each does not take the other as an end in himself. There is a taint on any contact between two people which does not affirm as an axiom the personal inviolability of both.

In these novels, the friendships and other relationships between black and white women mostly fail because the white woman does not take the black woman “as an end in [her]self.” Nor does she recognize the “personal inviolability” of the black woman. Each of the relationships ultimately takes a shape of its own. Sometimes black women are resigned to the white woman’s
agenda, more often they attempt to escape—to find that ideal place in which their "true" beings may unfold.

Fannie Hurst's Imitation of Life

Fannie Hurst's *Imitation of Life* was published in 1933 at the height of the artist's career—a brilliant one by all accounts. Two aspects of that career are consistently emphasized by Hurst's biographers: her enormous popularity with what Virginia Woolf would call "the common reader" and the mixed, occasionally hostile reception of her work by academic critics. Susan Koppelman has demonstrated that the "decline in [Hurst's] literary stock paralleled the decline in the economy and the rise of anti-Semitism and xenophobia that corrupted the United States on the edge of World War II" (1987: 504). But when *Imitation of Life* first appeared, it was lovingly received by Hurst's "natural" audience, "the polyglot European immigrant population of the urban centers of the United States and their children, first generation Americans" (504). It instantly became a best-seller. In 1934, the year after its appearance in print, John Stahl produced a film version which was also successful. In 1959, yet another re-make of *Imitation of Life* appeared, this time directed by Douglas Sirk. It, too, seized the public's imagination, becoming "one of Universal's highest grossing films in history" (Heung 21).
In the meantime, interest in the novel waned, but is now again waxing. Feminist scholars interested in revising the canon of literary studies have begun to reread popular novelists such as Hurst, while film critics and historians, particularly feminists interested in the classic Hollywood "women's films," are reading *Imitation of Life* as background to studies of the movies. Current criticism locates the novel and the two film versions of *Imitation of Life* in literary and filmic traditions treating major cultural concerns of women: work, sexuality, and the mother-daughter bond (DaGue; Lichtenstein; Heung). The movie versions belong to the Hollywood tradition of "maternal melodrama," particularly the popular sub-genre concerned with woman's "rise to power" (Heung; Haskell; Basinger; Williams; Viviani). Works in these extensive traditions are used to raise questions about the compatibility or incompatibility of women's work outside the home and femininity, which is defined, at least in part, as the capacity to sustain human relationships. Critics have been reading in order to ask: what price do women pay for autonomy and "success"?

Of the new feminist readings of *Imitation of Life*, few treat the unique intersection of gender, race, and class which is of interest to us here. In the rush to explore the psyche of Bea, the white woman protagonist, as she tests the limits of culturally defined womanhood, most critics have pushed into the margin her relationships to the novel's
black women, Delilah and her daughter Peola. I will be re-mov­ing the relationships between Bea, Delilah, and Peola back to the center, demonstrating how Bea's self-definition as a (white) woman largely depends on how she sees and defines black women. The relationship between Bea and Delilah is crucial. The novel is focalized through the character of Bea, which technique permits readers only to know Delilah as Bea's creation, the object of Bea's gaze. Bea looks at the black woman with arrogant eyes; what she sees is qualified and conditioned by her urgent need to assert herself as a feminine woman at the same time that she is successful on male terms. Success, in this model, requires exploitation of subordinates such as Delilah, yet to be aware of oneself as an effective exploiter of others conflicts with the traditional definition of white femininity as giving and gentle. The narrator thus needs to suppress awareness of the race- and class-based conflict inherent in relationships such as Bea's and Delilah's. This goal is achieved by several moves. First, class-based conflict is collapsed with racial conflict, and then the whole is displaced onto the black characters' mother-daughter struggle (Heung). This leaves the narrator free to represent the interracial relationship between the two mothers as falsely harmonious, as a "friendship." Racism is not ignored, but presented as a problem somewhere "out there" in society, not in the "family" which Bea attempts to
make with Delilah and their two daughters. The narrator's final move is to tell the daughters' stories as a reenactment of the white woman's racial myth: it is the fate of black and white female friends to be separated by a hostile world. Other possibilities—such as the possibility of mutually supportive interracial friendship—are missed, and thus the system of racial oppression is reproduced.

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Writing *Imitation of Life*, Fannie Hurst used the conventional resources of the two major female-centered literary traditions developed in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries: "the heroine's text" (Miller) and "woman's fiction" (Baym 1978). As a young woman, Bea imagines herself a character in a "heroine's text." She believes the most gripping interest of her own life-story will be contained in the activity of courtship; she believes that the female story can only end happily in marriage (the euphoric variant) or unhappily in death (the dysphoric one). The tension between her narrative expectations for her life and the actual nature of her lived experience is the novel's major problem. Thus Hurst, like many other twentieth century women authors, "writes beyond the ending" of the conventional "heroine's text" in order to address the pressing social problems of white women in the 1930s.5

Hurst's novel is ultimately much more closely related to what Nina Baym has called the "woman's fiction" of the
nineteenth century (1978). As Baym describes it, the genre of "woman's fiction" was concerned with the conditions of success for women. As in fairy tales, heroines of "woman's fiction" were often orphans thrown into a hostile world, stripped of both resources and defenses. The "woman's novel" was a novel of triumph over adversity. Its protagonist developed her moral and emotional being as well as her skills on the marketplace to the point of achieving a self-esteem and material security not dependent on others. If the "woman's novel" typically ended in marriage, it was at least a "feminist" marriage in which the woman's success on her own terms would not be compromised by her becoming a wife. Imitation of Life draws on this tradition, but abandons its conventional ending, too. Hurst's protagonist finds that worldly success disqualifies, rather than qualifies her as the kind of woman men are likely to choose for a wife. Thus Imitation of Life undermines the optimism of the earlier tradition, an optimism shared by many potential female readers of the novel today who believe that they too can "have it all."⁶

Hurst's Imitation of Life begins with the death of Bea's mother. The immediate effect of this on Bea's young life (she is seventeen) is to make her suddenly aware of the incredible amount of work her mother had daily and, as the narrator says, "invisibly" performed, work now thrust by her father onto her. Also, Bea realizes that she had never
truly known her mother, that her perception of her mother had not been directed to her mother as woman, but had been organized around her own needs as child to the woman. Bea can not imagine her mother as a sexual creature; nor can she imagine her mother's life before or apart from the relationships to her father and herself. As well, the narrator tells us that Bea's father perceives his daughter in the same way: arrogantly, as a function of his own physical and emotional needs. Bea bristles under his gaze, but uncomplainingly fulfills his often excessive demands in response to her own senses of duty and dependence. Despite the sharp pain of loss and the resentment which attend Bea's new perceptions of her parents, Bea never applies the insight to her subsequent relationship with Delilah, as we will see. Throughout, she will view Delilah with the same arrogant eye she had turned on her mother and her father turns on her.

Shortly following the mother's death, Bea's father suffers a disabling stroke. Wishing to avoid financial and domestic crisis, the father and Mr. Pullman, a pickle-and-relish salesman who boards with the Chipeley family, decide that Bea and Mr. Pullman should marry. From early girlhood, Bea had repeatedly been told the story of her life by her mother whose narrative expectations for female life fixed traditional marriage and the bearing of children as the story's only possible happy ending. So Bea, sharing her
mother's sense of female life-story, assents, "marrying marriage" more than the man (42). Bea expects to marry and live happily ever after, but instead she scarcely has the opportunity to acknowledge that the reality of Mr. Pullman does not match her dream before Hurst kills the husband and sends Bea prematurely into labor with her daughter. After these events, Hurst's protagonist, of necessity, must begin a whole new life-story as single mother and guardian of a feeble old man. *Imitation of Life* is no "heroine's text," but a twentieth century "woman's fiction."

Like all examples of "woman's fiction"--and the "woman's rise to power" films which further extend the genre into this century--the interest of *Imitation of Life* is in its anatomy of female ambition. The genre has most frequently been used by critics to raise questions about the conditions of success for women when they enter spheres of activity dominated by men. What are the consequences for women of the sexual division of labor? Can a woman simultaneously succeed in both the "male" and "female" spheres? And what does "success" mean to women, anyway?

These are some of Hurst's own questions, too, which she raises over and over again in her enormous canon.7 Hurst's favorite subjects are work and working women; she frequently writes of art, sexuality, wifedom, and motherhood as forms of work themselves and as activities circumscribed and qualified by women's status as workers outside the home.
Hurst's thinking is in line with that of many women of the 1980s in that she values women's work highly as means of independence and self-development. Her characters are frequently ambitious; they try to shape the received world of work, with its circumscribed opportunities for women, to accommodate their creative urges—to become more, to make more. However, Hurst's characters also find that success in the world of work can frequently be achieved only by suppressing the full expression of one's sexuality and creativity, or at the expense of important relationships with other human beings—activities traditionally seen as defining the feminine. *Imitation of Life* is in a class of Hurst's writings, including her first novel *Star-Dust* (1917), in which pleasure—especially sexual pleasure and the creative pleasure released within healthy relationships—is rarely enjoyed by the female protagonist.

Bea is one of Hurst's many female characters caught in a matrix of necessity and desire. Hers is a gendered consciousness, divided and ultimately disabled by an irreparable fissure between what she understands as "male" and "female" modes of being in this world. Necessity drives Bea to assume a "male" style to fulfill "male" roles. To provide for her family she must aggressively enter the public world of business with wits sharpened on the puzzles of profit and loss. Desire is "female." What Bea wants above all else is to be at home—a private sanctuary—
surrounded by loving family, getting and giving nurture. She is never able to reconcile these opposites, or integrate them into one person—herself. As she becomes more and more enmeshed in the "male sphere," she is more and more alienated from the "female" one.

Delilah, her black maid, assumes the female roles for her; and it is Delilah as well whom she believes is reaping the rewards of femininity that would be hers: the love of one's family and the pleasure of being home. Bea is jealous of Delilah, and simultaneously feels superior and inferior to her. We readers only see Delilah as Bea does: through a lens dirtied with guilt and shame, envy and loss.

Delilah is introduced into the story at the moment at which Bea's fortune is at its lowest ebb. Bea has almost no money; she has no skills, no training, no contacts, only a stack of business cards printed up for "B. Pullman," her dead husband whose first initial, accidentally and fortunately, is the same as her own. Determined to step into his place and make a living by selling maple syrup, Bea's first problem is how to manage what feminist sociologists have dubbed the "double duty" expected of women workers. Not only must she negotiate the new male world of business, Bea must also perform extensive female caretaking work for her family. Her infant daughter needs to be fed and tended, and her father, senseless after the stroke, is also dependent. Delilah is presented as the answer to Bea's
problems. After she joins the household as "servant," Bea's fortunes begin to turn.

In the initial stage of Bea and Delilah's relationship, the narrator speaks explicitly of the two women's opposed class interests. Bea needs "a servant" (89) and she knows where to find one: the black side of town. At this point, the narrator steps back to focus a larger perspective. The narrator presents a sweeping vision, described in a sociologist's voice, of the town's configuration into neighborhoods defined by class and race. For certain black women, domestic work was the only work from which they were not barred. Whereas at one time domestics were made to live in the white homes that employed them (an arrangement which forced them away from their own families and communities), during the first decades of the twentieth century, black women domestics' organized and successfully gained the right to return home evenings. Black women's social historians cite this political activity as crucial to black family history as well as an important early chapter in the twentieth century civil rights movement (Jones). Yet the narrator of Imitation of Life is uninterested in the meaning for black women of this important struggle, presenting it strictly from Bea's perspective as a problem:

There was the difficulty. Sleeping in. Most of the female domestic help, wives, sweethearts, or what nots of the thousands of negro waiters, chair-pushers, and miscellaneous helpers about town and the Boardwalk, demanded the freedom to return home evenings.
"No, ma'am. I cain't take no job at sleepin' in. I got a husband waitin' table at de Seaside Hotel, and three chillun needs me to put 'em to bed."

"No'm. I got to sleep home. I's married."

"Sleepin' in? No, ma'am!" (90)

But Delilah, a widow with a three-month old in arms, readily agrees to sleep in if only her daughter can live there, too. Bea reluctantly permits this, after quizzing Delilah about Peola's health and ensuring that her presence will not detract from the care of her own child. The bargain is sealed.

In the chapters that follow, Delilah's character is developed as the stereotypical mammy. Bea swings between desperation at how to make ends meet (for Delilah "swelled the food budget so considerably" [93]) and gratitude:

All to the good, for the growing peace of mind that permitted Bea to work now in two long half-day periods, without that flaying sense of the need to rush home. Delilah might be said to have risen like a vast black sun over the troubled waters of the domestic scene, laying them and the hordes of fears, large and small, that had dogged her heels all day.

Delilah, with a radiance that emanated off the polished disk of her face and off the impeccable fortification of her huge gingham aprons, had placed something as horny as the hand of a crocodile upon this uneasy household and brought it somewhere akin to a going concern. (94-95)

The type of language in this passage is typical of the narrator's style. Matters of dollars and cents are converted into matters of nurture and the heart. Delilah's work, for example, is not to provide such services as
cooking and diapering babies, but to provide Bea with "peace of mind." Delilah, when she is allowed to speak, refers to herself as a "worker," but the narrator (reflecting Bea's consciousness) calls it "help." Delilah rarely describes herself, but is described by the narrator with metaphors drawn from abundant nature: she is "a vast black sun" or, elsewhere, a mountain, or an ocean, immense and black, with "unassailable high spirits, Baptist fervor, and amplitude" that "reached and encompassed two infants and an infantile old man" and Bea herself (96). Bea projects onto Delilah in an exaggerated manner everything she is afraid she herself is not: maternal, life-giving, and nurturant. As the story progresses, Bea becomes jealous of Delilah, believing her daughter to prefer the mammy. The narrator reports that Bea considers Delilah a kind of expert on children and relationship, allowing Bea to ignore the reality that Paola is strenuously hateful toward her mother and eventually abandons her. Bea sees Delilah's life arrogantly, as a product of her own interests and concerns.

Very early on, the narrator suppresses the issue of class. Bea cannot at first afford Delilah's wages, but when she can, Delilah's refuses them:

For the first time since Delilah's initial month of service, Bea was able to pay her a portion of the arrears. This she refused with such loud ejaculations, stretchings of the orifice of her mouth into a very red and very white cave of long drawn winds, that meekly she was forced to restore the money to her purse.
"We's partners in dis heah shebang, Miss Bea. Nevah did have no truck wid money-suckin'. We got our chillun to think about before we go squanderin' de fust spare money dat comes in on no-'count suvvant's wages." (95-96)

This passage illustrates another typical move of the narrator: to represent Delilah as the one in control of the relationship. Here, Delilah bull-dozes Bea into meekness, makes the household's financial decisions, and defines their relation as one between "partners," or co-mothers. Simultaneously, she subordinates herself as a "no-'count suvvant" whose wages are "spare money."

In addition, throughout this portion of the novel, we see Delilah subordinating the care of her own child to her care of Bea's. Yet black women's historians demonstrate that relationships between white women and their domestics outside of literature are of another order altogether (Jones). In real life, it was typically white women who domineered over servants and frequently defrauded them of their wages. Moreover, black women's energy was spent devising strategies to subvert the priorities of white women in order to make the care of their own families the top priority.

Thus, the narrator suppresses and distorts the historical class conflict between the black and white women. It also collapses this class conflict with racial conflict, eventually making Delilah the spokesperson for the "natural" subordination of blacks to whites. In this text, it is
Delilah who is the agent of differential socialization of the two daughters into their respective roles as (subordinate) black and (dominant) white females. In *Imitation of Life*, Delilah is the passionate advocate of the righteousness of segregation:

Sooner or later, Bea kept telling herself, this situation [the propinquity of the child Peola to the child Jessie] was going to develop itself into a concrete problem. But why anticipate? Delilah did.

"Some day dat chile of yourn is gonna wake up an' find my Peola black. Den what?"

"No use crossing that bridge until we come to it."

"Tain't our bridge to cross, honey. It's yourn."

"People are broader-minded about such things than they used to be."

"Yas'm. Broad-minded as mah thumb nail."

"I don't believe in making an issue of it."

"Neither did de good Lawd when he made us black and white, an' look what's been issuin' ever since. De glory in bein' black, honey, is dat de Lawd willed it so. Mah man grievd his heart out wantin' to pass. Dar ain't no passin'. When de time comes for mah Peola to stay on her black side of de world and yourn on her white side, we won't have to decide it, Miss Bea. Some day, jes' a little word lak nigger'll creep in, an' everything will be all right except nevah de same as befoh. Won't be your fault, won't be Jessie's, won't beourn. Maybe it'll be de Lawd's, but only for bein' so holy and good hisself, he couldn't figure out de meanness and misery was goin' to come from makin' dis a two-tone world. Glory be to Gawd, I's glad I's one of his black chillum, 'cause, sho as heaven, his heart will bleed lust wid pity an' wid mercy for his low-down ones. . . . Every day of mah life I's gonna rear mah young un to know de glory of bein' born one of de Lawd's low-down ones." (141-42)

The narrator employs a number of white women’s stereotypes about black women here: their greater worldliness and
commonsense about "the way things are," and their legendary "strength." But all Delilah's strength need not be alarming, according to the narrator of Imitation of Life, for it will only be devoted to train her daughter for subservience. Bea is shown as the liberal one—the one who thinks race "shouldn't matter"—while Delilah, obsessed with the possibility that her daughter may try to pass, defends segregation. Not only does Delilah defend the concept of race as a divinely ordained biological "fact" (despite the evidence in her own family to the contrary), rather than a social construction to maintain white privilege, Delilah herself endorses that privilege. God has commanded that there be two races; mixture therefore is immoral. Delilah consistently uses two metaphors for mixture: oil and water (which don't mix at all) and chicken-gravy watered down (it's still chicken gravy, but not so good). Both images imply the permanence of race as a marker of caste. Separation is natural; oppression inevitable. Finally, although Delilah tells Bea that racism is only a problem for her (it is the white woman's bridge to cross, since Delilah's own response is determined), Delilah conveniently removes from Bea the possibility of fault. In this way Delilah neutralizes the impact of any guilt Bea might feel. Race is not Bea's problem, but a problem "out there" in society. It only intrudes on the home in ways that Delilah understands and will manage.
As Peola grows up, we see her subjected to a variety of petty abuses and, indeed, she decides that if there are two sides to a racial fence and she can choose on which side she'll live, she wants to be "white." Implicit here is the knowledge of race as a social construction. Peola, as sign, is "read" according to different codes for interpreting white and black women. The narrator reports several episodes in which Peola is mistaken as Bea's daughter and treated with dignity and respect until the truth of Delilah's maternity is revealed. Then, abruptly, Peola is harshly abused, with, of course, her mother's approval. The most striking of these episodes is when Delilah unexpectedly presents herself at Peola's grammar school to bring extra clothes because the weather has changed. Before this, Peola had been accepted as white. After school there is a scene between them, at the end of which Peola is hysterical and convulsing with anger at her mother. The doctor is called. Believing Peola to be Bea's daughter, he treats her solicitously, prescribing bed rest for several days and promising to call again often to monitor his patient's progress; when he discovers Peola is Delilah's, he recommends that she be spanked when she awakes and sent to school promptly next morning. For readers who have become sympathetic to Bea's own ambitious spirit, the sight of Peola's similar ambition being crushed is painful. Readers are thinking much of success in this story. Hurst makes
plain that while the possibilities of success for white women are severely circumscribed and fraught with much risk, for black women they are even more circumscribed and dangerous. The destructiveness, and the moral indignity, of racism are frequently made plain in the narrative of Peola's experience, but the narrator undercuts the potential power of each of these episodes by shifting the action away from the white people who are responsible for Peola's pain, and onto the emotional dynamics between Peola and her mother.

The mother and daughter are frequently hysterical with each other, Delilah dropping to her knees to weep, wail, and pray, Peola screaming "I hate you for being black" and fainting into unconsciousness. Delilah in turn describes her daughter as wild, sick, and cursed. Bea is merely the passive spectator of these scenes, presented by the narrator as not racist herself and powerless to prevent the racism "out there" from destroying the lives of her "family."

What happens is that Delilah's words are made to come true. Jessie calls her a "nigger," and "everything" changes. Delilah refuses to punish Jessie, hastening to teach her daughter to accept verbal abuse as a prelude to the other abuses she will certainly suffer as a black woman. Peola becomes increasingly resentful of Jessie and angry; and this emotional response to racism is described as a sort of psychological pathology. The mothers decide to separate the daughters, sending each to a different school (putting
each in her proper place, as it were), and comforting each other with the white woman's racial myth. It was inevitable, they tell each other, that the two girls, once so "close," would have to part. And it was no one's fault that racism came between them—that's just the way things are.

But, the narrator doesn't seem to have complete control over Bea's story. As much as Bea wants to believe that she is not part of the problem of racism (she treats Delilah so well and she's been like a second mother to Peola . . . .), readers are occasionally permitted to see her racism in action. For one thing, she disapproves of Delilah's speech, her unspoken reason for sending Jessie away to school being for her to learn to speak like a white person. More to the point, she will not hire black women as clericals in her vast waffle-house empire, but only as cooks.

The narrator's selective reporting of events is also extremely suspect. Conversation, for example, is rarely represented in its entirety. The narrator's style is to tell the story's ending first and then to go back in time, describing in an iterative mode not isolated events, but repeated ones. The narrator omits beginnings and endings of conversations in such a way that Delilah is made to appear as a sort of oracle, whose isolated phrases (for example, the frequently cited "Honey, you need Man-Lovin'!" or "Cotch it!") carry much emotional weight for Bea. Erving Goffman
(1983), however, points out that conversation is a social encounter rife with both risks and opportunities. To minimize risk, talk is regularized by rituals which help us negotiate social situations. By severing phrases from the stream of Delilah and Bea's talk, the narrator denies readers much information about the nature of this relationship. Entitlement to speak, modes of address, turn-taking, word choice, voice tone, and use of back-channel cues are all unrepresented. We don't know if Bea and Delilah even converse at all, or if their talk is merely incidental to their work. These omissions seriously limit our ability to interpret this relationship, for talk is frequently the basis of women's friendships and reveals both their status relative to one another and the degree of intimacy they are able to achieve.

Ultimately we know very little about Delilah. We don't know, for example, what she thinks of Bea's differential treatment of black and white workers. Bea provides a gym and a spa for her clerical help, while Delilah's "bulk" increases over the years, her legs and feet aching more and more, finally to the point that she is completely disabled. Meanwhile, Bea herself grows more slender, and even more tall. Nor do we know what Delilah thinks about the Brotherhood of Pullman Porters, an important organization that had a large share in laying the groundwork for the broad-based Civil Rights movement of the 1950s and 60s.
Bea—whose last name is Pullman—builds her waffle houses as replicas of Pullman dining cars, exploiting the white expectation of quality service and black subservience that makes "Pullman" synonymous with "comfort." These silences are deafening.

The narrator creates a picture of Delilah as a woman with no interests of her own, the perfect mammy who only wants to care for her white "family." But, as I have said, occasionally Delilah's point of view emerges when the narrator loses control of her material. Twice in the text, Bea is reported asking Delilah to name a gift for Bea to give her:

"I'd lak to see you, honey, rest up them achin' bones of yourn."
"No, no. What would you like best for yourself?"
"I'd lak dat for mahself."
"That's not what I mean." (172)
No, not what Bea means at all, for Delilah must work and keep working until Bea says she can stop.

This episode, the narrator says, is often repeated. The second time Delilah's response is reported, she knows better what to say:

". . . Delilah, I've begged you for so long to tell me, what is there you most want for yourself, your own darling self?"
"Honey-child, you talk like you ain't made life a white-satin padded cell for Delilah. Everything I wants, money for to send mah chile, money for to dress in de purple. I doan' want nothing else on dis earth 'cept peace an honesty for mah chile."
"But if you had a wishing-ring, one you could turn and wish for anything except, of course--Peola--what would you wish? Think hard."
"I’d wish for to meet mah Maker lak a queen comin’ befoh de throne of de Heavenly Host. I’d wish for a funeral dat would make de eyes of dis heah New York’s black town bug out for to see. . . . " (263-64)

These speeches flatter Bea, do not contradict her arrogant eye which needs to see Delilah as a woman who wants nothing more than to sacrifice her life to a white woman and be buried in style. And thus the story ends. Bea does give Delilah the funeral she wants, after years of exploiting her labor and ignoring her one wish: not to have to work.

The portrait of Delilah sent waves of outrage through the black literary community. Many blacks blamed Zora Neale Hurston, who had lived with Hurst for a time, claiming Hurston had supplied the material for this ridiculous and insulting picture of a black woman. From the more distant perspective of today, one wonders why Hurst, who had frequently been noted as the literary champion of shopgirls, domestics, and underdogs of all types (Salpeter), seems to break so abruptly in this novel with her past political concerns (Donaldson).

One explanation is simply that Hurst was racist, that the fact of Delilah’s blackness cancelled out any sympathy she might earn from her author by being an exploited worker. Commentary on Hurst’s attempts to control Hurston as her patron (Walentz, Hemenway), and on Hurst’s assumption of white culture as normative,10 even though she did make
public statements against racism (Donaldson), support this interpretation.

Another possibility is that Hurst modeled the relationship between Bea and Delilah on a similar relation between one of Hurst's friends and the friend's maid—in other words, that this was a true-to-life portrait of two real women (Koppelman, personal communication). Certainly, in real life, many black women domestics would have wanted a job in a home where her own child was welcome and the white mistress was absent most of the time. Also, Bea's off-hand comments about how Delilah "swelled the food bill" and made Peola's striking wardrobe from materials obtained who knows where would have mirrored the experience of other white women whose "servants" considered it necessary to supplement meager wages with this sort of employee benefit (Jones). Also, it is not inconceivable that a black maid would go to great lengths to convince her employer of her "reliability." Servility could be a mask put on for survival purposes. But in the end, it seems to me that elements of fantasy dominate this novel. In 1933, the depression was on in earnest. In many cities, there were designated street corners where black women gathered before dawn hoping to be selected when white women's cars drove by to hire a "girl" for the day. The fantasy of Bea's wealth, or even Delilah's "white-satin padded cell," would have been a powerful one for any woman experiencing hard times. For those women whose economic
situation permitted the hire of maids, the portrait of Bea and Delilah would have fed the fantasy that their employees had a sustained commitment to them.

A final possibility is that Hurst did not necessarily endorse Bea’s attitude, but, having chosen to present Bea’s consciousness from the inside, was limited herself by that consciousness. The narrator’s “unreliability” (Booth) is persuasive evidence for this position. When the critical lens is refocused on Hurst’s suggestion as author that Bea is a woman who has wasted her life in delusion (after all, the main plot is about how Bea has thrown her chance for a real life away in exchange for an imitation of life), it is not possible to equate Bea’s values with Hurst’s. The breaks in the narrative, when the narrator loses control and allows Delilah’s perspective to emerge, must in this case be read ironically, as more evidence of Bea’s capacity for self-deception. Nor can we discount the fact that Delilah’s views on race, with their emphasis on natural “difference,” are sharply opposed to Hurst’s professed belief in the essential similarity of the races. Delilah could very likely be as deluded as her mistress from Hurst’s point of view. But in the end, we know very little about the character of Delilah. We know much more about Bea, as focalizer of the image of Delilah and controlling consciousness of the narrative. Bea’s femininity is insecure and she both projects exaggerated femininity onto
Delilah and denies her own "masculine" exploitation of the black woman.

I have argued for a refocus on the character Bea, through whose arrogant eyes the image of Delilah is determined for readers. Yet, it would not be wise to gloss over Hurst's racism. Hurst, like all white women, was raised to assume white privileges and to internalize values which support racism. To a certain extent, she must share Bea's white habit of projecting onto black others one's own fears and longings, and the habit of denying one's personal guilt and responsibility for racism. But does a first person narrator who is an immoral hypocrite render the novel itself immoral and hypocritical? Imitation of Life can be read subversively through the character of Peola as a critique of social structures which so sharply curtail opportunities for black women as workers and eliminate the possibility that they will "succeed" in the terms of the dominant culture. If we are able to learn nothing more from this novel than how relationships between black and white women are damaged by the arrogant eyes of white women, how these same arrogant eyes destroy as well white women's potential even for self-knowledge, let alone the knowledge that allows for meaningful relatedness, then perhaps it is enough.

Nella Larsen's Quicksand
Nella Larsen's *Quicksand* is the story of Helga Crane, an intelligent, educated, beautiful, young woman of mixed Danish and Afro-American ancestry who is seeking identity and a place in the social world. When the novel begins, Helga is leaving her teaching position at a black college in the South because she is sick of its hypocritical and stifling policies of "uplift." In Chicago, she is harshly rejected by the white branch of her family. Moving to New York, Helga is happy for a time, but eventually finds hypocrisy to be the dominant tone of middle-class Harlem, too. In Denmark, Helga is celebrated, but she is also made into an object, an exotic "other," by the white people there, which ultimately she finds insulting and suffocating. Returning to New York, Helga decides to pursue her hitherto submerged sexual feelings for Robert Anderson, is rebuffed, and impulsively marries a rural Southern preacher after a conversion experience in a poor Baptist church. The novel ends with Helga pregnant for the fifth time; her inchoate ambitions permanently stifled.

Throughout the novel, Helga struggles to achieve a satisfying identity, yet she is limited and controlled by the concept of static identity I outlined previously in this chapter. In seeking "herself," she is really seeking affirmation from others of the vision she holds of herself—the "truth" of her life. Helga never achieves an integrated identity which both affirms her beliefs about her own
qualities and capacities and does not disown her personal history. She experiences instead striking incongruities between her personal identity and the social identities she adopts as masks to meet the expectations of others. Helga translates this incongruence into a feeling of homelessness, a vague sense of discontent and a conviction that a new beginning elsewhere will solve her problems. Her emotions are complicated by the imprecision of her self-image. At moments of crisis, Helga knows something is wrong, but she doesn't always know what. To make matters worse, her glimmers of self-knowledge are frequently negative: she sometimes knows only what she is not, not what she is.

Rejecting the "false" identities which others would foist upon her, Helga attempts to escape, moving restlessly from place to place, seeking an environment that "fits," an environment in which she can unfold.

Helga's interracial relationships bring into starkest relief the barriers which prevent her from forming a satisfactory identity and sustaining important relationships. Helga’s relations with her white relatives in Chicago and Copenhagen and with her Danish suitor are all qualified by the workings of the arrogant white eye. Helga is caught and fixed by the gaze of white people. They, of course, are seeing her only in terms of "what their heads are already full of" on the subject of blacks and what they think she can do for them. As might be expected, none of
these relationships are fulfilling; ultimately Helga does not maintain them. She returns to black communities after each of the interracial episodes. Yet she is not satisfied there, either. She finds that relationships with black people are infinitely more complicated than those with whites, no more fulfilling, and not themselves unaffected by the arrogant eye.

*Larsen’s biographers, however “scanty and often erroneous” their data (T. Davis 182), agree that Quicksand is highly autobiographical.¹³ The novel’s main events are those of Larsen’s own life: her mixed parentage, her self-identification as a “mulatta,” her father’s death (in Quicksand the father abandons the family), her mother’s subsequent remarriage to a white man, her rejection by the newly formed white family, her education at a Southern black college, and her travels in Scandinavia. Larsen’s biographers also agree that hers was a “delicate,” “fragile” personality; shy, stand-offish, and easily hurt, Larsen is frequently described as “vulnerable,” “unstable,” and “divided” like her fictional creation Helga Crane.

After an enthusiastic initial reception by the black and white press, two generations of black male critics have sustained Larsen’s reputation as a minor author of the Harlem Renaissance. Her literary output was small, consisting only of two novels—Quicksand (1928) and Passing
and a few short stories, but her work has consistently attracted the attention of the small audience interested in black letters. The "older-generation intellectuals, especially W.E.B. DuBois and Benjamin Brawley," praised Quicksand for its refusal to endorse the sleazy pictures of black primitivism current at the time it was published (Thornten 287). Later critics such as Sterling Brown (1965), Gloster, Arthur Davis, Gayle, Redding, and Bone viewed Larsen as a woman of talent whose novels culminated the tragic mulatto tradition and, happily, were among its last manifestations. This is not to say that these men did not appreciate Larsen's novel on the level of craft, only that they found its political implications unacceptable. Not only was Quicksand's main character insufficiently "representative" of black people, but her tragic demise in the rural South was interpreted as a rejection of the black folk culture upon which intellectuals since the 1930s have been fastening their hopes of forging a "black aesthetic." Finally, these men assessed Quicksand as a well-wrought description of the intensely personal problems of one exceptional black woman.

In the 1970s, Quicksand was one of the many novels "rediscovered" by black and white feminist critics, and finally brought back into print after being unavailable to more than a handful of readers for almost half a century. At least one of these women, Mary Helen Washington (1980),
found in the previously condemned unrepresentativeness of Helga Crane precisely the kind of self-mirroring in literature needed by the new class of black women professionals that had been forming since the Civil Rights Movement. Feminists generally built on Alain Locke’s early assessment of the novel’s importance to the black literary tradition:

This study of the cultural conflict of mixed ancestry is truly a social document of importance, and as well, a living, moving picture of a type not often in the foreground of Negro fiction, and here treated for the first time with adequacy. Indeed this whole side of the problem which was once handled exclusively as a grim tragedy of blood and fateful heredity now shows a tendency to shift to another plane of discussion, as the problem of divided social loyalties and the issues of the conflict of cultures. (T. Davis 183-84)

Feminist critics were attracted to the psychological depth of Larsen’s portrait of Helga Crane, asserting of Quicksand that it "is a precise delineation of a particular female perspective that has endured" (T. Davis 191). In Helga, feminists saw a woman struggling to realize her self, yet thwarted by the systems of racial and sexual oppression as much as, if not more than by her own mixed racial loyalties and conflicting sexual impulses. Refocusing critical attention on the radical political implications of the novel, they demonstrated first that sexism was an important theme and then that the novel illustrated the convergence of racial and sexual oppressions to shape black women’s experience [Thornton, Wall, McDowell (1986)]. Helga’s
experience of oppression includes lack of nurture from her (white) biological family, internalized oppression manifested as a deep sense of shame and worthlessness, restricted job opportunities for blacks and women, the necessity of attending to the institution of marriage as a means of social and economic survival, and the need to avoid full sexual expression because of its social consequences.

These feminist critical assessments of Quicksand recapitulate images of static identity: that identity is either a pattern of meaning forced on one from outside, or an essential truth about the self contained within. This concept of static identity was apparently endorsed by Larsen herself, for she shows Helga traveling from place to place, attracted to something permissive in each new environment and gratefully anticipating the possibility of "self-expression." But Helga never finds herself fitted to any single environment for long. She always winds up somehow at odds with the group (the source of "identity"); she never finally wants to be what she has to be to "fit." Because she believes identity is fixed and not subject to change, her only alternative is to escape to a new place and try again, a strategy which always works temporarily, but ultimately becomes impossible because of the children and because of Helga's failing health.

Helga's "weakness," her vacillating will and noncommittal nature, have been frequently cited as the reason
for her failed life-journey. While it is true that Helga never achieves the fullness of self-knowledge and the affirmation of self by others that she desires, Helga is sometimes firm and secure in her image of herself. For one thing, she never attempts to "pass" for white. No matter how disjoined her self-image from the appearances she makes to gain the approval of others, Helga never denies her black identity. A "mulatto," Helga firmly understands that race is not a biological fact, but a social classification. Although she is genetically both "black" and "white," she is socially "black," and that is what matters. Helga never tries to tamper with or deny this reality.

All Helga's relationships with white people, therefore, are carried out across lines of social difference. These interracial relationships are in many ways far less complex than the relationships Helga has with other black people. With blacks, Helga is distressed by the complicated inconsistencies, the many denials of reality, and the oppositions to whites that suffuse blacks' creation of self-image. But black identity as created by white people is absolutely consistent, because it is simple and one-dimensional. The "unreality" of white-authored versions of black identity (i.e., the fact that it doesn't match Helga's own experience) never upsets her because she never expects it to be "real" in the first place. Finally however, the white vision of her threatens to become altogether too real.
Helga learns the power of arrogant white eyes to fix and compel her to meet their needs. Helga accommodates for a time, but ultimately rejects the identities—of the worthless darky and the black exotic other—that whites would have her put on.

The first interracial episode of the novel is Helga’s visit to her white uncle Peter in Chicago. She had hastily left Naxos and would need money, support. Family is the traditional source of these things in times of crisis, but Helga’s family, being white, had often defaulted on the social contract. In a long internal monologue, on the train to Chicago, Helga remembers this family, made up of her mother, her mother’s disapproving siblings, a second (white) husband, and their other children:

Memory, flown back to those years following the marriage, dealt her torturing stabs. Before her rose the pictures of her mother’s careful management to avoid those ugly scarifying quarrels which even at this far-off time caused an uncontrollable shudder, her own childish self-effacement, the savage unkindness of her step-brothers and sisters, and the jealous, malicious hatred of her mother’s husband. (23)

It was here at home, perhaps more sharply than in white society generally, that Helga would receive her first lessons in black identity as whites would shape it to protect white privilege. Helga hints that she was told over and over again that she was bad, dirty, lazy, ugly, and worthless. Black identity, under these conditions, “is likely to consist of self-hatred, self-concealment, fear of
violence and feelings of inferiority, resignation, isolation, powerlessness, and gratefulness for being allowed to survive" (Pheterson, 148). And this is precisely the kind of personality that Helga develops.

Helga's only hope for support is with "Uncle Peter [who] was different" (6). Peter had "rescued" Helga after her mother's death and paid for her schooling in the South, among other blacks "where for the first time she could breathe freely, where she discovered that because one was dark, one was not necessarily loathsome, and could, therefore, consider oneself without repulsion" (23). "In his contemptuous way," Helga knew, "he was fond of her" (6). In petitioning Uncle Peter for funds, however, Helga knew she would have to play on that contempt, not revealing her true conflicts, but becoming for him what he already believed her to be:

... Helga Crane knew that he would be more likely to help her because her need would strengthen his oft-repeated conviction that because of her Negro blood she would never amount to anything, than from motives of affection or loving memory. (6)

Helga clearly understands that white charity, or "help," will only be given if it affirms the white sense of superiority and entitlement, never if it would interfere with white narrative expectations for black lives ("they will never amount to anything"). It is only Helga's "grievous necessity" which compels her to see these people at all (23).
In Chicago, Helga never obtains the interview with Uncle Peter, but speaks instead to his new wife who does not share her husband's "difference." Mrs. Nilssen greets Helga coldly, repudiating the connection between them on account of Helga's illegitimacy. "Of course she wasn't [married]," Mrs. Nilssen says of Helga's mother, "And please remember that my husband is not your uncle. No indeed! Why, that would make me your aunt! He's not--" (28-29).

The novel asserts that this is the kind of treatment black women can normally expect from white women. Black women's literature is full of descriptions of incidents like this. Indeed, this kind of abusive, insulting relationship is much more common than relationships resembling, however slightly, friendship between black and white women. Helga's reaction is a combination of self-abandonment and self-protection:

When she was in the street, she ran. Her only impulse was to get as far away from her uncle's house, and this woman, his wife, who so plainly wished to dissociate herself from the outrage of her very existence. She was torn with mad fright, an emotion against which she knew but two weapons: to kick and scream, or to flee. (29)

Helga flees to black community, "home" to the "multi-colored crowd" (30). Later, when her patron advises her not to "mention that my people are white" because "[c]olored people won't understand it" (41), Helga is more than willing to agree.
Thus, she disowns her white "background" and moves to Harlem to repeat the same cycle of excited optimism, disillusionment, and escape we have seen before. At the end of the first Harlem episode, Helga disowns black people. The second interracial episode follows, taking place in Denmark where Helga uses a gift of cash from Uncle Peter to visit another Aunt. This episode is often described as the emotional climax of the novel. Here Helga becomes unable not to act on her sexual drive; here Helga catapults herself to the end of her story.

At first, Copenhagen is enormously refreshing and liberating to Helga, who had become disgusted with the hypocritical inconsistencies of black identity in Harlem. She had found black people to be only superficially proud of their race, their "difference" from whites. Helga knew instead that they were obsessed with whites, and unable to be themselves. In Copenhagen, Helga's Aunt Katrina and Uncle Poul celebrate Helga's race and encourage Helga to accentuate her difference.

Of course, the Danes see Helga in terms of a predetermined image. For them, Helga must be the exotic and sensual black primitive, the dangerous sexual other. Helga becomes the little protégée of her Aunt, allowing Katrina to dress her, to arrange her social calendar, to decide with whom she will associate. She permits this because Katrina is so good to her, a kind and generous donor of all the
beautiful things Helga desires. And besides, Helga likes being a spectacle:

Incited. That was it, the guiding principle of her life in Copenhagen. She was incited to make an impression, a voluptuous impression. She was incited to inflame attention and admiration. She was dressed for it, subtly schooled for it. And after a little while she gave herself up wholly to the fascinating business of being seen, gaped at, desired. Against the solid background of Herr Dahl’s wealth and generosity she submitted to her aunt’s arrangement of her life to one end, the amusing one of being noticed and flattered. (74)

She allows herself to be made over into the "veritable savage" they have already in their heads (69).

And Helga knows that her aunt expects something in return for all her generosity. Katrina and Poul are successful merchants. Their "set" is a fashionable one, but they aspire to the one made up of artists and circled around the famous Axel Olsen. The Dahl’s expect Helga to marry—hopefully to Olsen himself—and through her to gain access to the coveted circle. They arrange Helga’s life to bring her close to the painter, and finally she spends her days posing for him as he works.

All the Danes see her with arrogant eyes. Helga’s life is punctuated by incidents on the street in which incredulous, "but friendly" white people accost her to demand what sort of human she is. Once, when she replies "I’m a Negro," an old countrywoman becomes "indignant." Her eyes know what she is seeing: “she could not be so easily fooled, for she knew as well as everyone else that Negroes
were black and had woolly hair" (76). Others, when told that Helga is black, project onto her the fantasies of sexual license they believe characterize the lives of African women.

This is what Axel does, in his face-to-face dealings with Helga and in his portrait of her. Frequently, the narrator describes Helga fixed by his "appraising" gaze, or enduring "a stripped, naked feeling under his direct glance" (86). He proposes that she be his mistress--Helga, who is tormented by doubt when even being kissed! When she ignores this proposal, he interprets it as even more evidence of her sexual savvy. He "knows" she has "the warm impulsive nature of the women of Africa," as well as "the soul of a prostitute" (87). He is proud to be "the highest bidder" and offers to marry her. His narrative expectations of her exotic otherness cast her in the role of Muse:

"But . . . for me it will be an experience. It may be that with you, Helga, for wife, I will become great, immortal. Who knows? I didn't want to love you, but I had to. That is the truth. I make of myself a present to you. For love. (87)

To Helga, "the truth" of Axel's arrogant self-display is finally intolerable. To be thought of as a whore, to be treated like a slave at auction--intolerable. The excitement she once felt to satisfy others' picture of herself as sensual black other is here drained into her realization that it was ultimately an insult. She rejects it, though Axel claims
"... my picture of you is, after all, the true Helga Crane. Therefore—a tragedy. ...

The picture—she had never quite, in spite of her deep interest in him, and her desire for his admiration and approval, forgiven Olsen for that portrait. It wasn’t, she contended, herself at all, but some disgusting sensual creature with her features. (88-89)

Thus the affair is over.

Axel’s objectification of Helga is much more dramatic than Aunt Katrina’s, but essentially of the same order. Katrina is disappointed—sorely—in Helga’s “foolish” rejection of the artist and urges her to try to win him back. Katrina, after all, has her own interest in the a marriage for Helga. Katrina, as well, seems all too aware of identity as a social construct, of identity as a mask that Helga could put on, if she would, to manipulate others and to get what she wants.

But Helga doesn’t see it that way. Helga doesn’t want a mask, but an integrated identity, where the inside matches the outside. To Helga, the identity of black female exotic is too threatening, and too insulting. It is finally too disconnected from how she sees herself and from what she wants to become. So again, she escapes.

Back in Harlem, Helga seems resolved to make a life for herself among black people (she has reclaimed them now), yet she holds open the possibility of returning to Denmark, just in case. She is still distressed by the politics which govern black identity, which Larsen raises as debates about
the politics of separatism vs. integrationism. Helga's discomfort as an "insider" to black groups involves not only the sexual politics that obtain between black men and women, but also inconsistencies in relationships with whites which Helga thinks affect blacks negatively. Also, Helga is consistently forced to "rewrite" the story of her own life to be accepted by blacks, an act she feels violates her personal identity in order to protect the social myths of black people.

At Naxos, for example, she was supposed to model black "ladyism"—which Helga understands as a repression of blackness altogether because a knee-jerk reaction against the disparaging images of blacks held by white people. This amounts finally to "an intolerable dislike of difference" (23). At any rate, the fact that Helga's father abandoned the family disqualifies her as a "real" lady, an identity she did not want on other grounds, at any rate—for she was uncomfortable with its suppression of sexuality. But she is also embarrassed that she owes her appearance as a lady to the sexual power of her light skin and hair, and never finally learns to manage the tension forced on women who would negotiate a third alternative to the sexual images of lady and whore. But most distressing to Helga about Naxos is the insufficient self-respect demonstrated by the community, as for example when a black audiences applauds a
white preacher who praises them for being the good sort of Negroes who stay in their proper place.

In Harlem, Helga suppresses information about her white mother because black people, she is told by her patron, would never accept it. In Harlem, the "respectable" women gossip about one Audrey Denney because she socializes with white people away from Harlem, yet these same women straighten their hair, aspire to succeed in terms set by white culture, and, in Helga's view, are "obsessed" with whites' opinion of them and with "the race problem," with the response white people seem to demand.

After Helga is rejected by Anderson, the narrative abruptly spirals to its close with Helga herself capitulating to a "false" image of blacks she herself holds. She romanticizes the life of the rural South, believing it to be simpler, more basic, more accepting of the "natural" things in life, such as sex. And, once the children come, Helga is trapped in a false identity such as she has never been before, for she will not abandon her children as she herself was abandoned.

Feminist critics of the Harlem Renaissance have been disappointed by the conventional closure of so many of its women's novels. Deborah McDowell (1986) compared the "unconvincing ending" of Quicksand with the equally problematic endings of Fauset's There is Confusion and several of Hurston's short stories. "These unearned and
unsetting endings," she says, "sacrifice strong and emerging independent female identities to the most acceptable demands of literary and social history" (xi).

Larsen does indeed "sacrifice" Helga, causing her to reproduce the life of her mother in "one blind surrender. A cruel sacrifice" (23). Perhaps Larsen wanted, like Woolf in *Mrs. Dalloway*, "to show the social system at its worst," to point out the systematic social forces of racism and sexism which contribute to the failure of individuals. But does this strategy only reinforce the idea that women are victims—perhaps blameless, but always victims?

Throughout this novel, Helga crane asks *"What's wrong with me?"*. Early critics followed the text's apparent lead by faulting Helga herself for her tragic end. It was "a lack somewhere" in the woman herself, her vacillating personality, her self-doubt, her inability to make choices and persevere in choices once made. A feminist rebuttal to this would be to point out, as I have above, that Helga's character represents the kind of personality traits found often among the oppressed. Yet there is something "wrong" with Helga, and not to point it out would make one complicit with Larsen as she "undercuts her own critique" of racial and sexual oppression (McDowell 1986: xxii).

What is wrong with Helga is that she is limited by the notions of static identity that surround her. She does not understand that identities—one's sense of herself and the
ways one is seen by others— are constructed dynamically, and can always be reformed by the actions of individuals such as herself. To many, this reformulation is the essence of political activism. Yet at key points in her life-story, Helga flees politics.

At Naxos, she objects to the matrons' disapproval of women wearing bright colors. But she, Helga Crane, [was] a despised mulatto, but something intuitive, some unanalyzed spirit of loyalty to the inherent racial need for gorgeousness told her that bright colours were fitting and that dark-complexioned people should wear yellow, green, and red. . . . Why, she wondered, didn't someone write A Plea for Color? [instead of] yapp[ing] loudly of race, of race consciousness, of race pride, and yet suppress[ing] its most delightful manifestations. . . . (18)

And why shouldn't that person be Helga herself? In Harlem, instead of being drawn into the political movements around her, Helga spends her time partying and criticizing the politics of others. Of course, "politics," narrowly defined, are not for everyone, and who will fault Helga if she is uninterested in committees and petitions and demonstrations? Yet, she could have made small changes in her own personal life and seen where they would lead. She could have affiliated herself with people such as Audrey Denney, who cross racial lines and apparently survive. She could have spent time meditating on the possibility suggested by Dr. Anderson when Helga wanted to resign from Naxos, the possibility that all human communities are flawed
and that this fact has its moral implications for setting
the purpose of one's life. But Helga only flees, searching
in vain for that ideal place that never is.

Jessie Fauset's character Angela Murray is much like
Helga Crane, beautiful, ambitious, resentful of restriction.
And Angela chooses "politics." The consequence of her
choice is improved living, including several satisfying
friendships with white women.

Jessie Fauset's *Plum Bun*

Jessie Fauset's life and work, except for her
activities as "midwife" to the Harlem Renaissance, have
attracted little attention from biographers and critics.
Choosing the black middle class as her subject, Fauset had
difficulty finding a publisher who would risk presenting the
public with a different image of blacks than that which it
expected (the exotic primitive, the prostitute, the
criminal). To this day, *Plum Bun* remains generally
unappreciated, like Fauset's three other novels. The
reviewer for *The New Republic* called it "melodramatic" and
"unreal" when it was first released and, later, black
aestheticians of the 1960s dismissed it as a "vapidly
genteel lace-curtain romance" (Littlejohn 50-51) which had
little power because it was "dainty" (Sato 68), "sophomoric,
trivial, and dull" (Bone 101). Fauset's integrationist,
rather than separatist position disqualified her as a
serious writer until, like Larsen and Hurston, she was "rediscovered" by feminism. Now, *Plum Bun* is undergoing a critical reassessment as "a frequently misunderstood, but carefully constructed black American Bildungsroman in which racial difference is the societal barrier perceived by the growing central character first as an absolute and, finally, as a false distinction of value to be overcome, ignored, and replaced" (Sylvander 81). Moreover, *Plum Bun* is an incisive, satiric study of sex roles. Feminist critics are finding that Fauset's character, Angela Murray, whose ambitious nature provokes first "her decision to pass and then] to reclaim her racial heritage" (Sylvander 80), is an excellent vehicle for studying the intersections of race, gender, and class which produce consciousness and experience. McDowell, for example, inverting Bone's placement of Fauset among the "Rear Guard" of black artists of the Harlem Renaissance, entitles her essay on *Plum Bun* "A Question of Power Or, The Rear Guard Faces Front." McDowell demonstrates Fauset's concern with differential access to social power based on sex as well as race and the author's manipulation of literary convention to reform her audience's "horizon of expectations" as it circumscribes the representation of black women's lives in fiction.

For our purpose, the study of interracial relationships between black and white women, *Plum Bun* is the quintessential novel of the period. For one thing, Fauset
frequently used interracial relationships as a narrative device to illustrate her point that whites and blacks of the same class were primarily similar to each other, rather than different. Although Fauset’s paradigm of race relations is out of favor now (and I will return to this point later), her use of interracial friendship as a central theme, rather than the focus of an occasional episode, is crucial to the development of this tradition. Of all the authors studied here, Fauset’s vision of the necessary components of a fully lived female life most clearly emphasizes friendship, rather than family alone. In *Plum Bun*, friendship is a central, rather than peripheral concern. Fauset lavishes attention on these relationships, rather than indicating them by a mere set of gestures. The theme of passing complicates the friendships, for intraracial friendships turn into interracial ones, and vice versa, with some frequency. However, at the end of the novel, Angela is confirmed in a proud black female identity (Jenkins) and enjoys all the blessings of life. These include meaningful work and strong, nurturant bonds with friends as well as family (Angela is reunited with her sister and is engaged to a man who loves her). Fauset thus writes well beyond the conventional endings of women’s novels. She also rewrites the scenario which controls stories about black and white women together. Angela successfully confronts the arrogant eye, although her mode of confrontation would not be
available to a darker-skinned woman. By the end of the novel, Angela's friendships include high quality interracial ones. They are not based on deceit, they provide both autonomy and nurturance, and they connect the characters to a wider community than the vicious and extreme segregation of the period normally would permit. The ending of Plum Bun, with its far-fetched coincidences reminiscent of nineteenth-century popular romance, will be unsatisfying to many readers today. But it can be appreciated as a utopian fantasy which anticipates the hopefulness of women writers of our own period. It asserts that the barriers between black and white women not only should be broken down, but can be.

* * * * * *

Deborah McDowell (1985) has separated Plum Bun's storyline into two main plots, the racial plot of passing and the sexual plot of romance. These cohere, McDowell says, to demonstrate the inextricable relationship of race and sex in black women's identities. A third variable defining identity--class--could also be introduced such that we could see Plum Bun as yet another female awakening novel in which the hero quests for an integrated identity and a place in the social world. She quests, like others such characters, for both autonomy and nurturance. To put it bluntly, Angela Murray wants power. After many painful experiences in which her false ideas are stripped away, she comes to recognize
the many sources of power in her life: meaningful work and supportive relationships of a variety of kinds. Once believing in a naive notion of personal freedom and autonomy, she comes to accept limitations and develops a new ethos of human relatedness not based on the principles of capitalist exchange, but on mutual respect and support. Her final viewpoint is one in which autonomy and nurturance are not opposed, but combined. Angela's "politics" are at issue here, for how one pursues freedom, and how one gives and gets nurturance and security, are profoundly political actions.

The novel's structure follows a popular nursery rhyme:

To market, to market,  
To buy a plum bun;  
home again, home again,  
market is done.

Major sections are entitled "Home," "Market," "Plum Bun," "Home Again," and "Market is Done." Angela begins at home, rejects what she sees as its limitations, departs, undergoes tests and trials, and returns home with special, transformative knowledge. This is also the mythic pattern of the life of the hero described by Joseph Campbell.

In the first section, "Home," the compelling qualities of Angela's character are presented. She is ambitious and loves luxury, but she is also a member of an oppressed class. She wants freedom from the innumerable petty and not-so-petty restrictions imposed on blacks in the 1920s,
but her idea of "politics"—how to change the situation—is naive, self-serving, and undeveloped. Angela’s only desire is freedom for herself. The narrator makes this point often, perhaps most strikingly the first time:

Freedom! That was the note which Angela heard oftenest in the melody of living which was to be hers. With a wildness that fell just short of unreasonableness she hated restraint. Her father’s earlier days as a coachman... her mother’s youth spent as maid... all this was to Angela a manifestation of the sort of thing which happens to those enchained it might be by duty, by poverty, by weakness or by colour. (13)

Angela’s mother teaches her to pass. The mother was motivated by the simple pleasure of breaking rules and enjoying the luxurious places reserved for whites in segregated Philadelphia, but Angela took it all much more seriously. In her was awakened a fierce desire to have those beautiful things denied to blacks. The third person narrator makes us readers aware of the mother’s "principle" which guides her passing: she would never pass if it meant she had to disclaim "her own" (15). But Angela neither knows, nor cares to know about that. She concludes from these escapades "that the great rewards of life--riches, glamour, pleasure,--are for white-skinned people only" and that dark-skinned people "are denied these privileges because they [are] dark" (17-18). The narrator points out the "fallaciousness" of Angela’s reasoning and its damaging effect: she pities rather than loves her dark relatives.
Like Bea's and Delilah's, Angela's idea of value will cause her to pursue an "imitation of life."

Virginia, the dark-skinned sister, is Angela's foil. She is devoted to the home and the community and to the comfort of others (compared to Angela's "selfish" devotion to her own comfort). This seemingly anti-feminist orientation to the domestic has to be understood in the context of the black feminism of Fauset's era. The architects of slavery and reconstruction required black women's work be expended on white projects; a high priority of black feminists was to make it possible for black women to choose home if they could. Virginia is an ideal of middle-class black womanhood in this respect. Her narrative expectations for her life also include work outside the home, political commitment, and an optimistic belief that race relations will improve as a result of that commitment. Angela, on the other hand, hates the idea of "politics." Like Helga Crane, she chafes restlessly against the boring monotony of political discussions. At this point, she is only considering the implications of racial oppression for her own personal life. She pouts at the earnest young men and at her sister, wondering why no one "think[s] that we have a right to be happy simply, naturally?" (54).

Angela's interracial relationships at this point in her life are formative. Most of the time, contacts with white people--especially white women--leave Angela feeling
degraded, angry, and self-loathing. In an embedded story, Angela’s mother’s relationship as maid to a white actress enacts the familiar scenario of the arrogant eye. The white woman expects all black women to be sexually experienced, immoral, inconstant, and invulnerable to rape ( . . . it doesn’t really matter, they do it all the time . . . ). The white woman sees only her own images, ignoring the actuality that Angela’s mother is virginal, shy, and skittish about the effect her light skin and hair have on men. The white woman therefore dismisses her employee’s concerns, setting her up for sexual harassment and abuse.

Angela herself suffers abuse, too, though she is somehow lucky enough to avoid sexual abuse. But her self-esteem is lowered by the numerous insults which maintain Jim Crow—not being able to see a movie, or eat in a restaurant, or work at one’s preferred occupation, or live where one will.

Angela’s first interracial friendship is with another school girl, Mary Hastings. Angela is one of the few black students at her school and is ostracized on account of her race. Mary enters school at mid-term and befriends Angela, thinking she is white. Angela’s release from her loneliness is liberating:

She had been so proud of Mary Hastings’ friendship. In the dark and tortured spaces of her difficult life it had been a lovely, hidden refuge. It had been an experience so rarely sweet that she had hardly spoken of it even to Virginia.
The other girls in her classes had meant nothing to her. At least she had schooled herself to have them mean nothing. (38)

Mary is rich and popular and bossy—but no one minds because she is rich. Angela becomes Mary's constant companion and, through Mary, Angela glimpses the exciting life of parties and activities she so fervently desires.

Angela was happy. She had a friend and the friendship brought her unexpected advantages. She was no longer left out of groups because there could be no class plans without Mary and Mary would remain nowhere for any length of time without Angela. So to save time and argument, and also to avoid offending the regent, Angela was always included. Not that she cared much about this, but she did like Mary; as is the way of a "fidus Achates," she gave her friendship wholeheartedly. And it was gratifying to be in the midst of things. (42)

The crisis in the relationship comes when Mary is elected as chief of the class representatives to the school magazine. She appointed Angela as her assistant to serve as treasurer. Another girl, jealous of Angela, blurted out "I don't know how it is with the rest of you, but I should have to think twice before I'd trust my subscription money to a coloured girl" (43). Mary is "astonished" to discover Angela's color and asks her friend why she didn't tell her in the first place (an incident which would recur several more times in Angela's adult life). Angela's response, "Why should I?," is not well received.

In a racist society that depends on blacks being noticeably "different" from whites (in order for oppression
Angela's lack of difference is unacceptable. Normally, difference is marked as a matter of skin and hair, and the arrogant eye, seeing these markers, interprets them according to its preconceived ideas. It is embarrassing and disconcerting, as well as threatening to one's white privilege (however unconscious one may be of that privilege), when the arrogant eye is confronted with discordant data. In this case, embarrassment is quickly converted into evidence supporting the arrogant gaze.

Angela's essential similarity to her white peers is dismissed, but her "dishonesty" in not making herself appear more different is interpreted as a racial trait—proof that she should be barred from positions of trust that require her to handle white people's money.

After a few days, Mary apologizes to Angela and agrees that her race "didn't matter." But it does matter; the friendship is never again the same:

Some element, spontaneity, trustfulness was lacking. Mary, who had never thought of speaking of colour, was suddenly conscious that here was a subject which she must not discuss. She was less frank, at times even restrained. Angela, too young to define her thoughts, yet felt vaguely: "She failed me once,—I was her friend,—yet she failed me for something with which I had nothing to do. She's just as likely to do it again. It's in her." (46)

The relationship ends here, characterized by a dynamic of restraint and distrust, which we will see again in Plum Bun and in the fiction of later decades.
A similar incident occurs when Angela attends an art college after high school. She is not yet fully "passing," but simply doesn’t talk about her "racial connections." Again she is discovered and her relationships with her white "friends" abruptly change. Angela does not like Jinny's advice to her at this point:

"... I don’t think you ought to mind quite so hard when they do find out the facts. It seems sort of an insult to yourself. And then, too, it makes you lose a good chance to do something for— for all of us who can’t look like you but who really have the same combination of blood that you have." (79)

Jinny is spokesperson for racial pride and for a "political" use of one’s identity against the arrogant eye. Jinny assumes that one’s "race" is a biological fact based on one’s "combination of blood," with any combination of black blood rendering one socially black. But Jinny also knows that how race is interpreted is a highly mediated social construct subject to change. Angela, on the other hand, asserts a different definition of race—her "blood" makes her both white and black, and her "looks" allow her to choose between the two. Defiantly she asks her sister "Why shouldn’t I declare for the one that will bring me the greatest happiness, prosperity and respect?" (80).

She decides to pass.

The next two sections, "Market" and "Plum Bun," relate Angela's experiences living a white identity. Arriving in New York from Philadelphia, Angela feels a surge of power,
an elation that comes from traveling unrestricted as a black person.

. . . she was living on the crest of a wave of excitement and satisfaction which would never wane, never break, never be spent. She was seeing the world, she was getting acquainted with life in her own way without restrictions or restraint; she was young, she was temporarily independent, she was intelligent, she was white. She remembered an expression "free, white and twenty-one,"—this was what it meant then, this sense of owning the world, this realization that other things being equal, all things were possible. (87-88)

She fantasizes:

"If I were a man," she said, "I could be president," and laughed at herself for the "if" itself proclaimed a limitation. But that inconsistency bothered her little; she did not want to be a man. Power, greatness, authority, these were fitting and proper for men; but there were sweeter, more beautiful gifts for women, and power of a certain kind too. Such a power she would like to exert in this glittering new world, so full of mysteries and promise. If she could afford it she would have a salon, a drawing-room where men and women, not necessarily great, but real, alive, free and untrammelled in manner and thought should come and pour themselves out to her sympathy and magnetism. To accomplish this she must have money and influence; indeed since she was so young she would need even protection; perhaps it would be better to marry . . . a white man. (88)

Up to this point, Angela only considered oppression a matter of race. Angela's experience of the intensity of racism caused her to overestimate the freedom of white women. Yet, on some level outside of consciousness, she understands sexism, for her fantasy of white power begins with awareness of its gendered possibilities. She knows, in other words, that white women's access to power is largely a function of
their attachment to white men. Her yearning for autonomy then, once imagined as freedom from the restraints of racism and lack of responsibility to other blacks, is now converted into yearning for dependence on (marriage to) a white man. At this juncture, Angela also disowns herself as artist, perhaps yet another issue of her subliminal awareness of sexism. To be a great artist is activity reserved for men; Angela decides instead to "have a salon" and be its hostess. For all the intensity of Angela's reformulation of identity here, she cannot completely abandon her loyalty to black people. But she easily slips into the role of the guilty white patroness. She will give charity to the poor, dark, unfortunate ones when all her dreams of wealth have materialized:

She saw her life rounding out like a fairy tale. Poor, coloured--coloured in America; unknown, a nobody! And here at her hand was the forward thrust shadow of love and of great wealth. She would do lots of good among coloured people; she would see that Miss Powell, for instance, had her scholarship. Or she would hunt girls and men like Seymour Porter,—she had almost forgotten his name,—or was it Arthur Sawyer,—and give them a taste of life in its fullness and beauty such as they had never dreamed of. (131)

The superficiality of Angela's concern for other black people is made apparent by her inability to remember even the names of the Philadelphia friends who less than half a year before had been her closest associates.

Angela denies her highest ideals. When they surface in her thoughts, she cringes inwardly, as when she considers
the character of Anthony Cross (who will be her fiance at
the end of the book):

There was a simple, genuine steadfastness in him
that made her realize that he would seek for the
expression of truth and of himself even at the
cost of the trimmings of life. And she was
ashamed, for she knew that for the vanities and
gewgaws of a leisurely and irresponsible existence
she would sacrifice her own talent, the integrity
of her ability to interpret life, to write down a
history with her brush. (112)

At this point in her life, Angela uses art classes and
work in general only as a means of meeting people, for her
idea of a rich life includes not only a white husband, but
many friends. The art school is integrated by one Miss
Powell, a very dark-skinned and earnest student, so Angela’s
prospects include an interracial friendship, this time with
roles reversed. Miss Powell, timid, self-effacing, and
"constantly withdrawn from her companions," like the child
Helga Crane, at first resists Angela’s advances toward
friendship. Angela has assured herself that she is not
"taking the girl up as a matter of either patronage or
loyalty," but is only "offer[ing] her the ordinary amenities
which their common student life made natural and possible"
(108). In other words, Angela is acting as though race
"doesn’t matter," a point she herself had so often tried to
impress on her white acquaintances in the past.

But Angela herself has already forgotten how much race
does matter. When Miss Powell finally accepts a lunch
invitation, Angela directs her to a restaurant without first
Finding out whether they seat black customers and when she arrives late to find Miss Powell nervously pacing the sidewalk, afraid to enter, she is as insensitive as any white woman who has never had to think about segregation at all. The two women are restrained with each other, just as Angela and Mary Hastings had been in the end:

The lunch was not a particularly pleasant one. Either Miss Powell was actually dull or she had made a resolve never to let herself go in the presence of white people; perhaps she feared being misunderstood, perhaps she saw in such encounters a lurking attempt at sociological investigations; she would lend herself to no such procedure, that much was plain. Angela could feel her effort to charm, to invite confidence, glance upon and fall back from this impenetrable armour. (109)

Angela does not pursue the friendship with Miss Powell to the extent that she pursues friendships with the "other" white women students.

Angela feels extended by her friendships with white women. They provide companionship, introduce her to eligible white men, and challenge her ideas of the limits of the possible—for they are all nonconforming artist-types who live haphazardly and zestfully in the Village. These are interracial friendships, too, but only from Angela's point of view. Most of the time, Angela acts as though race doesn't matter—and most of the time, in fact, it doesn't, for all the parties are assumed to be white. But occasionally, Angela is disturbed about what might happen should they find out. She questions the degree of
commitment these friends would have to her as a person, or whether they would be loyal to whiteness if a choice had to be made. Occasionally as well, racial "difference" intrudes on Angela's ability to converse. Having a different personal history than the others and feeling herself aligned with blacks, even if only secretly, Angela also has a different stock of common-sense knowledge which makes for an occasional lapse of intersubjectivity. When she begins her journey "Home Again," Angela would recall these incidents to rebuild a concept of racial identity as determined by more than one's physical appearance alone. Racial identity also includes, as Angela discovers, one's history and a sense of necessary or elected affiliation with others.

But these breaches with whites are never as severe as those with her black friends. Once, for example, she brushes Miss Powell off when they meet accidentally in public. Angela is afraid that the wealthy and very racist white man she is dating, and whom she is expecting momentarily, will become alienated at the sight of such interracial intimacy. Angela would later disown her sister in the same way, and for the same man.

Angela's disastrous romance with Roger Fielding has been the focus of most of the previous criticism of Plum Bun and I will not spend much time discussing it here. Suffice it to say that this episode is a dysphoric "heroine's text" in which Angela is seduced and abandoned. What is important
here is that Roger teaches Angela the limits of white women's power and the dangers which attend dependence on a lover. While at first Roger seems to Angela to be "a blond, glorious god" (129), he proves himself nothing more than an old-fashioned rake. To attract him, Angela learns to play a cut-throat game of power, a game in which one never lets one true's feelings be known, nor gives too much. This ethos—which attaches Angela to the white man—is the opposite of the ethos of relatedness and reciprocity that Angela is able to develop by the novel's close which reattaches her to a black community. Living as the white man's property represents the nadir of the trajectory of Angela's life. She is alienated from her friends; she is not serious about her work, nor working very well; she is dangerously dependent on Roger for the very roof over her head.

Fauset, however, writes beyond the ending of the heroine's text. When the affair falls through, Angela considers death, but doesn't die. Instead, she begins the very painful process of self-examination to learn what went wrong and how she can change herself to make things better. She is spurred on by loneliness. First, one by one her art school friends leave to pursue lovers or simply to go "home" to family. Her own sister, whose life Angela studies as a contrast to her own, is surrounded by real friends. Angela returns to the theme of her own friendlessness over and over
again in her painful meditations. Moreover, Virginia has work and a lover, too, neither of which Angela has.

Angela begins to work in earnest and to cultivate some new friendships. One of these, with a Jewish woman Rachel, seems promising until Rachel makes a bitter comment about never wanting to marry a "nigger." Angela is angry and ashamed, but doesn’t challenge her.

Angela’s sister is distant, but Angela is overwhelmed by thoughts of family. She therefore picks up again her old idea of marriage as a way to escape loneliness, but wonders how she will ever be able to tolerate marriage with a white man, for the racism among whites is pandemic. Angela knows she will never be able to develop in herself or live happily ever after with the common type of white personality. The "feelings of superiority, normalcy, and self-righteousness, together with guilt, fear, projection, denial of reality," and the aggressiveness, rigidity, and repression would be intolerable (Pheterson, 148). The essence of whiteness is cruelty (291).

After many false starts, she begins to identify the faults in her own behavior. The worst of these was disowning her own sister, so Angela begins carefully to repair the damaged bond with Jinny as well as seek out new friends. Her sincerity and commitment are proved when she falls in love with Anthony Cross, but, discovering that he is her sister’s secret fiance, she gives up the idea of
pursuing him. In other words, Angela now considers the effect of her actions on others as she decides how to act on her own behalf; she understands that her happiness is also connected to the happiness of others. She learns to accept limitations on her autonomy because her need for security can only be fulfilled in healthy relationships with others. She decides that her old idea of autonomy was wrong, that no one is absolutely free, not even Roger. White, male, rich, Roger should epitomize the freedom available in racist heteropatriarchy, but even he is controlled by the family purse-strings. Angela's decision to break from the white community and its values, and begin living her life according to different ones, is remarkable—the same decision that Janie in Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* makes. Like Janie, Angela now wants people, not things.

Angela's relative unattractiveness as a black feminist hero compared to Janie is undoubtedly due to a combination of factors. Black feminist critics almost unanimously approve of Janie's lover, Tea Cake, seeing in him a representative of the "natural" black man, despite the fact that he pinches her, has an affair with another woman, and beats her up to show that she is his possession. By comparison, the pale Anthony Cross, who himself is passing throughout much of the book, is too plain and too white. More important than the sexual attributes of their leading
men, however, is the novels' depictions of black community. Janie moves through successively less interracial or white-oriented communities, finding her happiness with Tea Cake on the muck, an epitome of black folk culture according to the novel's critics. This movement is politically more acceptable to those black feminist critics whose roots are in black nationalism, a separatist movement—in other words, to most of the influential black feminists writing about literature today.

The movement of Angela's life, on the other hand, is toward interracial community, a movement which although not assimilationist, does support the values of integration. When Angela decides to reclaim her black identity and realign herself in a meaningful way with black community, she is also unwilling to give up her white friends, though she is aware that they may give her up. She also wants to continue working with her white teachers and move to Europe for further study of art. There are aspects of white culture she values, and she wants equal access to them. (For example, she likes the movies and is upset when a theatre plays for "whites only.")

The crisis comes in the last section, "Market is Done." The devoted Miss Powell receives a scholarship to study painting in France and the donors of the award, learning she is black, take the money back. Some of the students organize a campaign of protest, but Angela at first will not
associate herself with it. She, too, has received a scholarship and is afraid they will take hers away. But she is sorely aware of the injustice of the situation and struggles valiantly to find a way to speak as a white woman in such a way that won't endanger her. This proves impossible, for every one of her arguments for racial equality are twisted into statements she doesn't mean, statements that support the arrogant gaze fixing Miss Powell. Anthony, whom she loves, reveals his black identity in a powerful gesture of support for Miss Powell. When Angela finally realizes that her most powerful political tool is her own unstereotypical black appearance (both her physical appearance and her achievements), she too "comes out." She reveals her identity to counter the insulting racist remarks of the newspaper reporters—who are visibly shocked—and she refuses the award as an act of protest before it can be taken away. This act, like Anthony's, is described as a sort of mental and emotional house-cleaning. It liberates Angela from feeling like a fraud and an imposter, and it makes it possible for Jinny to forgive her. In a long conversation between the sisters, they reaffirm the family values of not disclaiming one's own and of finding ways to resist the "common suffering" they share as black people and black women. Angela decides being a good person is better than being a white person.
There occur many convolutions of plot before Angela finally arrives in Paris to fulfill her professional ambition. Her white friends do not abandon her; some even help pay for her passage abroad. Before Angela leaves, there are many shows of affection, and promises to reunite. The complicated love quadrangle between herself, her sister, Mathew Henderson, and Anthony Cross is untangled in the last chapter so that Plum Run closes on a tone of utopic hopefulness. Angela has everything: work, family, and friends, including white friends. Without any one of these, life would be diminished. Angela deserves each of these blessings because she is no longer ashamed of herself, but is proud of her race. She is no longer, as Janie would say in Their Eyes Were Watching God, being whipped up the road after things. Instead, she knows what is of real value. Her experience in interracial friendships both point her toward the new value and are her reward when she begins living it. However, the only reason any of the interracial friendships work at all is that Jinny's primary loyalty is to her own black identity.

Conclusion

The interracial relationships in all these novels are qualified, restricted, and damaged by the arrogant eyes of white people. Rather than contributing to a high quality of life, relationships with white women are frequently sources
of pain for black women. The arrogant eye converts a relationship between self and other to a reflection of self in the other. It blots out the other's existence, rationalizes exploitation, and serves only the self, but not very well. To see with arrogant eyes is, like Bea, to miss opportunities for growth in intimacy with another; it is to risk living an "imitation of life." For black women, to acquiesce to the arrogant eyes of white women, like Helga Crane, is to risk self-destruction.

Two strategies emerge in the literature of the Harlem Renaissance for resisting the arrogant eye. Like Janie in Their Eyes Were Watching God, black women may find fulfillment by separating as much as possible from white society and white values. Complete separation, however, is not possible; nor do all black women find it a desirable ideal. Like Angela in Plum Bun, many black women will strive to make a place in white-dominated society. If this is not to mean self-destruction, it must mean sometimes taking a stand, choosing "politics" and confrontation with whites. Plum Bun does not advocate assimilation, but proud racial identity and commitment to black community as the necessary foundation for black women's lives. Good, supportive relationships with white women may be built upon, but never replace this base. And above all, this interracial building is only possible with those white women
who are willing to exchange arrogant looking for another kind of vision.
1. Frye herself cautions against the easy equation of racism with sexism (61). She is aware, as I am, of the politically suspect nature of many comparisons between forms of oppression. It is not my intention here to "rank oppressions," or to use one to discount the other.

2. See Contemporary Authors Permanent Series 1, Koppelman (1987), and Uffen. Koppelman, who is researching a full-length biography of Hurst, believes the bibliographical information now in print to be incorrect on key points, including the author's birthdate. See also Brandimarte, Burke, Donaldson, and Wilentz.

3. See, for example, the interviews by Salpeter and van Gelder.

4. Because great liberties were taken by each film's director in reworking Hurst's novel for the cinema, the movie versions do not provide an essential key to reconstructing the contemporary reception of Hurst's narrative, nor a necessary springboard for new readings of it. Thus, the films will not be analyzed here.

5. The phrase "writing beyond the ending" is from DuPlessis' book with the same title. It refers to continuing the plot line beyond the expected, traditional point at which it "should" close.

6. A phrase popularized by Helen Gurley Brown and purported to be the slogan of upwardly mobile women in the 1980s. The subtitle of Brown's book of the same title reads "Love, Success, Sex, Money."


8. See Chodorow and Gilligan for the more traditional view that women's development is primarily a function of personal relationship. Hurst's view does not fully endorse this.

9. For whites, that is. As Jack Santino points
out, the Pullman concept had an entirely different meaning for the black porters themselves and for black people generally.

10. See for example, Hurst’s introduction to Hurston’s *Jonah’s Gourd Vine*.

11. This is like Tate’s suggestion that critics refocus attention on the character of Irene in Larsen’s *Passing*. I am hoping for similar results.

12. The question is Mieke Bal’s (82).


14. See, for example, Doyle (1975), Giddings (1975), Howe, and Hull (1975; 1977). In 1971, Collier brought out an edition of *Quicksand*; in 1986 the novel was featured in the American Women Writers Series of the Rutgers University Press, a series explicitly linked to feminist critical revision of the literary canon.

15. Quotations from a few feminist analyses of *Quicksand* demonstrate the point. From Hortense E. Thornton:

The subject matter of *Quicksand* is varied, but the novel reveals that the issues of racism and sexism are no doubt concerns of Miss Larsen in that she exposes the racial and sexual prejudice which Helga, a perceptive, responsible woman, confronts in her cross-cultural quest for a sense of her place in life, her identity. When one considers the complex events of the novel, it becomes possible to argue that Helga’s tragedy was perhaps more a result of sexism than of racism. The novel assumes picaresque proportions as Helga frantically moves from one place to another in pursuit of an environment which will allow her free expression. . . . Helga optimistically pursues a variety of experiences with hopes of realizing a sense of self being and retreats from such experiences with feelings of disillusionment, indifference, and restiveness. (288)

Helga’s inability to allow herself authentic sexual expression assumes a significant role in her tragic dilemma at the novel’s end. . . . Helga Crane of *Quicksand* was a woman living in a male chauvinistic society wherein social roles, including sexual behavior, were, and still are to
a great extent, defined by men and by women who accept male dominance. (290-91)

Larsen skillfully displays the extent to which Helga's sex and her attitudes toward it serve as a handicap in her full realization of self. (294)

... Miss Larsen ... has created in Helga a tragedy of a person oppressed by a system that discriminates unmercifully against Blacks as well as against women. (301)

From Mary Helen Washington's 1980 article in Ms.:

In their insistence that black women are estranged from the right to aspire and achieve in the wide world of thought and action, Quicksand and Passing are brilliant witnesses to the position of a colored woman in a white, male world. ... The women in her novels, like Larsen, are driven to emotional and psychological extremes in their attempts to handle ambivalence, marginality, racism, and sexism. (50)

And most recently from Cheryl Wall (1986):

Both Quicksand and Passing contemplate the inextricability of the racism and sexism which confront the black woman in her quest for a wholly integrated identity. As they navigate between racial and cultural polarities, Larsen's protagonists attempt to fashion a sense of self free of both suffocating restrictions of ladyhood and fantasies of the exotic female Other. They fail. The tragedy for these mulattoes is the impossibility of self-definition. Larsen's protagonists assume false identities that ensure social survival but result in psychological suicide. In one way or another, they all "pass." Passing for white, Larsen's novels remind us, is only one way this game is played. (98).

[At Naxos, Helga] realizes ... that her battles with school authorities and snobbish co-workers are symptomatic of her personal struggle to define herself. ... Her real struggle is against imposed definitions of blackness and womanhood. Her "difference" is ultimately her refusal to accept society's terms even in the face of her inability to define alternatives. (98-99)

16. The phrase is Langston Hughes's. Fauset, as editor of The Crisis, an important black journal, "gave birth" to the literary careers of many of the notable
writers of the Harlem Renaissance. Fauset's biographers include Sylvander and McDowell (1985). See also Contemporary Authors 109. Sims has authored a selected bibliography on Fauset which includes references to biographical materials.

17. Occasional dissenting voices include that of Gloster.

18. See Giddings (1975), Hull (1975; 1977), and Perry. Fauset is also mentioned frequently in Gloria T. Hull, et al.'s All the Women Are White, All the Blacks are Men, But Some of Us Are Brave: Black Women's Studies, the ovular collection of syllabi and bibliographies.

19. Feeney was the first critic to point out the double-structure of Fauset's novels based on fairy tales. This double-structure is the base of the author's ironic attitude toward sex roles noted by the feminist commentators on Fauset's work.
CONCLUSION:

LITERATURE SINCE 1940

After 1940, as the Civil Rights movement heated up, women writers increasingly engaged the subject of race relations as a function of interpersonal relationships between women. When a "new wave" of the white Women's Liberation Movement swelled in the late 1960s, feminist theoretical imperatives focused women's attention away from men and sharply onto our relationships with each other, including our friendships. Finally, when black feminism powerfully emerged in the 1970s, making racism within the movement a major issue in the process, feminist writers--both black and white--responded by producing a sizeable number of literary texts about women's interracial friendship.

By no means has a single image emerged defining what it means, in either political or personal terms, for black and white women to come together as friends. At the level of theory, there is lack of consensus on even the most basic of issues, such as the relative power of white and black women, whether there exists a common female identity, what would define it if there were, and to what extent are black and white women's interests similar, or are they irrevocably opposed. Some of the fiction, such as Alice Walker's novel
Meridian (1976), Maureen Brady’s Folly (1982), and Sherley Ann Williams’ Dessa Rose (1986), confront these theoretical problems and dramatize the various possibilities as they impact on women’s interracial friendships. Many other texts are written less with the interests of a particular political movement in mind, than in the spirit of a broadly-based humanitarianism.

Quite a few of the texts are simple "action stories," like the abolitionist fiction we have already examined. In action stories, the focus is plot. Characters are not always well-developed; nor do the texts consistently address the issues of cross-racial perception with which the writers of the Harlem Renaissance struggled so fiercely. Instead, the stories are dramatizations of how racism damages women’s lives. The figure of interracial friendship in these stories is used first to symbolize the kind of growth through interpersonal relationship that women tend to seek in every aspect of our lives. Then racism intrudes into these friendships, sometimes without the characters really understanding what is going on, until it is too late—"the problem" is full blown.

Like the abolitionist fiction, typically such stories are "written beyond the ending" and into the world. Ending at moments of choice, they demand that readers ask what might happen next, what the characters can possibly do to solve their dilemma—the problems created by racism—what
they should do, and whether and why there is a difference between the two. These are stories written by engaged writers who pose moral choices for readers. The underlying assumption is that—to speak metaphorically—the world is a text that we are all busy co-authoring. Thus we are all engaged in the work of the artist, if not directly, then indirectly as we create a world in which certain stories are "realistic" and others "implausible" or even "impossible." These stories assume that daily actions create the future, or rather, as Annie Cheatham and Mary Clare Powell have put it, "the future is a result of choices [we] make every single day" (xxiii). Readers are engaged in looking at the kind of world that racist acts have made. We are challenged to rewrite the text of the world. In this way, writers may be liberated for new, and different, creative work. And readers, too, may be liberated into a world in which new stories—and new lives—are possible.

"A Nice Name" by Frances Gray Patton is a marvelous example of this type of writing. "A Nice Name" was first published in The New Yorker in 1949, and after winning an award from a society for the promotion of intercultural understanding was republished in The Negro Digest in the 1950s. It has not been in print since, but Susan Koppelman and I plan to reprint it in a forthcoming anthology. I have taught this story many times in English and Women's Studies classrooms and can attest to its continuing power to move
readers though no such evidence yet exists in print. "A Nice Name" effectively probes white racism as a problem for whites and a potential destroyer of the possibility for creative interracial relationships.

Josephine, the protagonist, is a middle aged white woman. She is happily married and of sufficient means to hire a (black) maid, though she feels she must work at a little something to supplement her husband's income. Having once loved to study Latin, she begins tutoring schoolchildren and writes a letter to a local paper about a teaching technique she has discovered. In another city, a mysterious Mrs. Hannah Marshall is given the article by a friend and begins corresponding with Josephine. In time, the letters between the two develop from a professional exchange, to a kind of contest, and then into a deeper sharing of souls. Josephine is "the highbrow" of her group of friends in New Hope, North Carolina, a circle in which, although she is happy, Josephine's best qualities can not be developed. Josephine herself recognizes this. She understands that it is her relationship with Mrs. Marshall which most enhances her life as it provides a channel for her undeveloped creativity.

Her white friends, perhaps motivated by jealousy--for Josephine's intellectual life is beyond them and separates her from them (the story describes a world intensely preoccupied with sameness and conformity)--investigate Mrs.
Marshall and discover that she is black. As soon as they can, they tell Josephine. This occurs during the girlfriends's weekly beauty ritual. Josephine has just been instructed by Amy to "Lie down and relax," an instruction which will be repeated often until the story's last line. "Relaxation" bears symbolic meaning: it means conformity, cooperation with the racist social politics of her girlfriends, politics which Josephine shares to a degree, though at times she enjoys "feeling pleasantly liberal" in her attitudes toward blacks (24). Josephine's first reaction after learning Mrs. Marshall's racial identity is inwardly to assert that "it didn't make much difference" (29), an assertion belied by her subsequent thoughts which reinterpret Mrs. Marshall in light of the new information. What Josephine actually does here is to encompass Mrs. Marshall in one of her preexisting images of black women--images represented by the two maids in the story. Liza, Josephine's maid, is a "good darky," who knows her place and is "humble and self-respecting" (24). Amy's maid Mossy, fat, black, and loud, is too familiar and oversteps, from Josephine's point of view, proper bounds. Before, when Josephine thought Mrs. Marshall was white, Josephine's stance was timidly respectful of Mrs. Marshall's obviously superior education and sensibility. Now she reinterprets Mrs. Marshall's poetic voice as unsophisticated and naive, her restraint as pretention and chicanery. This process of
perception, in which white women see not the black women in front of them, but their own images of "good" and "bad" black women, is well documented here by Patton. Josephine, in other words, looks at Mrs. Marshall with arrogant eyes but is unaware that that is what she is doing.

But when her girlfriends use the cutting label "nigger," Josephine is surprised by their harshness and cruelty. She starts, in a spontaneous impulse of sympathy with Mrs. Marshall and un(self)conscious resistance to the system of segregation. But she is again told to "Lie back, now..." (30), and she tries, but is uncomfortable, unable. In a series of conflicting thoughts, Jo alternates between condemning her friends (they are "silly") and declaring her independence ("I am a free agent"). But she does capitulate, an act symbolized by Amy's laying "a wet compress on her eyes" under which "Josephine surrendered" (30). She is now symbolically blinded to the narrowness and cruelty of her friends and to the restrictions on her self-development and fulfillment which the maintenance of the system of racism requires. Jo does know that her surrender impoverishes her. In contrast to her former mood of "calm exhilaration," in which her poetic faculties and ability to appreciate life were quickened, she is now inwardly dead. She can only see a "smug, dowdy town," can only hear "a monotonous humming noise--like a whine, like a long complaint, like the fretful, recurrent loneliness of the
human mind" (30). But she does not, as Susan Koppelman says, understand the distance between herself and Mrs. Marshall, "does not understand why race matters or how racism and power work" (personal communication). Josephine has no ready analysis to which to turn, nor a supportive community in which her questions and conflicts will be taken seriously.

When she is finally explicitly told by her white friends to break the friendship with Mrs. Marshall (Amy insists on this in language which links this passage to an earlier one in which Jo's mother forces her to put out of her life an unacceptable beau), Josephine realizes the price she will pay—that she has paid and is paying—for conformity. She "stiffens" again in resistance. But the final line of this story is Amy's, seducing Josephine to cooperate, to conform to racist convention: "Let all the muscles go slack, Amy said."

And there the story ends. But, obviously, it doesn't close. We readers are left with the unavoidable questions: What will Josephine do? What can she do? What should she do?

The system of segregation in which this story unfolds ensures that Josephine will receive absolutely no social permission for this friendship to continue. Nor might she herself want to continue it, for to do so would require her, possibly, to confront her own racism and revise her self-
image as a high-minded "liberal." One of Jo's alternatives
is to imagine Mrs. Marshall as an "exception" to her rules
about black women and continue to think of most of them as
"natural" maids. Another is to resist the racism of her
white friends and of white society generally. Finally, "A
Nice Name" is profoundly dissettling in its lack of
conclusion. Under its smooth and charming veneer is the
inner disquiet of Josephine, caught between her need for
this relationship, her conflicting need to see Mrs. Marshall
as a woman like herself, not a black woman who is "other,"
confounded by her "knowledge" of Mrs. Marshall's racial
difference, her need to conform to her white society, and
her own deep sense that Mrs. Marshall is being injured--that
she herself is also being injured--and that injury is wrong.

"A Nice Name" succinctly depicts the pressure whites
exert on each other to maintain the racist status quo.
Stories from the 1950s, 60s, 70s and 80s about interracial
relationships continue this tradition, revealing how racism
continues to be a barrier between women. Each of these
stories, too, ends at a moment of indecision and choice;
each is a hard question.

Tillie Olsen's story "Oh Yes," in Tell Me a Riddle, is
well known. It concerns two pairs of mothers and daughters,
one black, the other white, and the web of friendship
between them. The mothers Alva and Helen have been able to
maintain their intimacy, while the daughters Pariall and
Carol are being forced apart by the process which Carol's older sister Jeannie calls "sorting." "How they sort"—another name for the social construction of racist institutions, the subtle and overt judgements and actions, the readings of race as sign, which fix the girls in separate classes and assign them to separate destinies, just as the two daughters in Hurst's Imitation of Life are sorted and fixed. Jeannie makes it clear to her distressed mother that race is only one criteria for "sorting." She describes how she was "sorted" from her own childhood girlfriend, who also was white, but who would never finish school, who now, at 17, had a young child. Helen does her best to support Carol’s friendship with Parialee even while Jeannie makes it clear that this will be impossible. The narrative is in the complex stream-of-consciousness style Olsen also uses in "Tell Me a Riddle"; it shifts between the characters's points of view, marking lines of missed communication, evoking a texture of pain and loss which can not easily be forgotten.

The conflict in "Oh Yes" comes to center on Carol: will she resist sorting? In the story's first section, the mothers take Carol to Parialee's church for her baptism. Here Carol is overwhelmed by the "otherness" of Parialee and her people, by the strangeness, the emotional power, the pain of the worship. Koppelman has suggested that the fear with which Olsen suffuses Carol here has its source in
Olsen's Jewish identity and consequent healthy distrust of Christianity. Carol, however, is not identifiably Jewish. She is, though, wracked by fear that her white friends will find out that she has gone to this place, even as she remembers the childhood games she shared with Parialee and misses them sorely. She faints and is scorned by her now-distant friend.

In the second and final section of "Oh Yes," the sorting continues--its site: school--and we are witness to the brutality with which teachers treat Parialee and girls like her. In her desire to succeed, to be accepted by the "right" crowd, Carol continues to avoid Parialee. But when Carol gets the mumps, Helen arranges for Parialee to bring her homework to her after school. In a final meeting we see the now unbridgeable distance between the young friends. In a fit of fever (sickness in this story bears the symbolic weight that relaxation does in "A Nice Name"), Carol sobs to her mother that she can't be like the other white girls, that she is troubled with memories of the black girls--so rebellious in school, so good in church. She cries that she can't just forget about it like her friend Melanie; she sympathizes with Parialee despite the callous unconcern to which she is being trained.

"Why does it have to be like it is?" she asks her mother, "And why do I have to care?" These are the questions which end the story--again, not closing it, but
opening the reader onto a field of conflict and struggle. As in Patton’s “A Nice Name,” here too readers are required to read beyond the ending, to ask with Carol why is there racism, and why must I care? Do I accept my place in racist society, or struggle for a new kind of world? If I accept my place, what will the losses be? If I struggle, will I be punished?

Norma Rosen’s 1963 story “What Must I Say To You?” also poses a question. The friendship between the unnamed protagonist, a light-skinned, assimilated U.S. Jew, and Mrs. Cooper, her dark-skinned, Baptist, Jamaican maid, is a shy, careful one. The narrator describes how she and Mrs. Cooper perceive each other:

I know little about Mrs. Cooper, and so read much into her ways. Despite the differences between us, each of us seems to read the other the same—tender creature, prone to suffer. . . . What can I guess, except what reflects myself, about someone so different from me? (48)

Here the women do not perceive each other as preconceived images, as in “A Nice Name,” but as blank pages. They circle each other slowly and respectfully, moving closer. The plot of “What Must I Say To You?” is a triple one. One strand of the braid is the growing friendship between the two women as they learn about each other, discover a net of similarities and differences between them, appreciate each other’s history and struggles. The other two strands are the women’s relationships to their husbands, relations which
are amazingly parallel. The wives discover their mutual problem: conflict with their husbands about religion and culture. Mrs. Cooper's husband is a "zestful America-adopter"; Mrs. Cooper a lover of the old country who had to give up her hopes of return when Mr. Cooper became a U.S. citizen. Not only is Mrs. Cooper unable to find a Baptist church in this country which resembles the quiet worship of her home congregation (she is acutely uncomfortable with the ecstatic shouting traditions of U.S. black Baptists) and Mr. Cooper has joined a church which doesn't even celebrate Christmas. Her refrains throughout this story are "God is not a God of confusion" and "I am going to find a church."

The protagonist, an assimilated Jew, struggles against the shame her husband—"neither Orthodox nor Reform . . . his own council of rabbis" (51)—heaps on her for her aculturated upbringing. She was raised in wealth and privilege; he, a European, lost most of his family to the concentration camps. Her kind of Jewishness has been defined between them as less valid, less real than his, and she must fight for his respect.

The recurring question "What must I say to you?" is Mrs. Cooper's enquiry as to how she must greet her employer and acknowledge their differences. The question is part of the ritual between the two women as they skirt and narrow the distances between them. In the final segment of the story, which occurs at the Passover/Easter holiday, the
narrator’s husband hears Mrs. Cooper ask the slow question, and takes it on himself to lecture her about Passover. After he leaves them, the women are embarrassed at his display. Mrs. Cooper finally breaks the tension, saying "I will not be like this all the days of my life" (53), and she leaves the narrator to wonder what the phrase "like this" may mean. She is faced with the question of whether or not she herself is part of Mrs. Cooper’s problem ("Not be like what? A Jamaican without a servant? A wife who never vacations? An exile? A baby nurse? A woman who gives in?" [53]). As well, she suddenly realizes her own powerlessness to alter any of the conditions of Mrs. Cooper’s life—the unemployment in Jamaica, the race-segregated job market which makes educated Mrs. Cooper unable to get any job other than nurse maid for a white woman’s child. She is unable, perhaps, to alter even her own life.

Again, this is a story which ends, but does not close. What can the narrator, what can Mrs. Cooper do to improve their lives? To understand each other? To help each other and themselves?

Alice Walker’s short story "Advancing Luna and Ida B. Wells" is a story I have hesitated to teach for the same reasons that the first-person narrator, a young writer, hesitates to tell Luna’s story: a fear of legitimizing the myth of the black rapist. Luna is white, the young writer black, and their friendship, begun when they were both
working in Georgia to register voters during the summer of 1965, starts to unravel years later when Luna tells the narrator that she was raped that summer by a black man.

Before Luna confides the rape, the two women's friendship serves them both well. They are young, optimistic, and independent. They share an apartment together, are warm, close, and secure, but basically leave each other alone. They imagine themselves—at least the protagonist imagines herself—to be free, and "equal" to each other. Yet after Luna's disclosure, the protagonist begins angrily to question and reject the friendship, understanding Luna's experience as having a dangerous power over her, and not just over her, but over the entire black community.

Walker sets up the story well to foreclose against the possibility that readers inject their own sexist and racist prejudices into it. The black man, Freddie Pye, can not be imagined to have raped Luna out of lust, for she is described early on as "attractive, but just barely," with acne and oily hair. She could not have "led him on," for Walker makes her patience and passivity clear. Like the protagonist, all we have is Luna's word and the strong intuition that she must be believed.

Before she knows about this rape, the protagonist is comfortable with her beliefs that black people are a superior race and whites a people from whom one must expect
"any atrocity, at any time" (88). Afterward she has to sort out the conflicting claims on her of race and sex. She can't understand why Luna didn't scream ("I felt I surely would have"). She can't understand why Freddie did it—even though she is well aware of the belief of some black men in the idea of "revolutionary rape" and of the everyday threat of rape with which women of all colors live. At the same time she is forced to admit a certain nobility in Luna, for Luna understood the nature of the power of her word about rape and did not use it. The protagonist's most deeply felt prejudices about race are shattered. She realizes that black people are not necessarily superior (one of her cherished beliefs) and that some white women are trustworthy, will not betray a black friend or black people more generally.

In the end, after much struggle, blind loyalty to neither sex nor race wins out. The protagonist, a writer, does not succumb to Ida B. Wells's injunction to silence about interracial rape (that "threadbare lie"), yet she continues to feel guilty and endangered by speaking and writing about it. She writes an incident of interracial rape in a novel and combs out the contradictions in her own thought in the story about Luna. The Luna story contains the bare bones of plot—what happened. But, as its author says "It has an 'unresolved' ending. That is because Freddie Pye and Luna are still alive, as am I" (98).
Walker signals here is the "truth value" of the story about Luna. Walker means us to know that interracial rape does happen in real life to real people and will continue to happen. Moreover, she gestures beyond the story, arguing that our real actions in this real world, which either perpetuate or undermine racism, must determine how "the story"—that is, the story of our lives—ends, how we allow relationships between black and white women, and between women and men of different races to proceed.

The protagonist of "Advancing Luna" talks about the multiple endings she has imagined to this story, endings which only make sense, are only realistic, in the context of certain worlds. In "a society committed to the establishment of justice for everyone ('justice' in this case encompassing equal housing, education, access to work, adequate dental care, et cetera), thereby putting Luna and Freddie Pye in their correct relationship to each other, i.e., that of brother and sister, compañeros, then the two of them would be required to struggle together over what his rape of her had meant" (98). In this world, one of injustice, the relationship between the women is chipped away by the black woman's fear and anger, both women's consciousness of the whole history of racism and sexual violence which both binds them together and separates them as black and white women. In this world, they are both scarred by the rape, with unclear prospects and not even a
movement—a sense of community or common purpose—to secure themselves within. Finally, the writer-protagonist not only must imagine multiple endings, but multiple middles for the story as well. What happened when Freddie and Luna saw each other again? Is it possible what a politically savvy friend of hers in Cuba suggests: that Freddie may have been paid by someone to disrupt the Civil Rights movement by raping white women? The entire story, then, and with it the possibility for making sense of the relationships between black and white women and men, begins to unravel. What is certain is that Walker means to engage us with questions of racial and economic justice—and what we must do to bring them about.

In the 1980s, Lee Lynch continues this story-telling tradition with her "At a Bar V: Summer Storm" in which a lesbian bar—a metaphor for the lesbian community—is the setting for racial conflict. It is a sweltering summer, and Sally and Liz, the owners, work hard to make the bar a refuge for the working class dykes of the neighborhood. The bar is discovered by five black lesbians, who make it their lunch spot and begin to dance there on weekend nights, too. One white woman, Betty Marie, fueled by a family heritage of racist teaching, pent-up jealousy and "twisted" hate (she is also homophobic and self-hating), devotes herself to disruptive talk to the other whites in the bar. After several weeks of increasing tension, the white dykes begin
actively to harrass the black ones. The Five, as the black women are called, politely avoid a confrontation until an accident on the dance floor escalates into a full-blown fight between the white and black butches. Sally and Liz throw out the white aggressors; The Five, out of pride, continue to dance for a while, then they leave, too. After closing the bar, Sally and Liz analyze what went wrong.

At first they seem to subscribe to an idea of racism as the pathology and conscious political choice of a few--what Daniels and Kitano call the "evil madman" theory of racism. They wonder what is wrong with Betty Marie, why she would choose to treat black women with such contempt. "'Someone like that,' Liz said as Sally put her arms around her, 'ruins everything'" (204). They consider banning Betty Marie, but after talking a bit more, they come to realize that racism isn't just out there in a few individuals: "It's in all of us" (205). If it weren't, the fight could never have escalated to such proportions. Thus they move to a new model of racism, one which understands racism as a texture saturating everyday life, such an inherent part of society that "all of us," inevitably, are racist to one degree or another.

The story ends, like all the others in this tradition, with a question: "What are we going to do?" (205). The two women bat around a few ideas--like talking to all their customers, one by one, the way Betty Marie did--and feel
better. But at the end of this story the narrator warns us that "Thunder was rumbling in the distance"—the storm is not over. What are Sally and Liz going to do? What are we going to do? Will we be able to make a difference—or will lesbians, who need each other and who need a new kind of world in which to live with each other, simply perpetuate the same system which despises us, simply reproduce it in our separate communities?

All these stories about interracial friendships are questions. They are powerful and moving because of the close relationship claimed by the authors between their fiction and the real world. Truths about women and race emerge from this fictional tradition, not the least of which—if perhaps the most obvious—is that friendship between black and white women is possible. In fiction, as in our actual lives, women are drawn together as friends across racial lines. These friendships can serve the same purposes as intra-racial friendships: they help us survive patriarchy; they help us resist it. Friendship stimulates our growth, as well as providing sources of material and emotional security. I began this dissertation noting that the image of white women as friends to black women was not a formidable presence in black women's literature, but it is there, however minor. Toni Morrison's recent Beloved (1987), for example, is traditional in its focus on the atrocities committed by whites against blacks and in its
overriding concern to explore black survival—to see what may be recovered in all of that chaos of violence and loss. But Morrison also weaves back and forth through Sethe’s memories the image of Miss Amy Denver, a young white woman on her way to Boston who helps Sethe birth her daughter and then is gone. This moment:

On a riverbank in the cool of a summer evening two women struggled under a shower of silvery blue. They never expected to see each other again in this world and at the moment couldn’t care less. But there on a summer night surrounded by bluefern they did something together appropriately and well. A pateroller passing would have sniggered to see two throw-away people, two lawless outlaws—a slave and a barefoot whitewoman with unpinned hair—wrapping a ten-minute-old baby in the rags they wore. But no pateroller came and no preacher. The water sucked and swallowed itself beneath them. There was nothing to disturb them at their work. so they did it appropriately and well. (84-85)

This brief moment, in which need is seen and help is given, is a healing for Sethe. She returns to this moment many times in her thoughts, as if to remind herself of the possibility that she is somehow provided for, that the world is not only full of enemies, but sometimes friends.

But a second, more painful, truth also emerges from this body of texts: that friendships between black and white women are bound to fail. In the white woman’s version of this myth, this culture text of racial experience, the failing of friendship can be narrated almost nostalgically, as something mysterious, inscrutable, but finally inevitable. In the black woman’s version of the myth, the
failure is counted the failure of white women to open our arrogant eyes, to keep the promises implicit in the contract between friends, not to side with "our" men against them. Given such different readings of each other and our common world, the interracial "sisterhood" of women in which so many of us believe can be little more than a pipe dream unless we do the serious work of dismantling racism.

Many of the stories in this tradition take the form of a question, asking what racism is, how do we each, as individuals and as members of groups, bear responsibility for it, and how can it be eliminated. From its beginnings in the nineteenth century, this has been an activist literary tradition. The writers discussed here would not want the reader merely to question, and then, putting the book on the shelf, to give up questioning because the questions are hard, the answers not easily forthcoming. They would want readers to seek out a community of women dedicated to anti-racism work, to analyze racism, to resist it.

But for this to occur, we need more than questions. We need answers: models of resistance as guides to our action.

Some of the fiction produced since 1940 moves beyond questioning to put forth, however tentatively, some possible answers. These texts build on the concern of the Harlem Renaissance writers that black women emerge from the arrogant white gaze. Not only does racism have to be
understood, but concepts and images of race have entirely to
be reconstructed for racism to be eliminated.

Most feminist theories of anti-racism emphasize that
racism depends on the maintenance of "race" as a two-
category system.¹ This requires the physical visibility of
nonwhites which "means that a quick differentiation and
discrimination can be established" (Daniels and Kitano 1970:
5). Categorization is followed by labeling which "permits
actions against the 'enemy' which are frowned upon in
normal, everyday life. The most extreme behavior is likely
to occur when the stratification encourages one group to
view the other as less than human" (6). There is much
victim-blaming, rationalization, and so on, which accompany
such actions.

Ellen Messer-Davidow, in "The Philosophical Bases of
Feminist Literary Criticisms," has theorized how sexism
works as a two-category system. The skeleton of her theory
also applies to race. I am adapting the following from her
discussion of the two categories "m" and "f" (for "male" and
"female"); I substitute "wh" and "bl" (for "white" and
"black") and make several other changes, too, to apply to
the problem of racism:

(a) The first differentiation establishes two
categories and names them wh and bl. (Normally
done on the basis of skin and hair. Those who
aren't readily identifiable on this basis are
required by racists to identify themselves in some
other way--note the anger which Angela Murray, in
Fauset's Plum Bun faced when her appearance was
misread, thereby threatening the two-category system at its foundation.)

(b) The next differentiation ascribes the traits that sort people in wh and bl. Racists need some traits—it matters little what they are even though they may be convincingly rationalized—to differentiate people and maintain the two-category system. They need specific traits (strength and weakness) to enforce specific relations (dominance and submission) between people and categories. The ascribed traits may vary in locus (innate or acquired), cause (divinely implanted or socially induced), and effect (restrictive or empowering).

(c) A third differentiation bestows positive and negative values on wh and bl and their traits. Anti-racists sometimes believe that racists value the white and devalue the black, but persuasive determinists of every age praise the traits they want blacks to adopt, raising them above the ruder traits, but not the persons, of whites.

(d) Another differentiation sets the focus on wh and bl. Racists situate the white exclusively or centrally and the black, if not absent, marginally to literary and other endeavors. . . .

(e) The next differentiation standardizes wh and/or bl. Racists make the white the norm—the pattern for a group, the model for humanity, the standard of quality. Focusing exclusively on the white, they make it the norm by default. . . .

(f) Another differentiation indicates the relations of wh and bl. [Usually dominance and subordination.]

(g) A further differentiation confers perspectives on individuals categorized as wh and bl. [i.e., white self is subjectified and black other is objectified.]

(h) The final differentiation secures the system. In order to secure the two categories, racists make a third category; it subsumes all those deviates from wh and bl whose unclassified existence would undermine the dichotomous structure of the system. [i.e., the "mulatto" finally classified as bl].

Resistance to the racist system can occur at any of the above points, i.e., to create new categories, to reascribe or revalue traits, to resituate bl at the center, to
celebrate and revalue the margin, to disturb wh as a standard or norm, to upset the traditional relations by substituting notions of mutual, reciprocal empowerment and/or separation, to reject the "otherness" of bl, to claim the subjectivity of bl, to emphasize the existence of and make visible the "deviates," i.e., persons of mixed race, mixed culture, and so on.

Literature since the 1940s has dramatized or embodied all these strategies, as well as sometimes attempting to sink differences, or transcend them by moving to a new level of awareness that racial "difference" is superficial. Yet, those who have sunk "difference" in favor of an idea of the human universal have consistently been frustrated by the deeply ingrained processes of principle (e) above--processes which define the universal solely in terms of white values, experiences, and agendas.

 Nonetheless, especially in the 1940s, the search for human "universals" and a transcendent attitude toward race ("difference" doesn't matter) found ample expression in women's literature, most powerfully, perhaps, in the novels of Jo Sinclair.

 Jo Sinclair (the pseudonym of Ruth Seid) is best known to contemporary audiences as the author of *The Changelings*, an award-winning novel first published in 1955 and reissued in 1985 by The Feminist Press. In the 1970s, feminist historians and critics such as Susan Kopperman and Barbara
Smith began the effort to redirect critical attention to Sinclair's work. *The Changelings* has been available in paperback since 1985, but still suffers neglect. This complex examination of a white Jewish neighborhood's resistance to housing integration in the 1950s deserves a central place in the history of women's writing against racism.

Sinclair's earlier novel, *The Wasteland*, is also about race, but because its protagonist is a young male, it has not been recanonized by feminist scholars as *The Changelings*, with its female protagonist, has. *The Wasteland* is the first novel to my knowledge that is structured as the process of psychoanalysis. A third person narrator alternates between reporting Jake's therapy sessions and telling his childhood experiences. Segments at the end of each chapter represent extracts from the psychiatrist's notes.

We come to know that Jake's problem is his deep shame of himself, his family, his Jewish identity. He feels inadequate because "different." If this were a fairy tale, Jake's sister Debby would be the provider; Debby encourages Jake to get help and throughout his analysis provides valuable insights at moments of confusion and choice. In this text, hers is the voice of health--mental and political. Jake admires her fervently, although he is at first angry and ashamed of her lesbianism. Jake's process
of healing involves his ceasing to disown his family as he accepts Debby’s message of human community. Debby knows about difference and stigma. Her awareness of being "queer" leads her to seek black girlfriends. She has been able to forge connections between anti-semitism, heterosexism, and racism, connections which she teaches her brother. Debby gives blood for the war effort, something forbidden to blacks and something Debby transforms into a political act:

"It’s a funny thing," she said softly . . . "When I give blood I feel as if I’m giving it for Jews, too. Jews like Ma, who never had a break. Never. And I’m giving the pint for Negroes . . . For people like me. There are so many. It’s like giving your blood against any kind of segregation there is in the world. Anybody who is slapped in the face, laughed at. Pushed into a corner of—of society. They can have my blood. Sometimes, when you’re giving that pint of blood, when you’re lying there, it’s like you hear a sound of crying. Really." (282)

As a Jewish lesbian, Debby understands the "slap in the face" of segregation. Forced into marginality, "into a corner," she works from that place to create ties between "people like me" and others labeled different.

The Wasteland thus celebrates difference, at least on one level. But on another level, it speaks powerfully of human universals, especially through the voice of the psychoanalyst whose job is precisely the universalization of difference. Despite the specificity of Jake’s Jewishness, of Debby’s lesbianism, the trajectory of psychoanalysis is
the same far both. All must resolve familial conflict; all
must proceed through well defined steps toward well-
functioning, individuated adulthood. Psychically, under the
skin, so to speak, we are all the same, with the same
conflicts, the same desires, the same teleos. The knowledge
which ghettoization, segregation, and stigma bring is not a
knowledge of unique and various perspectives, but a
knowledge of the universal human condition, the meaning of
human blood and human crying.

The Changelings, too, inscribes human universals within
the very specific situation of urban integration in the
1950s. In this novel, Sinclair orchestrates the voices of
an entire neighborhood, making plain that their racial
prejudice springs from the universal emotions of fear and
shame. The action centers on Vincent, a white Jewish
adolescent girl who struggles to make sense of three aspects
of her life: her approaching womanhood, her father's
disowning of an older sister who has married a Gentile, and
the terror and violence with which her neighbors are meeting
the efforts of the schwartze, inner-city blacks, to rent
flats vacated by the successful Jews who are moving to "The
Heights" and taking the shul with them. With the aid of
Clara, a black Catholic girl who befriends her, Vincent
comes to realize that Clara and the blacks, her sister's
husband and the Gentiles, are not really different, they've
only been made to seem different (this language is much like
the school-teacher's language in *Our Nig* you will recall). Vincent comes to think of herself and Clara as "changelings," outsiders to the adult communities whose wrongs, especially exclusion and prejudice, they must someday right. The novel's closure is a gesture beyond itself to a future dependent on the engagement of many such "changelings" who can see beyond stereotypes and artificially constructed differences to the reality of human similarity, the potential for human community.

Black critics have pointed out one problem with Sinclair's novels, a problem related to the author's project of universalizing difference: the novels share with other white-authored books an inability to grant black characters subjectivity. In *The Wasteland*, Debbie's black friends are shadowy figures, coming and going in Jake's narrative in silence—we never enter their lives. Clara of *The Changelings* is better developed, but is still seen almost entirely from Vincent's perspective. The same phenomenon occurs in many other texts of the period, in Frances Gray Patton's "A Nice Name," for example, in which Liza and Mossy move about in the background of the story, never emerging as fully developed people. And of course, Mrs. Marshall is neither seen nor given a voice in the text.

This is not to say that only fully developed characters can be memorable or effective fictional constructs; but I do want to point out the contradiction which emerges here.
Sinclair wants to argue what might be called "the similarity of difference," yet by not entering the consciousnesses of those characters whose difference is supposed to define them, she doesn't really confront difference after all. Because Clara and Sinclair's other black characters are so one-dimensional, functioning in the plot much as "providers" do for the heroes of fairy tales, racial difference is finally wished away in the text. Difference is there, but it only operates as a springboard to something else, a kind of mythological "key" of liberation. Vincent vows to embrace "difference," to become, with Clara, a "changeling" who will resist narrow prejudice, but she does not begin to excavate the prejudice in herself: it is always "out there," in parents and other adults, in "society"--the powerful others.

Still, Sinclair's novels, The Changelings especially, are major accomplishments in the tradition of white women's anti-racist literature.

Lee Lynch, whose "At A Bar V: Summer Storm" we've already analyzed, executes this move in several of her other stories. Lynch's latest novel, Dusty's Queen of Hearts Diner (1987), is concerned once again with comparing and evaluating two divergent models of oppression: the "conscious choice of a few"/"evil madman" theory against the idea that "isms" saturate everyday life as an integral part of maintaining multiple two-category systems. The major
concern of Dusty, however, is oppression of lesbians. This is a story of violence, chronicling the attempts of the town’s elite to destroy Dusty’s cafe and ruin her financially. On the one hand, homophobic discrimination is seen as the conscious political choice of a few—Rossis and the priest—while on the other, a central theme of the novel is that homophobia is omnipresent and that Dusty must overcome her own homophobia—her intense negativity, pessimism, and self-loathing—before she will be able to confront the enemy without.

Race is a minor theme, spiraling around the central concern of heterosexism. Lynch makes it clear that these two forms of oppression are linked, that they operate via similar mechanisms, that they produce "difference" which really masks essential similarity. The device Lynch uses to link these themes is, again, the female friend—Rosa, a heterosexual Puerto Rican whose "simple lesson in pride and courage" is a turning point for Dusty Reilly. Like Vincent in The Changelings, Dusty comes to accept her own difference because, through knowing others who are also "different," she can finally see her own normalcy, can accept that "we are all different" in some ways, and therefore all "the same"—we are nothing more than people.

Another similarity between The Changelings and Dusty is the role played by the racially other friend. Both are providers to the white protagonist. It is Dusty’s
confidential conversations with Rosa, represented in the chapters called "Dusty's Tales," which provide Dusty the opportunity for introspection and its consequent self-confrontation—from which she usually flees in terror. Rosa, however, with that characteristic "strength" which white women so frequently ascribe to racial ethnic women, keeps her on track. This device of narrating in the form of a conversation between female friends is a genesis point for much female-centric literature—from Richardson's *Clarissa* to Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* to Lessing's *Golden Notebook*. The underlying idea would seem to be that female self-development requires female friendship for unfolding. The self is never developed in isolation, but in the context of relationships with caring others, with friends. Unfortunately, it is usually women of color who perform this service for white women and rarely the other way around. Rosa and Clara are "providers"—giving advice or simply listening—but what do the white women give in return? In most cases, precious little—the nurturance seems to flow in only one direction.

As we can see, the search for a universal vantage point, a place where racial difference is less significant than human universals, usually maintains white people and white problems at the center. It attempts to fight racism by denying what Messer-Davidow has described as "the first differentiation" in the two-category system—it attempts to
deny racial categories as meaningful in any way. Yet, it
usually only results in that "colorblindness" described by
Adrienne Rich in the "Introduction," a way of seeing that
pretends to be other than what it is: white solipsism.

Most feminists have therefore pinned their hopes on
difference, and have theorized resisting racism by
manipulating difference in various ways--not sinking it.

Sometimes the agenda proposed is directed at Messer-
Davidow's differentiation (b): the ascription of traits.
Specifically, anti-racist fiction since 1940 dramatizes the
same process its authors are attempting to produce in
readers: the process of breaking down racially stereotypic
ascription of character by creating cognitive dissonance in
the reader (both within and without the fictional text).

Typically, characters and readers are moved from comfort to
discomfort as their stereotypical attitudes, embodied in
"old patterns of relating" are challenged by discordant data
about the other. Whereas the "arrogant eye" has the power
simply not to see what would upset its tidy vision of the
world, the characters of recent fiction can not ignore
discrepancy without also violating some cherished aspect of
themselves. Many of these stories do not have closure, but
engage readers in speculating about the characters' moral
dilemmas as unresolved problems we share with them.
Three texts which do this are Patton’s "A Nice Name" and Alice Walker’s "Advancing Luna"—and Ida B. Wells" and *Meridian*.

In "A Nice Name," as we have seen, Josephine is shocked to discover a black woman who does not fit her images of them as good and bad maids. Mrs. Marshall is educated, sensitive, idealistic, creative. The question of how Josephine will deal with this discordant data about black women as "others" is unresolved. She may, as I have hinted, classify Mrs. Marshall as an exception, a deviant of some sort, or Jo may be moved to an entirely new understanding of race.

The narrator of "Advancing Luna" moves first from a sort of "colorblindness" in which she ignores Luna’s whiteness to sharp awareness that it cannot be ignored—indeed her whiteness has everything to do with what happened to Luna that summer. The narrator then is forced to confront her own stereotypes of race—her belief in the culture texts that have been in existence since the days of slavery: white women will always side with their men against us. But Luna didn’t side with white men. Despite having been violated by the black rapist, Luna remained loyal to the cause of black civil rights. The narrator doesn’t judge Luna’s act as right or wrong--nor do I, for in various ways, it is both right and wrong. The point is that
the narrator's stereotypes had to collapse to accommodate "reality."

"Advancing Luna" is similar to the sub-plot dealing with Lynne in *Meridian*. Lynne, too, comes South to join the movement, and there she falls in love with and marries a black man, Truman. The chapter "The Conquering Prince" explodes Meridian's attitudes toward black men and white women together. During this time period, when interracial couples consisting of black men and white women were a new public phenomenon, many black women confronted within themselves the jealousy they had toward white women—a jealousy similar to that of plantation mistresses toward their husbands' slaves. At the heart of both jealousies was the sense of betrayal, the outrage that one's own man is only attracted to flesh, the sense that one can't compete. Meridian at first cannot understand why anyone would be attracted to a white woman. She remembers what she was taught by her female kin about them:

> It was strange and unfair, but the face that [Truman] dated them—and so obviously because their color made them interesting—made her ashamed, as if she were less. . . . How bewildered by his preference. It went against everything she had been taught to expect.

For she realized what she had been taught was that nobody wanted white girls except their empty-headed, effeminate counterparts—white boys—whom her mother assured her smelled (in the mouth) of boiled corn and (in the body) of thirty-nine-cent glue. As far back as she could remember it seemed something understood: that while white men would climb on black women old enough to be their mothers—"for the experience"—white women were
considered sexless, contemptible and ridiculous by all. They did not even smell like glue or boiled corn; they smelled of nothing since they did not sweat. They were clear, dead water.

...what had her mother said about white women? She could actually remember very little, but her impression had been that they were frivolous, helpless creatures, lazy and without ingenuity. Occasionally one would rise to the level of bitchery, and this one would be carefully set aside where the collective "others" were discussed. Her grandmother—an erect former maid who was now a midwife—held strong opinions, which she expressed in this way: 1. She had never known a white woman she liked after the age of twelve. 2. White women were useless except as baby machines which would continue to produce little white people who would grow up to oppress her. 3. Without servants all of them would live in pigsties. (106-08)

Here Meridian confronts her own stereotypes of white character—and their attached narratives. From white men, expect abuse and sexual exploitation. From white women, expect abuse from the bitches, and from the others, nothing: they are "useless."

Walker, however, moves Meridian through this grid of perception, causing her finally to have to see Lynne in another way. Lynne, like Luna, is raped by a black man after his arm is blown off during a confrontation with the police. She is his victim because she is white and because, as a white woman, she is vulnerable in ways the white man is not. Lynne attempts to understand him, however, does not bring down the wrath of the law, though it is in her power to do so. Later Truman dumps Lynne—at that point in the struggle when "black became beautiful" and all the black
revolutionaries were trading in their white wives and girlfriends for suitably African women—causing Meridian to see Lynne in yet another light. The two women come closest after the death of Lynne and Truman’s child. They learn they have much in common; they also eventually part, when Lynne’s bitterness over Truman’s abandonment of her overwhelms and threatens to destroy them both.

Alain Locke, writing in the Harlem Renaissance against the stereotypical characterization of blacks, argued that stereotypes blocked white people from seeing "the Negro as he is." This project—of debunking the inhibiting and reductive images of racial other in order to get at the underlying "reality"—fuels this fiction. Yet, despite the authors conscious intents, what emerges from these texts is the idea that there is no unmediated knowledge, either of self or other, that can obtain between white and black women. Nor will such knowledge—characterized as unmediated, authentic, and complete—lead spontaneously to the realization of the right and proper relations between us.

What these texts confront instead, is the inescapability of our images, or "constructions," of each other. We can never simply do away with them, never know each other by facilely dismantling the old types and their stories. We must instead acknowledge their existence and power. As in Meridian, black and white women friends in
Maureen Brady's *Folly* and Sherley Anne Williams' *Dessa Rose* find they must engage each other in a process of co-production of a knowledge of race acceptable to both. There is no "reality" about the other ready for simple apprehension, but what is to be real between black and white women must emerge from a painful resituation of self and other by confronting, reversing, and reforming the images which have dominated our perceptions of each other. Ultimately, these texts are utopian. Racial confrontation leads to dialogue and the opposition of interests yields to commitment to work together for the mutual benefit of each.

In *Folly*, a lesbian novel, several pairs of black and white women befriend each other. The main plot has to do with Folly's political work: she is trying to unionize the clothing factory where she works and in the process learns to work with Mabel, and other black women. A friend of Folly's daughter, Lenore, who works as a butcher at the A&P, becomes the friend of Sabrina, a black woman who works at the diner. The novel is centrally concerned with issues of coalition politics: what defines a community, what are the bases of alliance, how will power be distributed, and who speaks for whom. The novel's focus is the white women's realization that their vision of themselves and the world has been profoundly conditioned by their white identity. Images of blindness and visual perspective abound to describe the workings of racism—a rhetorical strategy Brady
shares with feminists theorists of race such as Marilyn Frye, who coined the term "the arrogant eye," or Minnie Bruce Pratt.

The characters find that their vision of each other is necessarily effected by the old types and the old patterns of relating. They cannot be dropped easily, or at once, but must be carefully renegotiated to produce shared understanding and a consequent basis for friendship.

Similarly, the interracial friendship in Dessa Rose only develops through a series of confrontations with each other about the old scenarios. Williams' moves Dessa from silence to voice and power as she charts the heroine's escape from slavery with the aid of a white woman. In the process, the old scenarios are all reversed. Whereas Harriet Beecher Stowe's Prue, or Lydia Maria Child's Charity Bowery nurse the white woman's child and are repaid with betrayal, Dessa wakes in a room after her nearly fatal escape from the hangman only to see Ruth nursing her—Dessa's--black child. Each woman confronts her sexual stereotypes and sexual jealousy of the other. They also work to untangle the issue between them of the white woman's power: Ruth believes herself a powerless victim, Dessa sees her as omnipotent controller. The "truth" is somewhere in between these extremes. And so it goes, until each acknowledges, finally, mutual need and mutual respect.
At the end of her story, Dessa tells us that "Ruth went east; and I went west," a conclusion of the relationship which some read as signifying the diverging social and political interests of white and black women.

I read it as this, too, to be sure, but also as a signal of the profound respect which these two women have for each other, respect which allows them to cherish the summer’s growth together, and then to let go. It is a gesture of forgiveness and good will—a wish for the best future of each.

Thus, I construct a tradition of women’s stories of interracial friendship which begins with a crude statement of the other as type and ends—at least for the moment—with a sophisticated awareness of how those types operate and the kinds of work that must be done to reformulate them in order to end racism.
Endnotes to Conclusion

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