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Emergent Identities: The African American Common Woman in U.S. Literature, 1831-1903

by

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A THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE

Doctor of Philosophy

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ABSTRACT

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This dissertation examines the intersection of resistance, gender, and respectability in African American literature from 1831 to 1903 through the figure of the "common woman." As a category of analysis, the common woman is an alternative to the bourgeois African American heroine, and is characterized by a number of qualities: the lack of formal education; reliance on folk-based methods of knowledge; non-traditional views on the family; aggressive articulation of her rights and the rights of the community; and finally, her use of labor as a tool for manipulating the culture of oppression. While current theoretical frameworks of literary representations of resistance rely heavily on the primacy of iconographic black protagonists, the common woman is a new imagining of black respectability that is defined by a folk-based construction of the black self. I trace the literary development of the common woman through a historically grounded evaluation of black women's labor within the context of the West Indian and American slave pasts, Reconstruction, and racial uplift rhetoric. I argue that placing the literary common woman in conversation with black women's labor history destabilizes the emphasis on the bourgeois, representational heroine by establishing a pattern in which the common woman resists white racism by virtue of her position in the economy. Because the common woman is not generally regarded as race leader, she is free from the imperative to facilitate exchange with
Anglo-Americans and is thus free to assertively critique and subvert racism. In short, by focusing more on labor than on literacy, and more on maintaining the black community than on fostering interracial exchange, the common woman is the means through which nineteenth-century African American writers voice violent, subversive, and otherwise unspeakable critiques of the American nation that challenge the serviceability of the genteel heroine as the primary voice of resistance. By using the common woman as the voice of resistance, middle-class writers were able to critique the nation while also coming to terms with the complexities of intra-racial class conflict.
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INTRODUCTION
EMERGENT IDENTITIES: THE AFRICAN AMERICAN COMMON WOMAN
IN U.S. LITERATURE

Despite a nineteenth-century literary and historical record that privileges masculinity, African American women writers of this period worked tirelessly in the struggle for black freedom and citizenship. The cultural mission of such female activists and writers as Harriet Jacobs, Frances Harper, and Pauline Hopkins centered on their efforts to uplift the race by advocating Christian morality, female propriety, and above all, racial solidarity. This particular paradigm of uplift resulted in the construction of genteel heroines who adopted platforms of ideal domesticity from which to script their narratives of resistance. Women’s activities were central to the definition of the burgeoning black nation, and as Anna Julia Cooper makes clear in her 1886 speech, "Womanhood: A Vital Element in the Regeneration of the Race," black women are in the vanguard of racial uplift: "Only the BLACK WOMAN can say ‘when and where I enter in the quiet, undisputed dignity of my womanhood, without suing or special patronage, then and there the whole Negro race enters with me." However, the entrance into an equitable society that Cooper so eloquently heralds often excluded those black women whose activism did not outwardly convey the particularities of black female representational identity. Nonetheless, the exclusion of these women from the paradigm of black women’s uplift activity did not constitute a complete absence from uplift activities, but instead provided the space for an alternative articulation of uplift through the figure of the common woman.
"Emergent Identities" is an attempt to understand the literary and historical significance of the common woman's activism as represented in antebellum slave narratives, memoirs, and late nineteenth-century uplift novels. As such, my investigation of nineteenth-century black women's writing and resistance contributes to the tradition of Hazel Carby's *Reconstructing Womanhood* (1987), Claudia Tate's *Domestic Allegories of Political Desire* (1992), and Carla Peterson's *Doers of the Word* (1995). The aforementioned texts focus almost exclusively on iconographic female protagonists (i.e., - the tragic mulatto and the genteel heroine). However, my project makes a significant departure from these groundbreaking texts by recasting African American literary history to include analyses of the literary and cultural representations of resistance among non-elite African American women. More specifically, my analyses examine the intersection of resistance, gender, and respectability through the figure of the common woman. In the context of African American life and culture, respectability is understood as an adaptation of the Victorian value system that stresses the principles of piety, temperance, and sexual purity. An alternative to the bourgeois African American heroine who has been the focus of black feminist scholarship, the common woman is a new imagining of black respectability and is characterized by five interrelated qualities: the lack of formal education; a reliance on folk-based methods of knowledge; non-traditional views on the family; the aggressive articulation of her rights and the rights of her community; and finally and perhaps most importantly, her use of labor as a tool for manipulating the culture of oppression. The model of resistance articulated by the common woman provides the space for the recognition of the multiple resistance
mechanisms available to black women, especially the resistance potential inherent in black women’s daily activities.

It is important to note that many of the texts that I use to explore the relationship between the common woman, resistance and respectability—*The History of Mary Prince*, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, *A Hairdresser’s Experience in High Life*, *Iola Leroy*, *Imperium in Imperio*, and *Hagar’s Daughter*—may seem contradictory, considering that many of these texts are thought to be indicative of elite narratives of uplift. Certainly, such an argument could be made about Frances Harper’s *Iola Leroy* and Pauline Hopkins’s *Hagar’s Daughter*. Likewise, the inclusion of Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* and Sutton Griggs’s *Imperium in Imperio*, novels by a white woman and a black man, respectively, may seem odd in light of the black feminist framework at work in this project. However, I argue that the potency of the common woman often lies in her invisibility which is at work in the text as well as the way in which we read these texts. Early representations of the figure of the common woman take up little narrative space, thus suggesting that these representations are of little importance. From Dinah’s activities in the kitchen in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* to Venus’s manipulation of male spaces in *Hagar’s Daughter*—the common woman has been overlooked because of a tendency to only read black women’s agency in terms of literacy and the capitulation to the cult of true womanhood. In so doing, we have failed to realize that the common woman provides a useful service in these texts insofar as her representation eases the psychic burden imposed by the narrowly defined parameters of black respectability. As historian Kevin Gaines points out, the rhetoric of respectability and uplift often concealed feelings of ‘internalized racism’: "An elite self-image that might overcome powerlessness
and racial stigmas perhaps required the displacement of feelings of anger and shame onto other powerless blacks, or perhaps rival elites, even in the name of racial uplift."^2

Importantly, the common woman is always already outside conventional frameworks of respectability and uplift and is therefore free to express the anger and frustration that would otherwise be a liability for an elite activist. The images of the common woman available in these texts defy the rules of respectability.

That we can look to black women’s history for instances of the common woman’s non-traditional resistance practices further underscores the importance of the common woman as a figure worthy of careful examination. Therefore, I trace the literary development of the common woman through a historically grounded examination of black women’s labor within the context of the West Indian and American slave pasts, Reconstruction, and turn of the century racial uplift rhetoric. I argue that placing the literary common woman in conversation with black women’s labor history destabilizes the emphasis on the bourgeois, representational heroine by establishing a pattern in which the common woman resists white racism by virtue of her position in the economy of oppression. Furthermore, because the common woman is not generally regarded as a race leader, she is free from the imperative to facilitate exchange with Anglo-Americans and is thus free to assertively critique racist practices. In short, with her reliance on labor more than literacy, and with her focus on maintaining the elements of black community rather than fostering inter-racial exchange, the common woman is the means through which nineteenth-century African American writers voice violent, subversive critiques of the American nation. Thus, the figure of the common woman challenges the serviceability of the genteel heroine as the primary voice of resistance.
By using the common woman as the voice of resistance, middle-class writers were able to critique the nation while also coming to terms with the complexities of intra-racial class conflict. Indeed, while early representations of the common woman were frequently given little narrative space, late nineteenth century representations of the common woman were increasingly important to the outcome of the text, thus reflecting writer’s increasing acknowledgment of the common woman as a new and important construction of black folk respectability.

As I have pointed out, my exploration of nineteenth-century texts both engages and departs from the tradition of scholarship established by Carby, Tate, and Peterson. And it is because of the significance of their arguments to my own that I now turn my attention to a brief overview of these prominent explorations of black women’s writing in the nineteenth century.

The Trajectory of Black Feminism

Perhaps the most important full-length study of a female identified quest for literacy is Hazel Carby’s Reconstructing Womanhood (1987). In Reconstructing Womanhood, Carby recovers the texts of nineteenth century writers such as Harriet Jacobs, Frances Harper, and Pauline Hopkins by evaluating their work in a historical context. Carby considers Jacobs within the context of domesticity and abolition and analyzes Harper and Hopkins in terms of their utilitarian approach to literature as expressed in speeches and magazine journalism. What becomes apparent in Carby’s text is the importance of literacy in ordering the lives of each woman. As Carby points out, not only is literacy the means
through which each woman asserts her freedom, but it is also the means by which they can challenge the male dominance of both the African and Anglo-American scripts of national identity. Perhaps what is most important for later critics is the revisionist historical process that Carby undertakes in order to narrate the lives of Jacobs, Harper, and Hopkins. Carby’s readings tell a different story of black women in the nineteenth century by refuting the common myth that black women were under constant domination. Carby argues that these women were active participants in national dialogues on gender, race, and nation and became representational women in their own right. While Douglass is always considered as spokesman for the race, Carby’s reading of Frances Harper proves that she too was a public icon whose writing and lectures created a representational ideal of black women as leaders of the race. Thus Carby moved black women’s literacy and cultural production from the margins to the center of social and political discourse.

Also key in foregrounding the relationship between resistance and women’s writing is Claudia Tate’s *Domestic Allegories of Political Desire* (1992). Tate argues that the desires expressed by representational women are actually allegories for political inclusion. Tate reads eleven post-Reconstruction novels and considers three important characteristics of African American sentimental narratives: gender conventions, gentility as a bourgeois construction, and the expression of political desire. In so doing, Tate argues that black middle class women constructed the home as a site of politicized resistance to racial injustice.

While Carby and Tate have persuasively charted the progression of the black female literary voice, I would like to call attention to the class bias that occurs as a result of only
recognizing resistance in the efforts of representational black women. Not only does this oversight reflect a class bias, but it also reflects the difficulty of fully representing resistance in the lives of common black women. Although male authored slave narratives and white women’s sentimental novels were the most popular forms of nineteenth century literary production, neither genre expressed the full range of black women’s lives and resistance efforts. Given that mobility was not as readily available to female slaves as it was to male slaves, flight and the attendant resistant act, the quest for literacy, were not the primary means by which female slaves were able to forge their freedom. Indeed, women in the autobiographies of Frederick Douglass were used to further the cause of male freedom. Likewise, the racism that pervaded white women’s domestic fiction was equally deficient in portraying black women’s resistance, as seen in the case of Aunt Chloe in Uncle Tom’s Cabin, whose attempts to resist actually reinforce the power of the master class. In this light, both Carby and Tate can be read as continuing this critical oversight that erases the stories of certain black women. Although both acknowledge the distinctions between the folk and representational women, they do little in the way of critiquing them. As a result, both critics reaffirm the role of the representational literary woman at the expense of the folk aesthetic that was so vital to antebellum and postbellum United States culture. The women that Carby and Tate read are educated and middle class (save for Jacobs), thus leaving no room for an analysis of the contributions of the leaders that Patricia Hill Collins refers to as ‘organic intellectuals.’

Carla Peterson’s Doers of the Word: Women Speakers and Writers in the North, 1830-1880 (1995), makes an important gesture toward expanding the discourse of black
women's literary resistance. Like Carby and Tate before her, she also reads Frances Harper and Harriet Jacobs, but she also considers other 'organic intellectuals' such as Sojourner Truth and Jarena Lee. The importance of this text is Peterson’s examination of the cultural production of Northern urban communities. Indeed, she is perhaps the only critic to apply an African American feminist theoretical framework to antebellum Northern modes of production. Also important in Peterson is the treatment of orality. That she uses public speakers as modes of resistance is useful for a class and gender critique of the otherwise elite, male-centered uplift practices. However, Peterson’s text is limited by two factors: first, the time period that she considers; and second, her treatment of and reliance on literacy as a method of resistance. Peterson begins her analysis in the 1830s because it represents the emergence of black women writers, but she does not consider black women's writing at the turn of the century, which is one of the most important periods of black women's literary production. Secondly, although Peterson emphasizes orality, she eventually returns to literacy as the primary signifier of resistance.

One of the most recent developments in the discourse of resistance is Harryette Mullen’s theory of resistant orality developed in "Runaway Tongues: Resistant Orality in Uncle Tom's Cabin, Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, and Beloved." Mullen considers 'sass' or talking back as a mechanism of resistance that black women used to subvert white power and to redress notions of black inferiority. What is perhaps most relevant about Mullen’s argument is that she gives voice to the anonymous slaves and freed women who did not typically populate the pages of slave narratives and sentimental novels. However, despite her contribution, Mullen’s analysis falls short because she does not recognize the full
range of resistance mechanisms that black women employed in an effort to subvert the degradation of the antebellum south and the neo-slavery of Reconstruction. What is needed is a feminist model of resistance that does not necessarily privilege literacy and the spoken word over other modes of resistance, but instead engages the multiple resistance mechanisms available to black women. Such a model would recognize resistance not only in the written and spoken word, but also in the daily activities of black women. This shift from word to deed lends itself to the democratization of black women's history that considers a wide spectrum of women's experiences.

**Common Women and the Discourse of Resistance**

We can only understand the impact of black women's subversive acts by first defining resistance and taking into account the diverse modes of subversion available to black women. In the classic, textbook sense of the word, resistance is the capacity to resist or an underground organization seeking to overthrow a totalitarian government. While the former is a very general explanation of the resistance, the latter begins to cut to the core of current debates about resistance. If we consider the slave system as constitutive of a totalitarian system and any act that subverts the system as underground, then we have a crucial component of a definition of antebellum resistance. More importantly the notion of underground connotes the secrecy of antebellum resistance activities, even though they were often hidden in plain view of the master class. Perhaps even more subversive than large-scale rebellions, these secret, daily acts destabilized the power of the master class by
underscoring the erroneous belief that slavery was tantamount to complete subjugation.

Saidiya Hartman remarks on the visible/invisible nature of resistance in stating:

The everyday practices of the enslaved encompassed an array of tactics such as work slowdowns, feigned illnesses, unlicensed travel, the destruction of property, theft, self-mutilation, dissimulation, physical confrontation, with owners and overseers that document the resistance to slavery. These small-scale and everyday forms of resistance interrupted, reeledaborated, and defied the constraints of everyday life under slavery and exploited openings in the system for the use of the enslaved. What unites these varied tactics is the effort to redress the condition of the enslaved, restore the disrupted affiliations of the socially dead, challenge the authority of the slave holder, and alleviate the pained state of the captive body. However, these acts of redress are taken with the acknowledgment that conditions will most likely remain the same. This acknowledgment implies neither resignation nor fatalism but a recognition of the enormity of the breach instituted by slavery and the magnitude of domination.8

In analyzing literary representations of resistance, critics rarely see beyond literacy and flight and/or violent struggle, and as a result, everyday resistance practices and practitioners are marginalized. To read with the everyday in mind is to do more than read against the grain; it is to force readers to forego the comfortable tendency to believe that the African American experience is a singular one rather than an experience reflective of multiple positions and experiences.

In my project, I extend Peterson’s and Mullen’s investigation of the common woman by shifting the site of discussion to marginalized characters. Thus, I refute the overarching claim that Tate makes in stating that resistance emerges only in representational women. This dissertation documents the development of African American female resistance in African American literature from 1831 to 1903, a period which spans the publication of the first black woman’s slave narrative to the rise of black women’s popular fiction. The study also
traces the presence of ‘everyday’ resistance in mainstream literature, including *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. My project builds on a feminist model that revises the individual quest for national identity espoused in representational black male texts (*The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* and *The Souls of Black Folk*) and does so by considering diverse modes of subversion, especially as they appear in the context of domesticity. Furthermore, investigating diverse modes of resistance requires a multi-genre approach. In my project, I analyze slave narratives, autobiographical texts, and uplift novels, in an effort to underscore the outlets available to black women as resisting agents.

As African American literature and culture show, domesticity as both a narrative construction and a social, historical phenomenon enabled black women to manipulate their position in order to gain personal and cultural autonomy. While current theoretical frameworks rely heavily on the primacy of genteel black domestic protagonists, I seek to shift the focus to an investigation of the role of the common or working-class black women in manipulating domesticity. This emphasis on otherwise neglected characters reveals that the common woman, often poor and illiterate, is a fundamental voice of resistance. In texts from *The History of Mary Prince* (1831) to *Hagar’s Daughter* (1900), the common woman is the means by which early American authors voice violent, nativist, and subversive critiques of the American nation that challenge the serviceability of the genteel heroine as a figure who mediates between the races. Furthermore, through my emphasis on the common woman, I hope to recast current interpretive frameworks about black women’s literary history by indicating how the growth of the middle class and the popularity of the magazine
industry contributed to an important shift in representations of black female resisting subjects.

The key to understanding the literary common woman is acknowledging the complex boundaries she had to traverse in order to reconstruct herself as a resisting rather than a consenting subject. The common woman has been a stock character and read as liminal, whose presence assists the plot but never takes center stage. Further, many black women were forced to negotiate boundaries in which they were faced with the ‘expectations’ of slave holders that sought to claim their bodies and labor and subsequently exercise an undue freedom of speech and behavior in dealing with them. I will argue that the common woman has a system of subversive knowledge of her own that allows her to successfully negotiate these constraints. Consider, for example, Dinah in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. While St. Clair claims to know her mind and work habits, and Ophelia claims to know the best way for Dinah to keep the kitchen, Dinah’s alternative knowledge of conjuring and very intimate knowledge of the ‘ways of white folk,’ place her in a position that neither St. Clare nor Ophelia can access. In short, Dinah defies the master class with the tools that the master class owns.

The common woman’s resistance potential is inscribed within the larger framework of intersectionality. As black feminists from both the Woman’s Era and the black feminist movement agree, race and gender are inter-locking constructions. The notion of intersectionality describes the interaction of race, class, and gender as they shape the lives and cultural practices of black women. The move toward intersectionality departs from earlier black feminist frameworks because it does more than suggest the conflation of race
and gender; it goes a step further by theorizing the consequences that occur when discriminatory practices collide. And as Valerie Smith asserts, intersectionality focuses on movements that "might seem to engage one category of experience – race, class, sex, or gender – over and above the others. In each instance ... the ostensible dominance of one category masks both the operation of the others and the interconnections among them." In my project, I use an intersectional approach to critique the inter-play of racism, class, intra-racial discrimination, and gender bias as they appear in texts by and about African American women. It is also worth noting that the model of black feminism that I explore in this project is not a biologically determined one. Although the majority of texts that I discuss were written by African American women, I also discuss one text by an Anglo American woman and another by an African American male. I use these texts not only for their intriguing representations of black female subjectivity, but also to suggest that black feminism provides strategies for reading across narrative and theoretical boundaries.

In my project, I emphasize the intersection of the African past and the imposition of slavery and American identity. Recognizing resistance as practiced by common women involves acknowledging the intersection of African retentions, folk knowledge, and a conscious rejection of American domination. Indeed, in many texts, folk knowledge is posed against literacy as a primary mode of resistance. Consider, for example, the case of Aunt Linda in *Iola Leroy*. Throughout the text, Aunt Linda is illiterate and actually rejects the thought of ever learning how to read; however, despite her incapacity for traditional knowledge, she privileges folk knowledge and the skills carried over form the slave past as a model for her economic prosperity. The quotidian resistance that privileges the folk past
is closely related to women’s work. It is a resistance that I refer to as "insurgent domesticity," in which domesticity is a form of empowerment, quite the opposite of what domesticity was initially meant to signify in the lives of black women. Investigating such a model of resistance means focusing on literary representations of these women’s work, the historical specificity of black women’s work, and finally, on the ways in which the dynamics of the common woman’s work and the role of the representational woman intersect in both literature and culture.

**EMERGENT IDENTITIES: THE COMMON WOMAN IN LITERATURE AND CULTURE**

In chapter one, "Maiden Voyage: Slavery, Domesticity, and Trans-Atlantic Resistance," I analyze the common woman in Mary Prince's *The History of Mary Prince* (1831) and Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1851). My goal is to bring the common woman to the forefront of discussions on antebellum resistance and black feminism through an exploration of the trans-Atlantic slave past. The idea of a black Atlantic community as a diasporic theory of interpretation allows me to discuss the relationship between the British and American slave pasts as it is represented in these two texts. Specifically, I look at Prince and the character of Dinah in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* as trans-Atlantic markers of resistance who subvert oppression through their position in the slave economy. I argue that the resistance practices engendered by West Indian slavery — physical and verbal resistance, huckstering, and food poisoning plots — are the mechanisms through which Prince and Dinah attempt to attain physical and psychical freedom and moral victories over their oppressors. Though the black Atlantic community is typically constructed as
masculine, I suggest that if we look at the patterns of black women's work and resistance, then we can increase our understanding of the multiple articulations of the trans-Atlantic past.

In chapter two, "Venus Rising: The Dawn of Reconstruction and the Rise of the Working-Class Aesthetic," I examine the impact of slavery and emancipation on black female subjectivity in Eliza Potter's *A Hairdresser's Experience in High Life* (1859) and Frances Harper's construction of Aunt Linda in *Iola Leroy* (1892). These texts represent an alternative discourse in black women's writing that does not depend on the black female appropriation of the cult of true womanhood, but instead focuses on black women's efforts to use economic freedom to create a public self that can subvert oppression while also contributing to the black community. Reading the common woman in the context of Reconstruction era uplift and the ongoing development of black women's labor reveals that economic freedom and mobility, not middle-class constructions of the home and family, form the bedrock of their identity. Further contexts for this chapter include the impact of the industrial uplift rhetoric of Booker T. Washington.

The following chapter, "Warring Ideals: Gender, Resistance, and the African American Novel," continues my examination of the common woman as subject in middle-class texts through a reading of Sutton Griggs's *Imperium in Imperio* (1899). This novel represents an important shift in African American literature, because it was published by an independent black press and did not have to weaken the anti-racist critiques to please Anglo publishers. This publishing freedom also allowed Griggs to promote an aggressive agenda of political action to their readers. Gender, I argue, is a controlling category in the novel,
though it is constructed differently in each novel in which Griggs's construction of black female subjectivity depends on black women's submission to the black male nationalist cause.

Pauline Hopkins emphasizes the process of cross-class racial uplift through her work in the *Colored American Magazine*, which I examine in the final chapter, " 'A Monthly Magazine of Merit:' The African American Public Press and the Democratization of Domestic Nationalism." In this chapter, I examine, comparatively, black respectability, black activist journalism, and nation-building within the context of Hopkins's *Hagar's Daughter* (1901), published serially in the *Colored American Magazine*. I argue that the novel can be read as an instructional text designed to bridge the class divide between elite and non-elite African Americans at the turn of the century.

In using the common woman as a figure of resistance, I am ever mindful of Deborah McDowell's observation on the restrictive elements in black women's writing. McDowell argues that the 'impulse' behind black women's writing in the nineteenth-century was based on their efforts to depathologize the black female sexuality. McDowell writes:

> This impulse is, at once, the greatest strength and the greatest weakness of these early texts, for it results, without exception, in the creation of static, disembodied, larger-than-life-characters ... Ironically, despite the early writers' efforts to revise homogenized literary images they succeeded merely, and inevitably, in offering alternative homogenization; they traded myth for countermyth, an exchange consistent with their public mission.12

McDowell's warning that we should not exchange one restrictive figure in favor of another potentially restrictive figure is an important admonition for any scholar interested in interrogating the complexities of black women's cultural production in the nineteenth
century. Admittedly, I am one such scholar; however, I do not intend for the common
cwoman to be conceived of as an interpretive absolute. I do, however, want the figure of the
common woman to stimulate conversations regarding the diverse range of experiences in the
lives of nineteenth-century black women that will, in turn, increase our understanding of
black women's efforts to forge an empowered feminist identity.
INTRODUCTION

NOTES


4. See Patricia Hill Collins, Black Feminist Thought (New York: Routledge, 1990), for her discussion of the contributions of black women not recognized as intellectuals by academic and cultural institutions.


6. For many, the question of African American slave resistance is of great debate. While many critics eagerly point out literacy as resistance, others are hesitant to consider insurrections as an identifiable source of slave resistance in America. Although insurrectionist activity is a well-documented aspect of the British/Caribbean slave past, the Vesey, Prosser, and Turner rebellions are proof of American slave counter activity. See Herbert Aptheker’s path-breaking study of American slave rebellions in American Negro Slave Revolts (New York: International Publishers, 1963).


9. I distinguish between the Woman’s Era and the 1970s Black Feminist Movement on the basis of their organizational goals. The Woman’s Era is the historical period beginning in the 1890s when activist black women asserted their collective political authority by developing a national club movement aimed at anti-white resistance. The Black Feminist Movement of the 1970s was influenced by the political urgency of the Civil Rights and Black Power Movements and included political and intellectual critiques of Anglo and African-American patriarchy, as well as the ‘sisterhood’ of white women.


ONE
Maiden Voyage: Slavery, Domesticity, and Trans-Atlantic Resistance

Until recently, black feminist criticism of nineteenth century literature and culture has focused quite extensively on resistance models that prioritize maternity, black women’s appropriation of domesticity, and the struggle for equality all within a decidedly American context. To some extent, these readings have resulted in interpretive frameworks that focus almost exclusively on women as representatives for the race whose strivings for citizenship and equality were located within narratives of ideal domesticity. While such models are useful, they leave little or no room for alternative narratives of resistance that focus more on black women’s aggressive manipulation, and in some cases, destruction of dominant notions of domestic ideology. In order to remedy this critical oversight, I suggest that we expand the borders of black feminist criticism to examine black women’s resistance practices in a diasporic context. More specifically, I argue for the use of black Atlantic discourse and resistance practices as a way of understanding the common woman’s emergence as a resisting subject in antebellum life and culture in the United States.

This chapter is an effort to understand the cultural work of two important antebellum texts – *The History of Mary Prince* and *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*—by examining the intersection of representational politics, racialized geographies, and resistance within the context of the trans-Atlantic slave past. Though the pairing of Prince and Stowe may seem unusual, I argue that they share a common discourse based on their consuming interest in dramatizing the relationship between the common woman and the West Indies as a site of black liberation.
- a relationship complicated by Stowe’s anxiety about black resistance. More specifically, I am interested in the specific ways in which Prince and Stowe build on actual strategies of West Indian resistance in their respective abolitionist projects. In particular, I argue that Prince’s autobiographical depiction of the common woman and Stowe’s depiction of Dinah as the common woman construct narratives of subversion by manipulating their position in the slave economy. The resistance practices affiliated with West Indian slavery – physical and verbal resistance, huckstering, and poisoning plots – are the mechanisms through which Prince and Dinah attempt to gain physical and psychical freedom and moral victories over their oppressors. It is important to note that Prince and Stowe do not always allude to the same strategies of resistance. While Prince and Stowe both discuss verbal resistance and the resistance potential inherent in black women’s labor, Prince focuses extensively on several components of Caribbean slavery, including migratory experiences and huckstering. In contrast, Stowe alludes to Caribbean food poisoning plots. Despite the differences in the aspects of slavery that they choose to represent, I argue that their use of the common woman and the Caribbean slave past provides a new standard of nineteenth-century resistance that destabilizes the prevailing models of literacy and maternity.

It is also important to note that the motivations behind Prince’s and Stowe’s representations of the common woman are strikingly dissimilar. Prince’s anti-slavery platform places the common woman in dialogue with a narrative of resistance that affirms the West Indian liberational past and politicizes the experience of the enslaved. However, in order for Stowe to critique slavery, she has to demonize the common woman’s resistance practices and cast them as threats to white bodies. It is precisely the tension between Prince’s
affirmation and Stowe’s dread that drives their respective constructions of the common woman, which is in turn, largely impacted by the genres in which they worked. While Prince uses the slave narrative as a platform for articulating black resistance, Stowe’s sentimental novel could not tolerate angry eruptions from black bodies. And because I am most interested in the autobiographical construction of the common woman, my primary focus in this chapter is on *The History of Mary Prince*. I conclude with a reading of Stowe’s depiction of the relationship between the Caribbean slave past and the common woman. Thus, I start by examining the foundational concepts of black Atlantic discourse and then proceed to a discussion of the common woman’s emergence as a resisting subject in antebellum literature through readings of *The History of Mary Prince* and *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*.

**Understanding the Black Atlantic**

One of the most recent trends in the nineteenth century African American studies is the investigation of the role of the black Atlantic community in the making of the cultural identity. The black Atlantic community refers to the African descended people of the Atlantic world triangulated by England, Africa, and the Americas. Critics and historians usually view this community only according to the distinct categories of race, ethnicity, or nationality, but Paul Gilroy argues that the community should be viewed as "a single, complex unit" in which cultural, racial, and economic exchanges have been going on for centuries.² The system of exchange that Gilroy constructs includes the transmission of ideas
and cultural practices that materialized during the Middle Passage and have since directly impacted current African American cultural practices.

Gilroy’s emphasis on the Middle Passage depends on the metaphor of ships in motion across the Atlantic. For Gilroy, the ships represent a micro-system of linguistic and political hybridity: "Ships immediately focus attention on the middle passage, on the various projects for redemptive return to an African homeland in the circulation of ideas and activists as well as the movement of key cultural and political artefacts: tracts, books, gramophone records, and choirs." This creolization process that Gilroy refers to not only involves the creative capacities of the Middle Passage, but also constitutes the emergence of a group identity and cross-tribal affinities. Once captured and aboard ships, Africans from various tribes were forced to confront each other and forge a shared identity based on their capture and bondage. While slave owners often deliberately avoided combining too many slaves from a single tribe, new bonds provided the basis for group resistance: "As such, slave ships were the first real incubators of slave unity across cultural lines, cruelly revealing irreducible links from one ethnic group to the other, fostering resistance thousands of miles before there was mention of national rights in America."

Also crucial to Gilroy's theory of trans-Atlantic exchange is the role of the West Indies in the diasporic imagination. Because the West Indies was the first stop during the passage, the islands represent finality and the last semblance of home before going to North America. But more importantly, the West Indies, specifically Haiti, represent resistance and political freedom, most notably apparent in the history of the Haitian Revolution. The primacy of Haiti is a question that Gilroy raises in arguing for a connection between the
Haitian Revolution and African American political thought: "In periodizing modern black politics, it will require fresh thinking about the importance of Haiti and its revolution for the development of African American political thought and movements of resistance." Gilroy’s question is an important one that I will use as a point of departure for a discussion of the culture of resistance engendered by the Haitian Revolution and the ways in which it is manifested in women’s texts.

In the foreword to an anthology of black Atlantic writers, William Andrews draws upon Gilroy’s model for transatlantic culture, but he prioritizes the role of literacy in the black Atlantic. Andrews asks:

When eighteenth-century writers of the Black Atlantic confronted European Enlightenment notions of selfhood, race, and literacy, did their critique of these notions stem from simply a personal standpoint? Or did these early Black Atlantic writers also represent through their personal experiences a cultural point of view, a set of beliefs and values embraced by African-descended peoples in the world and articulated into a nascent literary tradition for successive generations of Black Atlantic writers to follow"? What is also important in Andrews’ interpretation of the black Atlantic community is the emphasis on masculinity, which is immediately apparent by his choice to include only the narratives of male slaves:

They were all truly men of the world. They were social and cultural creoles – incontestably and unashamedly black but with affinities, either by birth or experience, to various nations, colonies, and peoples. Hardy and adaptable by virtue of their wide travels in the Atlantic world, these writers seem to be at home everywhere and nowhere. Their unswerving commitment to Christianity, a bedrock of faith in their stormy, often perilous lives, reminds us of the spiritual foundation on which the antislavery movement in England and North America was built in the eighteenth-century. The literary efforts of these pioneering writers to fashion a distinctly multi-cultural identity for themselves in their autobiographies resonate powerfully with our contemporary world."
Andrews’ argument reveals a common tendency in criticism to associate learning and progression only with masculinity. While I do not want to rehearse feminist critiques that argue that women have been left out of critical discussions, I do want to highlight their absence, which is as much a result of an emphasis on literacy as it is a result of gender. The proclaimed pioneers of the black Atlantic – Ottobah Cugoano, John Jea, John Marrant, Olaudah Equiano, and James Gronniosaw – all wrote during the Enlightenment. Criticism on the Enlightenment and the role of the black Atlantic only validates literacy in its most traditional sense, and by that I mean that they value only the written word. In contrast, Mary Prince reminds us of the importance of other meanings of literacy and her text shows that though she may not be literate in the Western sense of the word, she is nevertheless able to deploy language, reason, and skill to create a feminist-based liberational schema.

The models that Gilroy and Andrews point to are both very important because they provide the framework for discussing the cultural exchange that takes place across the Atlantic. However, I make a significant departure from the normative characteristics associated with the black Atlantic, (e.g. - literacy and masculinity), by prioritizing women’s contributions to the black Atlantic, as well as the cultural practices and beliefs that created a continuous and integrated pattern of resistance for blacks during their dispersal throughout the New World.

We can begin to understand the development of the common woman by placing her in conversation with more traditional readings of antebellum black female subjectivity and resistance. Traditional constructions of black female subjectivity are invested in issues of maternity, community, and resistance to physical and sexual abuse in which women are often
constructed as the outraged mother or the unwilling victim. And as Claudia Tate suggests, such representations often coincide with nineteenth century domestic ideology. Tate writes: "Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* ... utilize[s] maternal discourses of desire as a particularly black and female politicization of domestic ideology. Hence, the white woman's antebellum narratives of feminized polity ... celebrate the consummation of the orderly household as a sign of a moral society, while the corresponding black texts – distinctly mourn these latter discourses of racial protest." In focusing exclusively on black women's written texts, Tate also privileges the role of literacy in creating and maintaining a culture of resistance. Tate's reading is important for what it reveals about how black women's writing responded to and appropriated the benchmarks of traditional domesticity. However, this reading also raises the question of the scope of black women's resistance to domesticity.

To understand the range of black women's responses to domesticity, we have to first analyze the function of the common woman in antebellum literature and culture. Like the more traditional heroine that Tate describes, the common woman does indeed respond to the dominant trope of domesticity. However, while the traditional heroine mourns and attempts to recreate for herself an ideal domestic setting, the common woman disrupts domesticity by refusing to be bound by the issues of maternity, family, and the home. In this discussion, I refer to the common woman's disruption of ideal domesticity as insurgent domesticity, which allows the common woman to upset antebellum power relations. In so doing, the common woman seeks redress not based on maternity or her ability to speak for the race, but instead bases her equality on her position as a laborer. Also important in the common
woman's revision of established patterns of resistance is a move away from traditional literacy to a folk-based systems of knowledge.

The move from traditional literacy to folk-based knowledge has to be understood within the context of Caribbean resistance practices. Therefore, I argue that to fully understand the scope of women's resistance in a black Atlantic context requires an analysis of the cultural practices of enslaved women throughout the Caribbean. The unique nature of Caribbean resistance practices hinges on the heightened visibility of black women as resisting subjects, which is particularly useful for the common woman because it underscores the limits of traditional narratives of resistance while also registering the need for a diasporic model of black resistance. Caribbean historians Barbara Bush, Louise Mair and Hilary Beckles have been influential in outlining the patterns of Caribbean female slave resistance through the formulation of the rebel woman and the natural rebel, respectively. Bush's work considers the daily acts of resistance by theorizing instances of work refusal and poisoning as channels of resistance available to Caribbean women. Mair's formulation of the rebel woman is organized around the cultural legacies of the West Indian revolutionary icons, Nanny Grigg and Nanny of the Maroons, and examines the public anti-slavery legacies of these female leaders.11 In contrast, Beckles's formulation of the natural rebel focuses less on female icons and more on the day-to-day resistance among Caribbean women. These constructions have been useful in establishing a methodology for a system of Caribbean female-centered resistance in a way that is helpful in establishing my own model of the common woman's intervention in diasporic resistance practices.
From Prince's huckstering to Dinah's connection to food poisoning, insurgent domesticity is the mechanism through which female slaves manipulate the boundaries of the economy of oppression in an effort to achieve autonomy and redress. Furthermore, insurgent domesticity subverts the civilizing mechanism of traditional domesticity by showing how the strict rules of domesticity often lead to opportunities for radical self-expression, even as it seeks to contain it. But perhaps what is most important is the common woman's internal cultural function of creating and maintaining a pattern of resistance in the black community. In short, the internal cultural function of the common woman is more concerned with maintaining community than she is with creating inter-racial alliances. Because the common woman is not typically regarded as a race leader, she is able to speak and act in ways that traditional/representational heroines cannot. Indeed, her use of insurgent domesticity often flies in the face of what whites think of as acceptable black behavior.

Both Prince and Dinah realize their worth and equality in terms of labor, and in so doing, make a case for their own humanity. Insofar as both believe their labor to be a commodity for which they should be respected and compensated, both Prince and her fictional counterpart, Dinah, reject the notion that they are unequal pawns in the economy of oppression. Houston Baker acknowledges the importance of labor for enslaved blacks in his discussion of Olaudah Equiano and argues that it is only through a process of self-conscious, mercantile, self-evaluation that slaves can begin the process toward physical and economic freedom. Baker's argument on Equiano's economic activity is very useful for antebellum depictions of the common woman, because labor and economic activities are the primary means through which Prince and Dinah resist white power, while also maintaining
the interiority of black life. For both Prince and Dinah, the workplace is the site from which
they enact resistance. But more importantly, they do so by using alternative discourses of
knowledge that are commonly associated with Afro-Caribbean cultural retentions. So,
Prince's participation in huckstering and Dinah's portrayal as a conjurer indicate the extent
to which their own practices are tied up with an effort to give voice to the experience of the
enslaved generally, and to the experience of the common woman specifically.

As Harryette Mullen has pointed out, in the absence of narratives of the quest for
literacy, illiterate women often used sass as a way of constituting redress in the slave
economy. Mullen argues that some black women writers were cognizant of the importance
of verbal resistance and orality:

Their texts, by focusing on a continuum of resistance to oppression available
to the illiterate as well as the literate, tend to stress orality as a presence over
illiteracy as an absence ... It is in the oral tradition (itself preserved through
transcription), rather than either the sentimental novel or the male dominated
slave narrative genre, that we find the most insistent representations of strong
black women resisting and also passing on, through their oral expression to
their daughters, a tradition of resistance to physical and sexual abuse from
white women and men.12

I am particularly interested in the way in which the common woman uses the female-
centered sass in conjunction with the mechanism of flight, which was generally only enacted
by men. Flight, and movement in general, is crucial in representations of common women.
As seen especially in The History of Mary Prince, sass and flight both prove to be valuable
modes of resistance. The common woman defies gender conventions by merging the
conventions of both the masculine and the feminine slave experiences. As a result, the
common woman's efforts make a myth of the conception of slave women as docile,
stationary, and accessible to both physical and sexual abuse. Further, the mechanism of flight moved slave women out of the kitchen or the fields, out of her "proper" place, which is dictated by both slavery and black patriarchy. This is especially important for Prince for whom movement was one of the defining factors in her own narrative of resistance.

**Feminizing the West Indies: The History of Mary Prince**

Because Prince's narrative is the first extant women's slave narrative to emerge from the Americas, and considering that it was published fourteen years before *The Narrative of Frederick Douglass*, new readings of the text will lead to a restructuring of how we think about the literature of the diasporic slave past. Published in 1831 by England's Anti-Slavery Society, this "as-told-to" account chronicles Prince's life in slavery, her resistance efforts, and her eventual freedom. Though her story reveals many of the slave narrative strategies found in later and more popular narratives, namely the *Narrative of the Life Frederick Douglass* and *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, Prince has been marginalized. Part of the narrative's absence from the critical discourse is due to its publication history. Though Prince suggested the idea of writing her story, she dictated her narrative to Susan Strickland, an English abolitionist. The project was edited and published by Thomas Pringle, Prince's employer and president of England's Anti-Slavery Society. However, because Prince's narrative is an as-told-to account and because her own reading and writing skills were limited, the narrative itself invariably raises questions about authenticity. The same questions of authenticity have dogged many other slave narrators, and while it may explain part of Prince's absence, Prince was empowered by telling her own story. As the prefatory
documents make clear, Prince believed it to be her duty to tell her story: "she wished it to be done, she said that the good people in England might hear from a slave what a slave felt and suffered." Critic Rosetta Haynes comments on the empowering nature of Prince’s narrative in stating: "Prince rhetorically reverses the power relationship between master and slave; she discursively exposes, verbally thrashes, and courageously holds up her former owners for public condemnation."14

Although arguments linking Prince’s absence from the canon to questions of authenticity are intriguing, I argue that Prince’s exclusion from the canon of slave literature is bound up in issues of geography and gender. Because Prince lived in the Caribbean and traveled extensively throughout the Caribbean and London, she is essentially left out of the tradition of African American slave narratives that focus primarily on the movement from south to north, specifically in the North American context. Indeed, Joanne Braxton’s study of black female slave narrators only briefly acknowledges a link between Harriet Jacobs and Prince:

This ‘as-told to’ account depicts the separation of families as well as the physical exploitation and sexual abuse of black women from a first-person point of view. Like Linda Brent, Mary Prince enjoys a happy childhood that ends abruptly with the death of a ‘kind mistress.’ Mary is initiated into the suffering of slave womanhood when the family is separated. Not only does Mary Prince prefigure the later Incidents in its criticism of sexual liaisons forced on slave women, but also in specific uses of language.15

Braxton’s commentary is vital to an initial understanding of the way through which Prince intersects with the African American canon. However, Braxton’s reading downplays the emphasis on the primacy of the Caribbean slave past as a defining component in the narrative. Likewise, Prince is left out of studies of the Black Atlantic because she is female
and only marginally literate. However, those are precisely the subject positions that should solidify Prince’s place in the canon.

I contend that we should read Prince as a product of the West Indian revolutionary past engendered by the Haitian Revolution and the cultural mythology surrounding the female maroon leader, Nanny. Ultimately, Prince speaks herself into a revolutionary script that liberates her self and community. While Sandra Pouchet Pacquet has made a similar argument that focuses on voice and authority, I am choosing to focus instead on the interrelated issues of verbal defense, movement, maternity, and labor as the defining principles of Prince’s pattern of resistance. More specifically, I argue that we can understand Prince’s construction of the common woman by examining how these issues challenge the prevailing models of female slave activism by advocating an assertive model of resistance that is not usually associated with female narratives of resistance. Importantly, two distinct trends emerge from this reading of the text. First, Prince’s resistance practices offer her an opportunity to address the lived experiences of a community of slaves. As a result, Prince’s migrations throughout the Caribbean and rejection of traditional maternity facilitate a theme of communal caring at work in the text. Second, and perhaps most important, is Prince’s individual use of labor as a resistance mechanism. My argument begins to engage an issue about women’s work raised by Carla Peterson, who is interested in the cultural and resistance possibilities generated by writing about women’s work. Peterson writes: “Given the particular social and cultural construction of black women’s lives, such writing differed in significant ways from that of black men in its ability to imagine cultural possibilities specifically engendered by women’s space and women’s work.” Work then, in The History
of Mary Prince, is both a narrative and historical construct that orders her subjectivity by giving her the means with which to attain physical and psychical freedom and moral victories over her oppressors. Ultimately, Prince is not only a literary precursor to other resisting domestics, but is also a model of West Indian feminist resistance that allows slaves to retain and affirm their heritage in spite of the obvious dangers of the New World.

In order to unpack some of the complex issues of The History of Mary Prince as evidence of the historical construction of West Indian resistant female subjectivity, I begin with an examination of this slave narrative within the context of the Caribbean slave past and the cultural impact of West Indian resistance plots. Ultimately, such resistance plots, historical and literary, provide the means through which slaves prevented the social death of slavery.¹⁸

West Indian slavery was a curious institution, perhaps even more peculiar than its American cousin. The West Indies was a major port in the trans-Atlantic slave trade and Saint Domingue in particular had a high number of slaves from Southeast Africa. The transportation of African slaves during the Middle Passage is of utmost importance for resistance practices, because memories of an African homeland and freedom often underwrote efforts to incite rebellion. The image of the ships in motion across the sea became an important marker for slaves and slave holders insofar as it represented both slavery and freedom. Consider, for example, historian Michael Craton’s description of the role of the sea:

The sea remained the common Caribbean element, the essential medium of communication, a symbol of distance, isolation, and danger, but also of escape. The sea not only linked the islands with the metropole, the cousin
colonies of the North American seaboard and the heartland-homeland of the African slaves, but was also the means of communicating between individual islands - with distances measured in time taken rather than nautical miles, because of the prevailing winds and the vagaries of the weather.¹⁹

Prince remarks on the role of the sea in her own experience, and it becomes a barrier of protection between herself and her owner: "My master, however, was a harsh, selfish man; and we always dreaded his return from sea: (21). Later in the narrative, Prince alludes to the opportunities afforded by sea journeys: "... for I wanted, by all honest means, to earn money to buy my freedom. Sometimes I bought a hog cheap on board ship, and sold it for double the money on shore" (45). Prince’s references to the sea should not be taken merely as minor reflections on her life in the Caribbean. Instead, these references confirm her acknowledgment of the sea as a central component of her experience of West Indian slavery.

As Craton points out, the sea constituted a source of communication, a phenomena which Prince refers to as seen in her memory of a particularly brutal voyage: "We were nearly four weeks on the voyage, which was unusually long. Sometimes we had a light breeze, sometimes a great calm, and the ship made no way; so that our provisions ran very low, and we were put upon short allowance. I should have almost have been starved had it not been for the kindness of a black man ... and his wife, who had brought their own victuals, and shared them with me" (37). Shortly after Prince recounts this scene, she makes another significant reference to the relationship between the sea, movement, and community:

I was on the beach with some of the slaves, and we saw a sloop come in loaded with slaves ... We got a boat and went aboard. When I came upon he deck, I asked the black people, "Is there anyone here for me?" "Yes," they said, "your mother." ... when I saw my poor mammy my joy was turned to sorrow, for she had gone from her senses. She began to talk foolishly, and said that she had been under the vessel’s bottom. They had been overtaken
by a violent storm at sea. My poor mother had never been on sea before, and she was so ill. (41)

Prince's various references to the sea raise a host of issues critical to the nature of Caribbean slavery. Slave ships immediately focus attention on issues of exchange among slaves, which we can see at work in Prince's exchange with the slave couple. More importantly, in telling the story of her mother's suffering aboard the slave ship, Prince becomes one of the few slave narrators to recount the horrors of the transatlantic slave trade. Ultimately, Prince's memories of the sea further underscore her self-conscious effort to condemn West Indian slavery.

But perhaps more important than Prince's identification with the sea is the role that the Haitian Revolution played in creating a culture of resistance that she was able to appropriate. Despite all of the Haitian Revolution's obvious political implications, there were just as many psycho-social implications that gave birth to a West Indian culture of resistance. The revolution was not only a marker of the slave's belief in freedom and liberation, but it was also a threat to white power throughout the world that represented the breadth and scope of black rage and resistance. This established culture of resistance is precisely the cultural script that Prince writes herself into. And as Sandra Paquet points out, Prince's story has a crucial place in West Indian history: "telling her story is a civic and political act that links Prince's individual quest for freedom as a black West Indian woman to the revolutionary restructuring of West Indian society." Prince brings forth this revolutionary fervor in a conversation with her editor Thomas Pringle: "I would rather go into my grave than go back as slave to Antigua, though I wish to go back to my husband very much – I am much afraid
my owners would separate me from my husband, and use me very hard, or perhaps sell me for a field negro; – and slavery is too bad, I would rather go into my grave!" (55). Prince’s statement reveals that liberty is more important than life itself. This same type of revolutionary fervor is reiterated throughout the narrative – from her brutal condemnations to her equally important refusal to shield her readers from the brutal truths of West Indian slavery – the content of her narrative itself is a rebellious act. The rebelliousness of her narrative invokes an important narrative function of the common woman. Obviously unconcerned with what her readers may think of her aggressive exchange with her white editor, Thomas Pringle, Prince instead creates a narrative voice that serves to reaffirm for herself and remind her readers of the revolutionary West Indian past from which she comes.

A crucial component of West Indian women’s resistance is verbal defense, and as Prince makes clear, sass provides her with ample opportunities to destabilize the tenor of the master/salve relationship. Prince’s uses of sass operates on two levels: as a tool for personal redress and as a tool for critiquing the British slave holding population. Consider, for example, her use of verbal resistance to change the scope of her relationship to her owner. Upon returning to her owner after running away, Prince is certain about how she expects to be treated and even acknowledges a change in Captain I—’s treatment: "I then took courage and said that I could stand the floggings no longer; that I was weary of my life, and therefore I had run away to my mother ... He told me to hold my tongue and go about my work, or he would find a way to settle me. He did not, however, flog me that day" (37). Prince’s verbal defense situates her in a lineage of women who used verbal resistance to strike back at their owners. As both Joanne Braxton and Harryette Mullen have pointed out, ‘sass’ or talking
back was one of the most common modes of resistance available to black women. But well before literary critics acknowledged the use of sass, verbal assaults by slaves were a problem for West Indian slave owners. In response to a proposal made by the British government to abolish the used of the whip, one leading official argued against it because of women’s personal weaponry – "that powerful instrument of the attack and defence, their tongue".

A second and perhaps more important use of sass allows Prince to politicize the plight of the enslaved by severely critiquing British slave holders, an action that has important implications for Prince’s position in the slave narrative genre. Even though Prince is writing for a white readership, she risks alienating her audience by repeatedly condemning members of the white community who refuse to call an end to slavery. Consider, for example, her reaction to being sold to Turks Island without being able to see her family: "Oh the Buckra people who keep slaves think that black people are like cattle, without natural affection. But my heart tells me otherwise" (37). Framing this overt assertion of black humanity and subjectivity is an outright condemnation of whites. Prince frequently decries the actions of slave owners and British citizens, and perhaps her most damning indictment appears near the end of her narrative once she is living as a ‘free’ woman in England:

Since I have been here I have often wondered how English people can go out into the West Indies and act in such a beastly manner. But when they go to the West Indies, they forget God and all feelings of shame, I think, since they can see and do such things. They tie slaves up like hogs.... and they lick them, so as hogs, or cattle, or horses never were flogged; – and yet they come home and say, and make some good people believe that slaves don’t want to get out of slavery.... All slave want to be free ... The man that says slaves be quite happy in slavery ... is either ignorant or a lying person. (54, emphasis mine).
While such condemnations serve the narrative well, William Andrews views narrative outbursts as a narrative liability:

A few ex-slaves, however, in seeming ignorance or defiance of the rhetorical risk, made much of their despair and assuaged outrage, their transgressions of Christian morality, and their unheroic behavior. Nor did these narrators always apologize for their breaches or use them as pretexts for grand reversals of the character at climactic moments in their lives. Ex-slaves who do not hide or apologize for the lingering evidence of the psycho pathology of oppression in their writing present important problems for interpretations of the slave narrative as simply a mode of antislavery propaganda on the one hand or a means of self-advancement on the other. When we find a gap in slaves narrator’s objective reportage of the facts of slavery, or a lapse in his possessing self-image, we must pay special attention. These deviations may indicate either a momentary lapse of narrative control or deliberate effort by the narrator to grapple with aspects of his or her personality that have been repressed out of fear of the dominant culture.²⁴

Although Andrews attributes this assertiveness to a narrative lapse, in Prince’s case, this assertiveness is an indication of the common woman’s freedom in challenging established boundaries of expected slave behavior. Prince is not hindered by the constant need for approval or economic compensation from her white audience. Therefore, free from issues of propriety enforced by abolitionists or amanuenses, Prince is able to come to terms with her lived condition as a slave. But more importantly, her critique of British national identity politicizes her verbal resistance. In this case, verbal resistance is a matter of politicized resistance to institutionalized injustice rather than a only a matter of personal vindication. In so doing, she authenticates the slave’s voice within the institution of slavery and thus excavates the truth of the situation.

As we have seen, Prince’s sass places her in an important tradition of black female resistance; however, Prince’s emphasis on movement and migrations disrupts received
notions of black women's enslavement. Prince navigates both the physical and psychological dangers of the New World by embarking on a series of migrations throughout the Caribbean that ultimately lead to freedom and a renewed sense of herself as a resisting subject. Unlike other female slave narrators who remained stationary in an effort to maintain family ties, Prince's narrative makes clear that she moved in search of increased opportunity. Prince traveled extensively throughout the region, and her project becomes one of liberation through migration. Each stop that she makes has its own specific history of resistance, and it is her mobility that allows her to forge her own plan of resistance.

Reading Prince in terms of movement forces readers to acknowledge her multiple positions during which she develops what Carol Boyce Davies calls a migratory subjectivity in which women's lives and work cross various boundaries, thus situating them in various locations. Davies writes: "... the category of Black women, or woman of color, exists as multiple performances of gender and race and sexuality based on the particular cultural, historical, geopolitical, class, communities in which Black women exist."25 The relationship between black women and community is especially important for Prince insofar as the frequent migrations throughout the Caribbean facilitate a greater understanding of her individual enslavement, as well as the experiences of her fellow slaves.

The relationship between resistance and movement at work in the text can be traced to Prince's separation from her rather insulated community and is thrust into a recognition of her condition that she recognizes as harsh realities of slave life. Not surprisingly, this forced move considerably alters Prince's conception of self:
My heart throbbed with grief and terror so violently that I pressed my hands quite tightly across my breast, but I could not keep still, and it continued to leap as though it would burst out of my body. But who cared for that? Did one of the many bystanders, who were looking at us so carelessly, think of the pain that wrung the hearts of the negro woman and her young ones? No, no! They were not all bad, I dare say, but slavery hardens white peoples hearts towards the blacks; and many of them were not slow to make their remarks upon us aloud without regard to our grief. (30)

She continues: "Oh those white people have small hearts who can only feel for themselves" (31). Prince’s condemnation is a significant one, for though it is not her first assault on slavery, it is her first verbal attack on those slave-holding whites themselves. Here Prince deploys the narrative freedom of the common woman who is not bound by the ideology of conciliation and therefore does not have to negotiate for white approval and assistance in the abolitionist cause. Prince is asserting that her experiences alone, not the willing assistance of white sponsors, will suffice for her condemnation of slavery. Further, that she does not invoke white women’s assistance during a moment of potential cross-cultural coalition also has important implications for black women’s experience of enslavement. Unlike Harriet Jacobs who makes frequent appeals for white women’s assistance in her struggle for freedom, Prince makes no such entreaties. At this particular moment, Prince’s resistance is based on an individual and physical rejection of the inhumanity of slavery. In so doing, she reaffirms her own humanity by suggesting that she does not need anyone to speak for her.

Prince’s sale to Spanish-Point marks the development of her consciousness regarding the group dynamics of slavery. When Prince arrives in Spanish-Point she is immediately initiated into a group of slaves from varying backgrounds who form a resisting community. Even before she reaches her owner’s house, she is forewarned of the coming trials: "... two
slave women hired from another owner, who were at work in the yard, spoke to me, and asked who I belonged to? I replied, ‘I am come to live here’ Poor child, poor child, they both said; ‘you must keep a good heart if you are to live here’ (32). The variations of slave life provide an important narrative function insofar as they allow Prince to quietly critique West Indian slavery. Shortly thereafter, Prince recounts her meeting with "A French black called Hetty" and a young child, "Jack was an African from the coast of Guinea" (34). Not only is she warned by other slaves of her owners' brutality, but she also witnesses the treatment of Hetty who "led a miserable life" and the ill treatment of the young Jack and another child, Cyrus, who Prince remarks, "seldom a day passed without these boys receiving the most ill treatment, and often for no fault at all" (34). Through these descriptions, Prince critiques the indiscriminate brutality of West Indian slavery, but she also marks her own process of communal self-creation. According to Sterling Stuckey, the community building process is a crucial element in a slave's ability to survive the horrors of slavery: "Their very effort to bridge ethnic differences and to form themselves into a single people to meet the challenge of a common foe proceeded from an impulse that was Pan-African – that grew out of a concern for all Africans – as what was useful was appropriated from a multiplicity of African groups even as an effort was made to eliminate distinctions among them."26 For Prince, then, the detribalization process forces her to identify with other slaves and thus to recognize that theirs is a shared plight.

Of the slaves Prince encounters, it is the female slave Hetty who has a lasting impact on Prince, while also establishing a strategy for understanding the competing representations of the common woman available in the text. For example, Hetty momentarily invokes the
narrative function of the common woman through her efforts to build and maintain a sense of community among the slaves. However, Hetty’s inability to actively resist her abuser eventually destabilizes her identification as a common woman. By witnessing the depravity of Hetty’s misuse, Prince realizes the complex nature of the particular abuses heaped upon slave women, and revises Hetty’s example by refusing to be defeated by the overwhelming abuse of their slave owner. We can see the tension between Hetty’s passiveness and Prince’s agency by gauging their respective responses to abuse. Prince recounts Hetty’s suffering in great detail without any attempt to shield her readers from the brutality of the incident. Instead, it is through a stark, realist language that Prince recounts Hetty’s suffering on her first night with her new owner:

I got a sad fright, that night. I was just going to sleep, when I heard a noise in my mistress’s room; and she presently called out to inquire if some work was finished that she had ordered Hetty to do. "No, Ma’am, not yet," was Hetty’s answer from below. On hearing this, my master started up from his bed, and just as he was, in his shirt, ran down stairs with a long cow-skin in his hand. I heard immediately after, the cracking of the thong, and the house rang to the shrieks of poor Hetty, who kept crying out, "Oh Massa! Massa! Me dead. Massa! Have mercy on me.... This was a sad beginning for me. I sat up upon my blanket ... thinking that my turn would come next. (33)

As Prince points out, Hetty’s moment of suffering initiates her own fears for her personal safety. More importantly, Hetty’s inaction in the face of danger provides a model of resistance that Prince finds personally unacceptable.

After Hetty’s death, Prince assumes her chores and becomes the object of their owner’s abuse but refuses to relive Hetty’s suffering. Prince responds quite differently and chooses escape as a means of resistance to a particularly brutal beating from her owner: "He came to me and without any more ado, stooped down and taking off his heavy boot, he
struck me with such a severe blow in the small of my back that I shrieked with agony ... I cannot remember how many licks he gave me then, but he beat me til I was unable to stand ... After this I ran away and went to my mother" (36). Prince’s rejection of slavery merges both male and female renderings of escape tropes. Prince’s actions are indicative of the questing hero, most notably Frederick Douglass, who uses physical struggle as a motivation for escape. Likewise, her hideaway in a nearby cavern calls to mind the wilderness and the dark night of the soul characteristic of many slave narratives. However, Prince’s return to her mother, who feeds and hides her, suggests a variation of the loophole of retreat that so effectively assisted Harriet Jacobs in her quest for freedom. Indeed, Prince makes it clear that her mother’s efforts saved her: "she dared not receive me into the house, but she had me up in a hole in the rocks near, and brought me food at night, after everybody was asleep" (36). As Valerie Smith reminds us, hiding away may seem like total confinement, but more appropriately results in psychical liberation: "Likewise, and perhaps more important, the garret, a place of confinement, also renders the narrator spiritually independent of her master, and makes possible her ultimate escape to freedom." That Prince is assisted by her family reifies Smith’s argument that female escape is often negotiated with the help of family and/or community members.

Prince’s experiences with Hetty and the other slaves at Spanish-Point are instrumental in the development of her resistant voice, and this same type of self-conscious construction as a resisting subject parallels her movement throughout the Caribbean. Importantly, it is during her voyage to Grand Quay to work on the salt ponds that anticipates a significant change in Prince’s relationship to enslavement. Salt mining was demanding and
brutal labor, and Prince describes in detail the physical and emotional hazards associated with this work. Prince's experiences in the salt mines were far different from the labor she had previously experienced but nevertheless provided her with a larger community of slaves with which she could identify. Interestingly, her narrative takes on a different tone, and she no longer speaks in terms of the narrative "I" that marked her speech at Spanish Point. She, instead, speaks in terms of the collective "we." This shift in pronoun usage is far more than a grammatical slippage; it marks the continued development of a resistant voice and group consciousness. Through this overtly oppressive state, Prince overcomes the isolation she experienced. The identification can also be read as a yearning for the family that she had left behind and therefore as a critique of the familial disruptions that slavery engenders. Prince takes great pain to describe her own suffering, as well as the sufferings of the others in the gang of slaves. Importantly, the aged Daniel serves as a symbol for what lies ahead for all slaves: "He was an object of pity and terror to the whole gang of slaves and in his wretched case we saw, each of us, our own lot, if we should live to be as old" (39). In this reimagining of the ruptured slave family, Prince reminds her readers that she is culturally and morally obligated to tell their stories: "In telling my own story, I cannot pass by those of my fellow slaves-for when I think of my own griefs, I remember theirs" (40). Ultimately, the salt ponds and the oppressive conditions she was forced to endure allowed Prince to access a public voice with which to speak for others. As a result, the salt ponds provide a space of liminality that eventually facilitates her empowerment. The state of liminality as defined by Victor Turner and Carla Peterson, is that particular moment in which a disenfranchised individual can access communal connections. The communitas, as Turner describes it, exists "in
contrast ... to social structure, as an alternative and more liberated way of being socially human, a way both of being detached from social structure ... and also more attached to other disengaged persons." Hence, at Prince's greatest site of oppression, she can access a communal experience that leads to opportunities for self-expression linked to collectivity.

After ten years of traveling throughout the British island communities, Prince's return to Bermuda, her self-described "native place," complicates what is commonly thought of as the exile's return to the native space. The home that she returns to is certainly not the idyllic home that she described earlier in her narrative. If, during her travels, Prince recreates home and family in the community of slaves that she encounters, her return to Bermuda is symbolized by absences. Nonetheless, though her mother is physically absent when she returns to Bermuda, she is still a primary reference point for Prince's own resistant subjectivity. As Carole Boyce Davies points out writing home for black women writers is usually linked to the presence of female ancestral figures: "In the spatial-expansion of home, female elders are crucial links in its rewriting ... one can identify a female ancestor ... whose presence or absence evokes a very specific identification and redefinition of the meaning of home. They become specifically gendered ancestral links in terms of knowledge of healing arts, survival skills, for Caribbean women, nurturing, re-membering." It is worth noting that just prior to her return to Bermuda, Prince meets her mother for the first time in over five years and meets a sister whom she had never met. In this exchange, Prince not only reconnects with her own mother but becomes a mother-figure to her younger sister. This particular mimetic exchange mediates her return to her home/mother land.
Although Prince momentarily invokes a maternal narrative through her relationship with her sister, she ultimately refuses motherhood because of its tragic implications for black women's development of a resistant subjectivity. In so doing, Prince manages to free herself from one of the most tragic burdens placed on slave women in choosing to not have children. The historical rape of black women was often the means through which slave economics increased their population, and as feminist critic Barbara Omolade suggests, the black woman's body becomes a valuable source of income for slave owners: "Her vagina, used for his sexual pleasure, was the gateway to the womb, which was his place of capital investment – the capital investment being the sex act, and the resulting accumulated surplus, worth money on the slave market." For Prince, then, the absence of children is an act of resistance that robs her owners of her resources. But more important than the role of resistance is what Prince's choice says about issues of black female subjectivity and agency. From her own mother to Hetty, all that Prince has seen of motherhood is of tragic proportions, and she essentially views motherhood as a powerless position in which: "... mothers could only weep and mourn over their children, they could not save them from cruel masters, from the whip, the rope, and the cow-skin" (37). This is not to say that motherhood was not valued in West Indian slave culture, but it does indicate the extent to which Prince views herself outside of a maternally-based subjectivity. And even though she converts to Moravianism and marries a fellow convert, she never laments her childless state.

Prince's views on maternity illustrate a provocative contrast to the views shared by other slave narrators, namely Harriet Jacobs. For Jacobs, children were a source of agency who motivated her to act and changed her condition. In contrast, Prince views the absence
of children as the best means to activate agency. Without children, Prince is able to move, act, and speak in ways not always available to the outraged mother figure because she is not immediately concerned with maternal obligations and/or retributive actions taken against her children. Importantly, Prince reconfigures the debilitating trope of motherhood by replacing maternity with the trope of communal caring. As she indicates throughout her narrative, she understands the importance of telling the stories of other slaves, thus allowing her to be a voice for other slaves. Communal caring is a mechanism of resistance that allows Prince a heightened visibility that gives voice to the experiences of slave who do not fall under the rubric of the outraged mother or the questing hero. As the name suggests, communal caring facilitates a great understanding of the larger community of slaves.

The trope of communal caring is indeed crucial to Prince’s resistance practices; however, a second trend emerges in her narrative that centers on her individual efforts to use labor as a mode of resistance. Prince’s efforts to gain economic independence are part of a larger framework that deals specifically with cultural practices engendered by West Indian slavery. Houston Baker reminds us of the complexities of West Indian slavery in stating that: "The consequences of the differing views of slavery in the West Indies and the Old South are reflected in the possible degrees of freedom available to the enterprising West Indian and Afro-American slave. West Indian slavery was more inclined than that of the Old South to permit the substitution of one form of capital for another."32

In reference to the *Interesting Life of Gustavus Vassa*, Baker identifies a crucial link between the slave’s subjectivity and economic value, "... the narrator, having been reduced to property by a commercial deportation decides during his West Indian captivity that neither
sentiment nor spiritual sympathies can earn his liberation. He realizes, in effect, that only the acquisition of property will enable him to alter his designated status as property. He thus formulates a plan of freedom constrained by the mercantile boundaries of a Caribbean situation.\textsuperscript{33} Baker's reading of Vassa's economic ventures establishes the fact that Vassa is well aware of his economic value. Similarly, Prince is well aware of her value in terms of the slave society. Prince even remarks on this situation in stating: "The bidding commenced at a few pounds, and gradually rose to fifty-seven, when I was knocked down to the highest bidder; and the people who stood by said that I had fetched a great sum for so young a slave" (31). Both Vassa's and Prince's reflections indicate not only their knowledge of the economic ramifications of the slave trade, but also their role within this particular economic system. But, as Baker reminds us, the slave's acknowledgment of the system is not enough; it must be accompanied by his actions to change his status: "It vividly delineates the true character of Afro-American's historical origins in slave economics and implicitly acknowledges that such economics \textit{must be mastered} before liberation can be achieved.\textsuperscript{34} Prince shows us that a self-conscious, mercantile self-evaluation is essential to her pursuit of freedom:

The way in which I made my money was this - When my master and mistress were from home, as they sometimes did, and left me to take care of the house and the premisses, I had a good deal of time to myself, and made the most of it. I took in washing, and sold coffee and yams and other provisions to the captains of ships. I did not sit still idling during the absence of my owners; for I wanted, by all honest means, to earn money to buy my freedom. Sometimes I bought a hog cheap on board ship and sold it for double the money on shore; and I also earned a good deal by selling coffee. By this means I by degree acquired a little cash. (45)
Prince's commercial involvement is also characteristic of the tradition of huckstering that was widely practiced by women throughout the Caribbean. Huckstering, broadly defined as the informal commercial activities of slaves, was a crucial element in black women's social and economic relations.\textsuperscript{35} The popularity of huckstering was in large part a response to the social and material conditions of a slavery that allowed women to attain limited resources, including higher quality food and in some cases, property. Likewise, huckstering allowed women an opportunity to regain some control over their lives: "Huckstering ... enabled them to make profitable use of their leisure time. And it afforded them the chance to travel and normalised their social lives as much as possible under highly restrictive circumstances."\textsuperscript{36}

Prince's commercial endeavors reveal her skillful use and manipulation of time, space, and place. During the absence of her owners, Prince transforms their site of ownership (the home) into the proving ground for her own ownership. Prince's use of labor also underscores her sense of self and authority. Through her negotiations with ship captains and other customers, Prince develops a public persona and a heightened level of visibility. Therefore, well before she narrated her story for a public audience, Prince's labor provided her with a public platform.

The emphasis that Prince places on her labor also serves as a metaphor for freedom and the rights of citizenship. In telling of her efforts, Prince brings to light the quotidian acts of slave life that illustrate the experiences of enslaved blacks. Prince's labor also illustrates the reciprocity inherent in the contract of citizenship. In relating the story of one black woman's participation in economic exchange, Prince suggests that blacks should have the right to participate as equal agents in the marketplace. As a result, not only does labor
facilitate her own personal freedom, but it also marks blacks' eventual independence from whites.

Prince finally realizes her own independence once she travels to England. In what is probably the most important migratory experience, Prince's move to England gives her the freedom to speak, act, and finally, leave her owners and seek the help of Moravian missionaries. In one of the many verbal duels with her owners in which they threaten to throw her out, Prince asserts her rights on the basis of the evils of slavery and also turns their abuse against them: "... this is the fourth time my master and mistress have driven me out, or threatened to drive me – and I will give them no more occasion to bid me go. I was not willing to leave them, for I am a stranger in this country, but now I must go – I can stay no longer to be so used" (51). Prince disengages herself from her owners' control and after her departure from the Woods household she continues to work toward her physical and emotional freedom.

Prince's closing manifesto is the culmination of her attempts to gain freedom, equality, and the rights of citizenship. Still free from the prevailing constraints of propriety, Prince refuses to hide her anger as she critiques the uncivilized behavior of the English. In an interesting twist, Prince subverts theories of the supposed civilizing nature of British influence: "Since I have lived here I have often wondered how English people can go out into the West Indies and act in such a beastly manner. But when they go to the West Indies, they forget God and all feelings of shame, I think, since they can see and do such things" (54).

Though Prince is still enslaved by virtue of British law, she has already achieved a psychical freedom evident in the status she assigns to her self and the writing of her
narrative. Consider, for example, her construction of the relationship she shares with Strickland, whom she refers to as "my good friend" (54). Prince's reference is personal and most likely alludes to some sense of mutual affection between the two women; however, the reference also uncovers a more important political imperative. That she refers to Strickland as a friend indicates that she does not recognize the cultural and political rules that establish difference between a black woman and a white woman. In short, Prince's statement reveals that she views herself not as the lowly recipient of Strickland's benevolence, but instead as Strickland's equal. In another equally profound statement, Prince acknowledges that her story is a history-making event that will significantly impact British views of slavery: "I will say the truth to English people who may read this history" (54). Herein, Prince recognizes the importance of her own story, as well as the significance of telling the stories of other slaves. In telling her English readers of her personal experiences and by including the voices of other slaves in that framework, Prince significantly alters the abolitionist impulse and Western concepts of history and notions of individuality. Considering that many abolitionists sought to dismantle the institution of slavery without necessarily considering the lives and the experiences of the slaves themselves, Prince prioritizes the involvement of black bodies in freedom movements. For Prince, the institution has to be destroyed, but the interior lives and culture of enslaved blacks have to be maintained. In naming her efforts as part of a larger history-making project, Prince makes a conscious move to insert herself into national historical discussions. Indeed, as historian Hilary Beckles argues, Prince is in the vanguard of West Indian resistance: "Slave women like Mary Prince... who neither led troops into battle, nor mobilised any community for such action succeeded nevertheless, in making a
considerable contribution to the radical tradition through the writing of memoirs. Her ‘voice’ in metropolitan anti-slavery circles constituted an important ‘literary’ force from the West Indian women’s anti-slavery vanguard."³⁷ Likewise, Prince places her history alongside the masculinist histories of other West Indian blacks, most notably Toussaint L’Overture and the cultural currency of the Haitian Revolution.

As if to further solidify her commitment to a revolutionary past, Prince does not frame her argument in terms of Christian love and sisterhood between white and black women. As I have pointed out, Prince is not interested in impressing her readers or in creating a fiction of sisterhood, but as her statements suggest, she is interested in becoming an economic subject:

What’s the reason they can’t do without slaves as well as in England? No slaves here – no whips – no stocks – no punishment except for wicked people. They hire servants in England; and if they don’t like them, they send them away, they can’t lick them. Let them work ever so hard in England, they are far better off than slaves. They have their liberty. That’s just what we want. We don’t mind hard work, if we had time given in the week to keep us from breaking the Sabbath. (54)

Prince claims knowledge of the centrality of labor in the nation, and thereby argues that she should be considered an equal worker, not a slave. Just as work was the mechanism through which she resisted the tyranny of her various owners, work is the same mechanism she uses to demand citizenship. In this sense, work operates as more than employment; it implies freedom, equality, and mutual respect between the citizen and the nation.

At the core of the resistance model that Prince constructs is a commitment to black liberation which allows her to address a range of Christian resistance practices in her slave narrative. In contrast, only a small segment of Stowe’s novel deals with the resistance
potential engendered by the Caribbean slave past. However, Stowe’s depiction of Dinah echoes the verbal resistance and manipulation of labor that is so crucial to Prince’s narrative. Therefore, Stowe’s representation of Dinah as a marker of Caribbean resistance is useful for exploring the ways in which Caribbean resistance is deployed in an American context.

**Who’s in the Kitchen With Dinah?**

Like *The History of Mary Prince, Uncle Tom’s Cabin* appeared in the post-Haitian Revolution, pre-emancipation era – a moment in which the fears engendered by the Haitian Revolution were already part of the West Indian and American cultural imaginaries. However, unlike Prince’s text, Stowe’s text casts the Caribbean past in a problematic light that in many ways reflects the public fear that black rage and power elicited for Anglo-Americans. As a result, Dinah becomes the vehicle through which Stowe represents these anxieties. Dinah appears at a critical moment in the novel during which the narrative action shifts to Louisiana, a move which should not go unnoticed. As Lynn Wardley points out, this move establishes the region as a ‘foreign, decadent, and dangerous place.’

Stowe confirms the link between space and danger through the references to the ‘San Domingo hour’ which refers to the threat that unbridled black power represented in the minds of whites in the Caribbean and the United States. Consider, for example, Augustine St. Clair’s perspective on the Haitian Revolution: "If ever the San Domingo hour comes, Anglo Saxon blood will lead on the day. Sons of white fathers, with all our haughty feelings burning in their veins, will not always be bought and sold and traded. They will rise and raise with them their mother’s race.”

That this conversation takes place in New Orleans is crucial to
understanding Stowe’s use of the trans-Atlantic past. Historian Julius Scott points out that Saint Domingue had lasting ramifications for both blacks and whites in America, generally, and those in New Orleans specifically:

...officials barred blacks from Saint Domingue from entering Louisiana because of a recent series of poisonings of slave owners which they thought might spread to the mainland. Similar regulations were instituted in 1790, but despite structures against the introduction of slaves or free people of color from French colonies, New Orleans remained the destination for large numbers of both descriptions during the Haitian Revolution. White refugees brought trusted slaves with them, or, in some cases, sent them ahead. In addition, free coloreds constituted as many as one-third of the 10,000 refugees from the West Indies who settled in Louisiana between 1792 and 1808.\textsuperscript{40}

Stowe’s construction of New Orleans as an illicit and possibly dangerous space draws directly from the historical influx of West Indian slaves and refugees.

It is this narrative of white hysteria about black rage and poisoning that informs Stowe’s creation of Dinah and her ominous presence in the kitchen. If, ostensibly, Stowe uses the disorder of Dinah’s kitchen to decry slavery’s encroachment into the domestic sphere,\textsuperscript{41} she unwittingly constructs the foundation for an examination of insurgent domesticity based on folk knowledge and poisoning practices. Wardley suggests that Dinah is in some way constructed as a conjurer: "Stowe’s belief in the force of inspired possessions cannot be read simply as an interested embrace of the mystical nature of commodities ... It must also be reassessed within the context of the numerous subcultural practices in the nineteenth-century United States, such as the ongoing art of conjure."\textsuperscript{42} Although Wardley’s reading is extremely useful, her argument looks only at African retentions primarily as a source for white appropriation, and thus forecloses the consideration
of how these practices articulate black agency. I argue that we should move away from the context of the United States and look instead to the Caribbean to understand how Stowe used that revolutionary past to produce a narrative of fear and food poisoning.

I argue that insurgent domesticity refocuses attention on the link between cultural retentions and black resistance. In particular, insurgent domesticity depends on the common woman’s location in the economy of oppression, her realization that she has the means and desire to resist, and, the use of an alternative discourse of knowledge based on African survivals and folk patterns. Because women constituted a large percentage of house servants, they had the increased opportunity to learn and manipulate the rules of nineteenth-century domesticity. The folk knowledge of herbs and conjuring, along with the knowledge of the ‘ways of white folks,’ increasingly paved the way for acts of defiance against the master class with the very tools that the master class owned. Furthermore, acts of insurgent domesticity are increased by the close quarters of the Big House. As Eugene Genovese points out, "The Big House itself often resembled a battlefield. If closeness bred affection and warmth, it also bred hatred and violence." 43 The conflicts between mammies and mistresses proved to be fertile ground for acts of resistance within the Big House, and although the genesis of insurgent domesticity is rooted in the circumscribed private space of the white home, slave women’s rearticulation of domesticity constitutes the basis for a gendered pattern of quotidian resistance.

Stowe indicates her knowledge of African cultural practices in The Key to Uncle Tom’s Cabin. Stowe writes that Africans were "... believers in spells, in fetish and obi,’ in the ‘evil eye,’ and other singular influences, for which probably there is an origin in the
peculiarity of constitution."44 Though she does not name poisoning, acts of poisoning certainly fell under the rubric of obeahism.45 Though Stowe tries to cast such practices as mere superstition, obeah and poisonings represented a complex mode of knowledge and redress for the enslaved. As historian Philip Morgan points out, poisoning plots greatly altered the slave’s perception of their experience: "A major development that took place in the metaphysics of the slave community in response to the enforced coexistence with other African groups and to the grave, everyday problems of dealing with harsh taskmasters, was an expanded role for the realm of the lesser spirits, particularly those deemed useful in injuring others."46 Historian Barbara Bush writes: "It was generally believed by planters that certain slaves, particularly old women, had an exclusive knowledge of herbs and plants which could be used as medicine but also for more sinister purposes."47 From the Caribbean to the United States, the perceived threat of African-based knowledge systems was ever-present, thus prompting a member of the Jamaican Committee to make the following statement, "the skill of some Negroes in the art of poisoning has been noticed ever since the colonists became acquainted with them."48 And because the effects of poisoning were so closely linked to symptoms of other illnesses, namely cholera and yellow fever, it was sometimes difficult to trace the perpetrator.

As a mode of insurgent domesticity, poisoning allowed the perpetrators to strike a balance between white’s notions of acceptable conduct, and the slave’s own version of acceptable behavior. Such a balance usually forced the perpetrator to participate in a masquerade. Bush notes: "Domestic servants in the West Indies were frequently cited as being particularly difficult .... Of all slaves, domestics probably exhibited the greatest degree
of duality of behavior. Outwardly they conformed and adopted white culture to a greater degree than the more autonomous field slaves, while covertly they rejected the system. Paradoxically, the most favored slaves, the house slaves, were often the vanguard of slave resistance at all levels. To be sure, it is precisely the closeness and tenuous ‘trust’ between master and slave that move St. Clare to praise Dinah because she "gets you a capital dinner" (184) without ever allowing for the fact that his dinners could present an opportunity for Dinah’s resistance. Perhaps such perceived ‘trust’ and culinary admiration were at work for one female slave who according to one Mississippi slave owner, turned the kitchen into a site of resistance:

[Alcey] systematically disobeyed orders and destroyed the greater part of the provisions given to her for the table. No special notice was taken, so she resolved to show more plainly that she was tired of the kitchen. Instead of getting the chickens from the coop, as usual, she unearthed from some corner an old hen that had been sitting for six weeks, and served her up as a fricassee ... She achieved her object for she was sent to the field the next day. We are very sorry for she was the most accomplished cook whom we had in Mississippi.50

Also frightening for planters is the way in which information regarding resistance movements traveled throughout slave communities. Although the rumors outweighed the actual incidents, the fear attributed to poisoning plots reverberated throughout the Caribbean, South Carolina, Virginia, and Louisiana. So great was the fear of poisoning in Louisiana that in 1763, the Superior Council outlawed the importation of blacks from St. Domingue because they feared the integration of poisoners with the general slave population. Consider, for example, the case of Sarah Basset, a slave from Bermuda, who was accused of poisoning her owner and his family. Basset was executed a year later in 1730 in Crow Lane Bermuda.
Basset's exploits and death became a part of the local folklore, and perhaps her story traveled across the Atlantic to South Carolina, which was partially settled by colonists from Bermuda. Not surprisingly, South Carolina also became a site of poisoning activity. There were numerous executions of those believed to be associated with poisoning scares, and in 1741, a man was executed for poisoning a white infant.51 The South Carolina press fueled the public's fears with reports that the "Negroes have begun the hellish act of poisoning."52 But perhaps what is most important is that the whites eventually realized the potency of the slaves' knowledge. D. Alexander Green, a South Carolina physician, states that "the Negro slaves here seem to be but too well acquainted with the Vegetable poisons (whether they gain that knowledge in this province or before they leave Africa I know not, tho I imagine the Latter)."53 But despite the efforts to stem the tide of West Indian blacks, the networks of communication remained a vital component of transatlantic, underground exchange.

In the case of Uncle Tom's Cabin, Dinah's presence in the novel challenges the perceived authority of white ways of knowing. Consider, for example, Dinah's response to Ophelia's impending visit: "Dinah had heard, from various sources, what was going on, and resolved to stand on defensive and conservative ground – mentally determined to oppose and ignore every new measure, without any actual and observable contest" (181). Dinah's resolve symbolizes the posturing of the trickster figure who outwardly conforms, while inwardly plotting to disrupt domestic power relations. Dinah's reaction is also more in keeping with the common woman's perspective on labor and space. Though the kitchen is generally conceived of as a site of ownership and subservience, Dinah reverses this pattern by essentially making it her own space designed specifically to suit her own needs: "The more
drawers and closets there were, the more hiding-holes could Dinah make for the accommodation of old rages, hair-combs, old shoes, ribbons, cast-off artificial flowers, and other articles of vertu, wherein her soul delighted" (181).

Moreover, Dinah replaces dominant ideologies of domesticity with her own order, designed specifically to suit her needs:

Seated around her were various members of that rising race with which a Southern household abounds, engaged in shelling peas ... and other preparatory arrangements, – Dinah every once in a while interrupting her meditations to give a poke, or a rap on the head, to some of the young operators, with the pudding-stick that lay be her side. In fact, Dinah ruled over the wooly heads of the younger members with a rod of iron, and seemed to consider them born for no earthly purpose but to ‘save her steps,’ as she phrased it. (180)

Dinah’s control over the space simultaneously marks her rejection of the principles of domesticity and sets the stage for her ongoing battle with Ophelia over these principles.

The significance of Dinah’s resistance has to be read in the context of the competing representations of the common woman available in the novel. For example, Aunt Chloe momentarily invokes the narrative function of the common woman through her efforts to earn money to buy her husband’s freedom, but generally speaking, her actions never place her outside the boundaries of the sentimental ideal. Consider, for example, the two very different ways in which Aunt Chloe and Dinah deploy the use of sass in the conversations with white women. Early in the novel, Aunt Chloe recounts a near quarrel with Mrs. Shelby regarding the food preparation for an important dinner party. In retelling the story, Aunt Chloe makes it clear that she takes pride in being ‘sarcastic’:

Yer mind dat ar great chicken pie I made when we guv de dinner to General Knox? I and Missis, we come pretty near quarrelling about dat ar crust ... she
wanted me to do dis way, and she wanted me to do dat way; and finally, I got
kinder sarcy, and says I, Now, Missis, do jist look at den beautiful white
hands o' yourn, with long fingers and all a sparkling with rings ... and look
at my great black stumpin' hands. Now, don't ye think that dat de Lord must
have meant me to make de pie-crust, and you to stay in de parlor? Dar! I was
jist so sarcy.... (21)

For Aunt Chloe, this momentary rebuke and territorial claim make her sassy; however, this
display places her squarely in the realm of paternalistic behavior that calls for the slave's
concurrent acceptance of their place and adoration of the slave master. However, in a similar
scene between Ophelia and Dinah, Dinah's sass allows her to question the very basis of
paternalism. In responding to Ophelia's queries about the kitchen, Dinah refuses to be
ruffled and replies, "What does ladies know 'bout work?" (182). In this instance, not only
does she sass Ophelia, but she also suggests that white women are inherently lazy and
subsequently, inverts the master/slave relationship by suggesting that masters are dependent
on slaves. Dinah's actions indicate a skillful manipulation of the power structure engendered
by Stowe's model of domesticity. Her disorder drastically counters the rules of ideal
domestic settings. But more importantly, just as her belongings do not have a proper place,
Dinah refuses to recognize her proper place in the slave economy. While Stowe's model for
ideal behavior depends on Christian subservience, Dinah subverts this rhetoric through her
refusal to be bound by paternalistic expectations.

But in the context of the very specific patterns of resistance via food poisoning and
harmful occult practices, Dinah's presence and attack on model behavior take on an even
more ominous tone. Consider, for example, the importance of the findings from Ophelia's
inspection through Dinah's drawers: "... she found a nutmeg-grater and two or three nutmegs,
a Methodist hymn book ... a paper of tobacco and a pipe ... some twine and darning-needles, and several broken papers, from which sundry sweet herbs were sifting into the drawer" (182). I draw attention to these two items in particular – the Methodist hymn book and the sundry sweet herbs–because it is a useful pairing with which to examine the radical nature of Dinah’s disorder. The symbolic currency of the hymn book and the herbs speaks to the collision of normalized (white) systems of knowledge and the knowledge of herbs and poisoning in operation throughout the slave economy. This uneasy pairing represents the coexistence of Christianity and narratives of poisoning and resistance. Such a coupling jeopardizes the narrative of Christian passivity that Stowe privileges in the novel. As seen by Tom’s Christian long-suffering, Stowe uses Christianity as a pacifying presence in the lives of her black characters. However, the presence of African retentions and resistance practices destabilize Christianity’s function by representing an active protest to slavery.

Dinah and Ophelia’s exchange in the kitchen scene also calls attention to the complexities of representing black females as resisting subjects. Dinah’s actions indicate a total disregard for domesticity and white power, as seen by Ophelia’s entrance into Dinah’s territory: "When Miss Ophelia entered the kitchen, Dinah did not rise, but smoked on in sublime tranquility, regarding her movements obliquely out of the corner of her eye, but apparently intent only on the operations around her" (181). Dinah’s reaction and her presence as a whole represent a set of dangers to the carefully constructed world that Stowe creates. To begin with, Dinah’s positioning in the St. Clare household has too profound of an impact on the white family members around her. Given that her dinners were in "perfect order, and in a style of preparation with which an epicure could find no fault" (180), Dinah’s
potential for influence makes her a threat to white bodies based on the ever-present potential for poisoning.

But more important than her closeness to white bodies is the complicated nature of the relationship between her representation and the sentimental mission of the novel. Dinah is absent for the remainder of the novel, even when the slaves from the St.Clare household are sold, because she resists sentimentalization. All of the black characters in the novel are in some way rendered sympathetic and therefore palatable to Stowe’s white readers. Even Pru’s drunkenness and Cassy’s rage can be explained away under the guise of tormented motherhood. However, Dinah’s characterization offers no such opportunity for sympathetic identification. The struggle for territory in the kitchen is a useful metaphor for explaining how Dinah is dealt with in the novel. Though Dinah is an identifiable force in the household, she is only represented during moments of contestation, a position which no other black woman in the text occupies. Therefore, it is only when Dinah is at her most threatening that she is visible. Dinah’s invisibility throughout the remainder of the text is directly related to representations of more acceptable black characters. In Uncle Tom’s Cabin, acceptable representations of black characters are constructed within conventional U.S. strategies of resistance, most notably, literacy and maternity. For Stowe, then, only loving mulatto mothers and literate mulatto males slaves, Eliza and George, respectively, are visible. In the end, Dinah’s presence is contained by the continued visibility of more acceptable images of blackness and she is erased from the text because her threat may reach too far outside of the boundaries of sentimentality and respectable black behavior.
We can also read Stowe’s anxiety about representations of the female resisting subject through her linkage of the narratives of food poisoning and maternity. When poisoning involves black resistance to white power, it is narrated abstractly, only through veiled descriptions of an unorganized kitchen, blood-stained clothes, and sundry sweet herbs. However, when poisoning only involves black bodies, as it does for Cassy, it becomes less of a threat and more of a logical response to a brutal situation. The conjoined narratives of tragedy and motherhood focus attention on Cassy’s powerlessness and victimization:

In the course of a year, I had a son born. O, that child! – how I loved it! But I had made up my mind, – yes, I had. I would never again let a child live to grow up! I took the little fellow in my arms, when he was two weeks old, and kissed him, and cried over him; and when I gave him laudanum, and held him close to my bosom, while he slept to death. How I mourned and cried over it! and who ever thought dreamed that it was anything but a mistake, that had made me give it laudanum? but it’s one of the few things that I am glad of now .... After a while, the cholera came ... and I, I, though I went down to death’s door, I lived! Then I was sold .... and then this wretch bought me, and brought me here. (218)

In this episode, Stowe makes some effort to normalize poisoning by placing it within the context of a tragic maternal narrative. She is first able to render Cassy as a sympathetic figure by recounting her past sufferings. And though Cassy does not repent, Stowe is able to extract some justice for the infanticide by placing Cassy on Legree’s plantation. Essentially, Stowe is able to narrate poisoning only when she can regulate it. Poisoning as an act of outright resistance to white power cannot be adequately voiced in the novel. Indeed, in Stowe’s world of virtuous, slave-owning women, retributive acts against the master class are not even necessary. As a result, Dinah’s kitchen stands as a frightening glimpse of the
future if slavery were to continue. Because Stowe is writing within the limits of the sentimental novel, she cannot politicize a voice as resistant as Dinah’s.

The common woman in antebellum literature existed on highly charged ground that was largely mediated by the era’s most popular forms of literary production – the slave narrative and the sentimental novel. But despite the restrictions, the common woman emerged as a radical voice that drastically altered the received notions of black women’s subjectivity. Importantly, the use of the Caribbean in these texts gives us a new methodology with which to examine antebellum resistance efforts. Secondly, the respective constructions of resistant subjectivity reveal that the freedom and radicalness of the narrative functions of the common woman were crucial in destabilizing the tenor of antebellum master/slave relationships. And though Stowe’s construction of the common woman is not constructed around the principle of freedom, Dinah nevertheless challenges the definition of acceptable black behavior. What these two models have in common is a sustained resistance to white superiority and enslavement within the specific context of Caribbean slavery. However, these representations of the enslaved common woman have important implications for the development of the resistance potential of the common woman’s struggle for liberty in a post-bellum context. As we will see in the following chapter, the common woman’s manipulation of labor and non-traditional approach to uplift have a lasting impact on black women’s efforts to attain liberty and the rights of citizenship.
CHAPTER ONE
NOTES

1. For an expanded reading of black women's relationship to idealized domesticity, see Claudia Tate, *Domestic Allegories of Political Desire: The Black Heroines Text at the Turn of the Century* (Cambridge: Oxford University Press, 1992).


6. Gilroy, 16.


11. Nanny of the Maroons led an eighteenth-century maroon band and now is now regarded as a national heroine in Jamaica. Nanny Grigg was an important figure in the 1816 slave rebellion in Barbados. Through her leadership role, Nanny Grigg conveyed news of the developments in the Haitian Revolution to other slaves and also mobilized a group of male slaves to support the Revolution's principles and actions. Hilary McD Beckles, *Centering Woman: Gender Discourses in Caribbean Slave Society* (Kingston: Ian Randle Publishers, 1999) 163.


15. Braxton, 22.


18. For an exploration of the ‘social death’ of slavery, see Orlando Patterson, Slavery and Social Death. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982).


20. The only other representations of the transatlantic slave trade are found in The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Gustavus Vassa, the African (1789) and Martin Delaney’s Blake, or The Huts of America (1859-1861).


22. See Braxton and Mullen.


27. For a reading of the wilderness trope in spirituals and slave narratives, see Melvin Dixon, *Ride Out the Wilderness* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1987).


29. Qtd. in Peterson, 28.

30. Davis, 127.


33. Baker, 35

34. Baker, 37

35. Beckles, 141.

36. Beckles, 141.

37. Beckles, 185.


42. Wardley, 207.

44. Qtd. in "Changing the Letter: The Yokes, the Jokes of Discourse, or, Mrs. Stowe, Mr. Reed," in *Slavery and the Literary Imagination*, ed. Deborah E. McDowell and Arnold Rampersad, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989) 27.

45. Obeahism is a system of magic that is also commonly referred to as "gris-gris" and "hoodoo." This system blends Christianity and African religious practices.


48. Qtd. in Bush, 76.


51. Morgan, 613.


53. Qtd. in Morgan, 617.
TWO
VENUS RISING: THE DAWN OF RECONSTRUCTION AND THE RISE OF THE WORKING-CLASS AESTHETIC

As we have seen in the previous chapter, literary representations of the common woman are very much invested in the abolitionist struggle for black liberation. The discussion of the common woman in this chapter follows that activist tradition by locating resistance in the struggle to access the rights of citizenship. The shift from an emphasis on emancipation to an emphasis on citizenship parallels the historic changes that were taking place in the American nation. Indeed, the years between 1859 and 1892 – the publication dates of Eliza Potter’s *A Hairdresser’s Experience in High Life* and Frances Harper’s *Iola Leroy*, respectively – mark a monumental period in the African American struggle for freedom: this period included the Harper’s Ferry Raid in 1859, the commencement of the Civil War in 1861, the passage of the Thirteenth Amendment in 1865, the end of Reconstruction in 1877, and finally, the institution of Jim Crow legislation in the 1880s. Not surprisingly, African American cultural production dramatized these sweeping changes, as seen by the publication of such foundational texts as Frederick Douglass’s *My Bondage and My Freedom*, Harriet Wilson’s *Our Nig*, and Harriet Jacobs’s *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*. As the criticism suggests, these texts, especially Douglass’s and Jacobs’s, were instrumental in establishing their authors as representatives of the race. Despite the cultural currency of the these texts, I turn my attention to the development of the common woman as a counter to the emphasis on representational literary figures. As an alternative to
representational figures, the common woman rejects genteel appeals for equality in favor of aggressive demands for equality. I discuss this development through an analysis of a lesser known 1859 text, *A Hairdresser's Experience in High Life*, and Frances Harper's fictionalized common woman, Aunt Linda, in *Iola Leroy* as examples of the common woman's radical intervention in the struggle for equality and citizenship.

Both Eliza Potter and Harper's Aunt Linda have been overlooked as subjects of critical analysis because they do not easily fit any of the preexisting paradigms of nineteenth-century black women's writing. Ultimately, what is missing from discussions of Potter and Aunt Linda is a critical approach that allows for an understanding of the complex way in which both Potter and Aunt Linda narrate agency from the very specific subject positions as African American common women. I argue that Potter, in particular, complicates our understanding of black women's writing by emphasizing pleasure. Although Potter expresses pride and pleasures, seemingly incomprehensible emotions given the racial climate, she nevertheless constructs a politicized voice. I argue that we should read *A Hairdresser's Experience in High Life* as an instructional text for the working-class common woman, written to assess the conflicted nature of freedom. And, to borrow from contemporary feminist frameworks, I will also argue that this text marks Potter’s efforts to politicize the personal. Working-class individualism then becomes the means through which she tests the limits of social control and critiques white structures of racism and conservative black middle class ideologies alike. As a result, she uses her own position as an independent, free black common woman to develop a working-class consciousness in which the individual is held up as the agent of social change. That Potter's autobiography appears between the era
of the slave narrative and the uplift novel is important because she privileges economic individualism above issues of collective uplift. She rarely evokes community, nor does she ever attempt to rise to a leadership role in African American life. Indeed, she would not be able to because she so easily invokes the narrative functions of the common woman who always already functions outside of the traditional African American responses to racism, slavery, and uplift. In this chapter, I want to explore Potter as illustrative of three aspects of the common woman's resistant subjectivity: rejection of the patriarchal family, aggressive articulations of her rights, and finally and perhaps most importantly, her use of labor as a tool for manipulating the culture of oppression.

Perhaps what is most intriguing about the text is the way in which Potter constructs economic individuality. As I have pointed out, most nineteenth-century autobiographers constructed themselves within the discourse of tragedy, but Potter constructs herself within a narrative that centers around experiencing the pleasures that her labor has afforded her. I do not use pleasure only in its most colloquial sense, but to mean a type of social and political empowerment that leads to a heightened sense of agency. Considering manifestations of pleasure in these texts illustrates a set of issues that have been given scant attention in the scholarship on nineteenth-century black women's writing. Potter lends a new voice to black women's writing because she is free in a moment when most black women are not. Her physical freedom – from slavery and a boundedness to a particular space – allows her a freedom of psyche to map the contours of working-class black women's lives in terms of self-gratification, or pleasure. As I discuss in detail below, pleasure manifests itself not only
as the joy experienced in self-ownership but also as the freedom that the common woman has to speak against racial injustice.

Aunt Linda, the common woman in Harper’s *Iola Leroy*, recently freed under the Emancipation Proclamation, struggles to use this same model to access the rights of liberty, and by extension, the rights of citizenship. Though Aunt Linda’s exploits may not be as glamourous as Potter’s, her characterization continues the model of economic individualism established in Potter’s text. Aunt Linda is rendered in a distinctly folk context, which operates as an alternative to the intellectual uplift model that dominates the novel. Pleasure functions quite similarly in *Iola Leroy*, insofar as it centers on Aunt Linda’s freedom to critique both inter- and intra-racial dynamics, a freedom which is definitely mediated by her role as a common woman.

My focus on the common woman as a site of resistance stands in direct contrast to the more traditional mechanisms offered in representational texts. Although Douglass’s *Narrative* and Jacobs’s *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* are important in understanding the genealogy of African American literature, they are somewhat limiting because of the narrow construction of success illustrated in their autobiographies. The quest for literacy and the desire for an ideal domestic setting are the controlling narratives in those texts. Similarly, narrations of tragedy and racialized abuse figure prominently in those texts. However, investigating representations of the common woman allows us to explore alternative experiences in the African American struggle for social and economic freedom. And by extension, we can examine the ways in which the functions of the common woman intersect with the larger frameworks of uplift and domestic ideologies.
THE POLITICS OF PLEASURE

As Ishmael Reed suggests, pleasure is "that which makes life easier, no matter how
difficult the circumstances under which this pleasure is experienced." Like Reed, I argue
that African Americans, both enslaved and free, use pleasure as a subversive mechanism that
effects resistance and a freedom of expression regardless of possible repercussions. Such
manifestations of pleasure are evidenced in work songs, spirituals, and quilting and represent
an attempt to make tolerable the intolerable circumstances of slavery. This does not mean
that pleasure is merely an escape mechanism. Rather, pleasure is a mode of redress which
leads to a heightened sense of the self as a resisting subject.

Audre Lorde's discussion of the 'erotic' is particularly useful for exploring the
resistance potential inherent in pleasure. Lorde describes the erotic as "a measure between
the beginnings of our own sense of self and the chaos of our strongest feelings. It is an
internal sense of gratification to which, once we have experienced it, we know we can aspire.
For having experienced the fullness of this depth of feeling and recognizing its power, in
honor and self-respect we can require no less of ourselves." Lorde explains further, "in touch
with the erotic, I become less willing to accept powerlessness, or those other supplied states
of being which are not native to me, such as resignation, despair, self-effacement ... self-
denial." The paradigm that Lorde constructs suggests that the erotic is located in a sense of
self-knowledge and power that is accessible to all. The relationship between the erotic and
pleasure is premised on an intense engagement with the self which privileges individual
agency and opposition to injustice, a phenomena that resonates throughout the texts that I
discuss. Admittedly, I do not discuss "the erotic" in the same way that Lorde does. However,
the focus on the pleasure of particular modes of resistance that Lorde associates with the erotic are indeed central to my discussion. Ultimately, articulations of pleasure are always infused with elements of resistance.

Pleasure also involves a general comfort with the black body and spirit despite being in a hostile world that thrives on its attempts to devalue black life. Carla Peterson reminds us that black cultural production is invested in constructing an aesthetic that affirms the connections between body and spirit. Peterson writes: "... the culture, rituals, folkways, and writings developed by enslaved Africans and their descendants bear witness to African Americans’ ongoing struggle to reconstruct body and spirit and endow this newly formed entity with beauty." Within the context of the struggle for freedom and liberty that is at the core of African American writing, pleasure then assumes a politicized function. In this vein, we can begin to understand the radicalness of Potter’s text as one of the earliest, if not the first, to explore the politics of pleasure.

Incidents in Antebellum High Life

In her own words, Eliza Potter’s 1859 memoir, A Hairdresser’s Experience in High Life, is a modest effort to narrate her experiences as a hairdresser to some of America’s wealthiest residents. Potter makes clear her ‘mission’ in The Author’s Appeal:

If the marble statues that adorn the riches of lordly mansions could open their mouths, how would they outrival all poetry and romance in the incidents they could proclaim! and could the nuptial couch with its silken hangings, unfold its memories, could we bear to listen to its disclosures? But nowhere do hearts betray themselves more unguardedly than in the private boudoir, where the hairdresser’s mission makes her a daily attendant. Why, then, should not the hairdresser write, as well as the physician and the clergyman? She will
tell her story in simpler language; but it will be none the less truthful, none
the less strange. (iv)\(^5\)

And so with decidedly sensationalist language, Potter begins a memoir that chronicles the
daily lives and reveals the countless shortcomings of her white clients, while revealing only
the barest of details about her own life. Although Potter's *A Hairdresser's Experience in
High Life* intervenes in debates about the contested nature of freedom for free blacks in
antebellum America, it is often overlooked because it does not fit any of the preexisting
paradigms of nineteenth-century black women's writing.\(^6\) Likewise, Potter does not attempt
to construct herself as a race leader and only marginally invokes anti-slavery debates.
Perhaps what is most striking considering the tenor of both African American and Anglo-
American women's writing at the time is that Potter completely rejects any emphasis on
domesticity. Although she is married, she mentions her husband only three times and is
completely silent about her two children. Though her silence turns to harsh critiques when
she speaks about Anglo-American domestic arrangements, she also seems to mistrust typical
constructions of domesticity in the African American community. Instead of a domestic
narrative, Potter offers an account of her travels as a hairdresser to some of the world's
wealthiest women. Potter also discusses at length her enviable wardrobe that she has
acquired as a result of years of hard work. In many ways, Potter marks the advent of a black
consumer class, but her silk dresses would have certainly seemed a frivolous waste of time
and resources in light of the urgent needs of the overwhelming majority of blacks who were
enslaved throughout the South. Therefore, if we try to understand Potter's text within the
critical parameters of nineteenth-century black women's writing to which we have grown
accustomed, we would fail miserably and be left searching for signs of authentic blackness everywhere.

Recently, critics have viewed this text as an insider/outsider autobiography in which Potter reveals very little about herself in order to uncover the lives of those for whom she works. Sharon Dean argues that this text establishes the context for the behind-the-scenes, tell-all autobiographies that narrators such as Elizabeth Keckley would later write.⁷ Rafia Zafar also contends that Potter's autobiography fits squarely within this genre. However, though Potter deliberately withholds information about herself, I contend that the textual details nevertheless reveal a conscious effort to create a black self. Unlike Dean who argues that Potter's autobiography "lacks an overt interest in defining a black self, or in struggling to appreciate that identity,"⁸ I argue that if we shift our perspective from what Potter reveals about her white clients to an evaluation of Potter's reaction to racial injustice, we can begin to understand the extent to which her story disrupts received notions about black feminist identities in the nineteenth century.

In her first chapter, aptly titled "My Debut," Potter immediately alerts her readers to the fact that her text is quite different from traditional black, female autobiographies. She gives her readers no indication of her parentage or birthplace, thus disallowing full knowledge of her personal history. Instead, Potter begins with a commentary that brings to bear the complexities of personal and domestic freedom. Consider, for example, her critique of the limits of traditional women's roles:

I was brought up in New York, and went out, at an early age, to earn my living, in the service of people of ton. For some years, this occupation was agreeable to me; but at length, I wearied of it, and being at liberty to choose
my own course, I determined to travel, and to gratify my long-cherished desire to see the world ... So I started as soon as possible toward the setting sun .... however, my journey was suddenly arrested by a sort of ceremony called matrimony, which I entered into very naturally, and became quieted down under it for a length of time, just as naturally ... I suppose, I need not be ashamed to own having committed a weakness, which has, from the beginning of time, numbered the most respectable of the earth among its victims. But it matters not how or why after a season of quiet or unquiet ... the desire for roving again took possession of me. (11-12)

Such statements of restlessness and desire for adventure immediately alert her readers to the fact that Potter is not restricted by physical boundaries. Indeed, she travels extensively throughout the United States and Europe. She eventually settles in Cincinnati, which represents a very real border in the lives of African Americans. Given that Cincinnati was in a state bordering Southern slave states and by 1850 had the largest free African American community in the Northwest Territory, her choice to settle there in and of itself articulates a very specific decision to situate herself in a decidedly black environment. Further, the border that separates Ohio freedom from Kentucky enslavement corresponds to Potter’s own liminal status as a free person of color in antebellum America. As historians James and Lois Horton point out, freedom for antebellum blacks was a contested phenomenon: "As slavery evolved and the numbers of slaves increased, especially in the South, and legal measures for the protection of slaveholders’ property rights were established, free blacks were increasingly seen as a threat to those rights. Thus, the development of slavery was closely tied to the deteriorations of the rights of free blacks ... Those blacks who did acquire freedom were not truly free, their rights were severely restricted by special regulations devised to control them." As a resident of Ohio, Potter would no doubt have been aware of such restrictive mechanisms, especially considering that by 1820 Ohio had begun to enforce its Black Laws,
among which was a law that required blacks to post a five hundred dollar bond guaranteeing good behavior and gainful employment. Potter underscores the value of her freedom in emphasizing that she had the liberty to choose, a liberty made possible in large part by her status as a working woman.

Potter’s economic independence allows her to dramatize the realistic tension between freedom and liberty that was being played out in American race relations. While the two words may seem virtually synonymous, I argue that liberty is more closely linked to issues of equality and citizenship. Given that the neo-slavery of Jim Crow laws was instituted after slaves were freed, it is quite obvious that freedom from slavery did not easily translate to liberty and the rights of citizenship. Potter’s efforts to construct herself as an autonomous subject are infused with a sense of Republican zeal. Although such a suggestion may initially seem to be a white-washing of the common woman’s efforts to articulate black resistance and survival, consider historians James Horton and Lois Horton’s perspective on the African American response to Republican fervor:

The availability of cheap land dampened Europeans’ willingness to accept extended indentures or to work for wages any longer than was necessary to become landholders. This propensity for personal independence encouraged a political commitment to individuality that by the late eighteenth century came to be known as the Republican ideal. Ironically this passion for personal independence grew simultaneously with a reliance on a system of racially defined slave labor that became the very antithesis of freedom. The presence of an enslaved African people provided the contrast by which white Americans defined liberty. Black Americans, however, refused to accept a definition of liberty that excluded them.10

Horton’s analysis underscores the tension between freedom and liberty that was the undercurrent of social relations throughout antebellum America. Given this context, it is
apparent that for some, freedom meant the absence of slavery, which gave rise to a host of complex issues for blacks in antebellum America, especially free blacks. As a result, Potter, a free black woman, dramatizes the tension between freedom and liberty.

Liberty has a multi-layered designation in this text, as seen by Potter’s desire for movement and change, as well as her cavalier disavowal of marriage. I am also interested in another meaning that deals with issues of personal agency, or the freedom to do as one pleases, a meaning which gets to the core of the relationship between black pleasure and varying experiences of liberty. While I do not want to suggest that the tensions surrounding freedom and liberty are the ideological terrain of the common woman, I do, however, want to point to particular moments where the negotiation between liberty and freedom are specific to the common woman. For instance, black elites typically sought to maintain freedom through the respectable means of genteel behavior and ideal domesticity, which, more often than not, drastically reduced the possibilities for self-expression and the articulation of pleasure. In contrast, the common woman challenges these conventions through her investment in herself as a laboring subject and through her effacement of the domestic ideal. Potter does not need to evoke a narrative of superior female morality or ideal domesticity because her own economic independence and pleasures are enough to establish a liberty rooted in participation in the public sphere. Potter defends her economic independence and search for pleasure in stating: "I worked for my patrons for their money, and when I earned and got it, I did not ask them how I should spend it, what I should eat, drink or wear, or how I should dispose of my money" (282).
Likewise, a discourse on liberty is at work in the choices that Potter makes in disclosing her past. Potter’s silences immediately alert the reader to the extent to which she is committed to complicating her audience’s judgement of what a black woman should be. Published in 1859, the same year that Harriet Wilson’s *Our Nig* was published, which disclosed the life, tragedy, and domestic trials of its narrator, Potter’s text is noticeably silent about her own life. In many ways, I will argue, Potter’s silences are an effort to recover the black female from the ignominy imposed by slavery. Even though she is free, she registers her awareness of the sexualized corporeality of the black female body and protests the misuse of black women whenever possible. One such opportunity presents itself when Potter is aboard a river boat en route to Cincinnati from Canada. During the passage, Potter engages in a highly charged, verbal debate with a slave trader who appears to ‘favor’ a particular slave:

The number of our passengers had increased. Among the new ones was a negro trader, whose name was W.; he had with him a number of unfortunate beings in chains and shackles. They were destined for the Southern market, and were all emptied with the exception of one – a good-looking, well-formed girl, for whom he had obtained a cabin passage, and who was treated better than her unfortunate companions. Why? Because the slave trader doomed her to ignominy ... She had beauty enough to arouse the base lust of some Southern buyer. I objected to sit at a table with her - not through any feeling of superiority on my part ... but I thought if she came to the table her companions on the lower deck ought to have the same privilege ... my objection caused some disturbance ... Those of the passengers who were opposed to the system came to my aid, and Mr. W., not possessing arguments enough to silence me, thought his best plan was to brow beat me, and called me a meddler, an abolitionist, and many other such names. Not noticing these epithets, I pursued my way untroubled by anything he could say. (15-16)

Although such instances of public, anti-slavery critiques are unevenly interspersed throughout the text, they are nonetheless very telling for what they reveal about Potter’s
commitment to the African American community. For Potter, this instance of face-to-face aggression allows her to forge a connection with the oppressed group of blacks. Also, Potter's insistence that the slaves be treated equally, ("I thought if she came to the table her companions on the lower deck ought to have the same privilege"), indicates a critique of class and caste bias within the slave community. As Sharon Dean points out, Potter's critique is "oblique and ironical," but nevertheless confirms that she will use her liberty to wage a very personalized attack on slavery.¹¹

More importantly, this scene brilliantly illustrates the expression of a black female self outside of the dominant race and gender conventions. As seen by both her actions aboard the ship, specifically, and her willingness to openly debate a white male, Potter indicates that she is very much a vocal participant in debates generated throughout the public sphere and is not afraid of using her voice in the pursuit of justice. Given the expectations shared by many whites who believed that black women especially should maintain their place in society, Potter's aggressive and outspoken behavior contradicts gender and race-based restrictions within the larger society about acceptable forms of social engagement. But herein lies the key to understanding Potter's cultural function as a common woman--she does not have to seek approval from anyone. Her writing is not mediated by financial necessity, nor is she a race woman trying to galvanize sympathetic white readers in the struggle for justice. As a result, she chooses to disclose this one moment of empowerment to represent the very particular way in which she fights slavery and racism. In refusing to appeal to the benevolence of her readers, she affirms that black humanity is more than enough to justify freedom; witness her forthright response to an aggrieved slave owner: "The lady related to
me her loss and grievances [sic], but as I could not recognize the right of one human being to own another, I did not sympathize with her in the least" (17). Potter's actions constantly manipulate the expectations of her audience as she distances herself from them by eschewing the potential for cross-racial alliances.

Another anti-slavery moment occurs early in the text which has important implications for Potter's personal freedom. Potter reveals that she has helped a male slave escape to Canada, an act for which she was jailed for three months. Again, Potter speaks freely in a public forum as seen in her speech before the court: "I adhered to my integrity to the last, preferring to be tried with, and to die with (if necessary), those who had killed the body, rather than shrink from owning that I had boldly aided in rescuing the soul of an oppressed fellow-being. I said in reply to those who examined me, that I recognized no crime--meant in what I had done--meant none. My speech to the court resulted in my acquittal, and I was permitted to go free ever afterward, in both free and slave states" (19). This court scene has important implications for the way in which we understand the remainder of the text, the least of which is that it legally sanctions and reaffirms her freedom.

In choosing to narrate these incidents, indeed they are the only incidents about herself that she reveals in such detail, Potter establishes a reading strategy for the remainder of the text. In asserting black rights based on shared humanity, she decorpsorealizes the black female body by placing the rationale for freedom on the soul, not merely the body. Further, we can read the risks that she takes in revealing these scenes as evidence of her firm commitment to the fight for black rights. Though mobile, French-speaking black women
may not have been common in 1859, Potter’s actions nevertheless destroy any doubt that this text is to be read as anything other than a black woman’s working-class narrative.

Potter’s construction of a black woman’s working-class consciousness both advances and complicates the scope of black women’s labor. Like most black women, Potter began work as a domestic for a wealthy family, which eventually led to countless other positions, including work as a ladies’ maid and child’s nurse. Early on, Potter makes it clear that, though she may be in service to white employers, she is in no way servile. This is an important distinction insofar as it gives Potter the privilege of choice, which allows for self-control over her life and a greater degree of self-knowledge: "But, as I had a rather vagabond disposition, and loved change, I, soon after this, left the service of this pleasant family, and engaged again as a child nurse to a sister of this lady, who was soon to embark with her husband and family for Europe" (20). While in France, Potter learned the language and visited the Champ Elysees and the Tuillerie gardens, and by her own admission, she picked up French habits: "but finally, I regret to say, I became as French as the rest of them, and dancing on the Sabbath evening, after the day had been spent in strict observance of religious duty, no longer offended my notions of propriety" (22). Despite her proclivity for tourist attractions and dancing, Potter never forgets that her occupation and position in the world involve struggle, as she reveals during a disagreement over her wages: "I had a dispute with Mr.---- about wages ... He refused to give it to me, saying I need never expect to get any more from him than Paris wages. I was very indignant, and told him, in very plain words, what I thought of his conduct. Of course, after this scene, I left the gentleman’s service" (26). Though ready to return to the United States, she stayed in France to enjoy "many of the
amusements of Paris" (26). Potter's employment experience drastically alters perceptions of black women's labor in the antebellum era by emphasizing the element of choice. For Potter, choices and control over her labor become the defining principles of her liberty.

Perhaps Potter's most important choice was her decision to leave the relative security of her position as a ladies' maid for the new territory of hairdressing: "At the Countess M's I was very pleasantly situated, but found it necessary, in the service of a fashionable lady and her daughters, to understand hairdressing; so I improved the hours occupied by M'lle M's music lessons in this art of one of the best hair-dressers in Paris. Nothing but hair-dressing pleased my fancy for any length of time" (emphasis mine) (27). I emphasize this particular moment because it has important implications for her conceptions of labor. By indicating that she received some pleasure from her work, Potter extracts black labor from its meaning as an enforced condition and establishes it as a site of personal affirmation. Further, her decision not only points to her use of empowered pleasure as a means of determining her place, but it also both anticipates and revises the type of behavior that Booker T. Washington later famously advocated. Through her skillful use of her own leisure time, Potter continues to construct herself as a self-reliant woman. As opposed to Washington's theory that supported the political status quo, however, Potter's self-reliance was contingent on her equality with those she encountered. Consider the dynamics at work in her critique of social interaction in which she views her relationship to Europeans based more on class than race: "I had but ten dollars in the world, and at Gravesend, as well as anywhere else, I knew I should lose my friends as soon as they discovered I had no money.... I had health and a trade, and though I felt a little lazy, yet I went to work to recruit my exhausted treasury" (38).
Although some could say that her emphasis on class decentralizes race, I contend that Potter’s emphasis on money and labor is always based on her status as a black woman. Potter acknowledges that the freedom that she enjoys as a black woman is severely limited without money. Though she circulated freely in both Europe the United States, the Ohio Black laws are just one reminder of the often circumscribed freedom of free people of color. Essentially, a free black person without labor or money was at an increased risk of some measure of legalized attack. Her money and her ability to earn even more of it when necessary not only invokes the narrative function of the common woman’s skillful use of her own resources but also continues to ensure her freedom and liberty. In this context, money and freedom undergird her circulation in the public sphere.

Potter’s physical movement also marks her attempts to balance the material effects of middle class status against middle class ideology. Critic Rafia Zafar contends that Potter is well on her way to becoming a member of the burgeoning black middle class: "The talents for discerning falsehood and knowing where supporters can be found, of being able to know one’s employers while shielding oneself became Potter’s tickets to the middle class."12 Zafar’s argument is certainly an acute assessment of one of the many complexities of Potter’s text, but it only begins to touch the surface of what is actually a complex relationship that Potter has with middle class status, generally, and black middle class status, specifically. Potter has an opportunity to revel in the pleasures of her labor and critique both white and black efforts at social control after her belongings are burned in a fire. I quote at length Potter’s ruminations over the fire:
On the 12th of September I went back to Albany to get the balance of my money. It was the 18th before I got away from there. They seemed all perfectly astonished at the list of my clothes. Mr. F. was aghast at the idea of my paying thirty-five dollars for a moire antique dress, and said his wife never had a dress cost so much. I laughed, and told him I had a dress which cost me fifty dollars, and a mantle to suit which cost me fifty more; and if his highness pleased, I had a suit that cost me one hundred and fifty dollars.... It would have amused any person who knew the extent of my wardrobe, to be behind the door and see their wide-open eyes and hear their caught-up breath when they came to any articles more expensive than others; and when Mr. F. came on the list, to a velvet basquine trimmed with deep fringe, he seemed to think it was an impossibility ... I was never more amused in my life than at seeing the different railroad gentlemen pick up my list, look and shrink from it, as if it were an impossibility for a working-woman to have such a wardrobe. One of them seemed horrified at the very idea of my having ten silk dresses with me; but it afforded me a good deal of pleasure to let him know that I had as many more at home; but I told him that did not make any difference, as I had to get paid for what they, in their carelessness, burnt up; and it was nothing but carelessness, as I myself was an eyewitness. (100-101)

Potter's commentary on her efforts to be compensated for her property actually provides the basis for a critique of the relationship between Potter's use of pleasure and its relationship to the more conservative ideologies of the burgeoning black middle class.

African American middle class leaders urged a platform of frugality and restraint. Potter's contemporary, Maria Stewart, broaches the issue in her lectures: "It is true that the free people of color throughout the United States are neither bought nor sold, nor under the lash of the cruel driver; many obtain a comfortable support but few if any have an opportunity of becoming rich and independent; and the enjoyments we most pursue are as unprofitable to us as the spider's web or the floating bubbles that vanish into air." For Stewart, enjoyments are considered trivial in light of the obstacles faced by African Americans. Quite frequently, black newspapers printed editorials that also chastised African Americans for their lavish and seemingly excessive spending: "... has any man yet been held
in estimation on account of his fine dress? Is it the mark of prudence to put all our earnings upon our back?"¹⁴ Another focuses specifically on women’s attention to the self: "thousands of wretched females, who throng our streets, owe their degradation to a love of and a desire to be fashionably arrayed." Likewise, leaders urged African Americans to lead by example by "dressing with simplicity and ceasing to wear costly and useless ornaments."¹⁵ What these speeches and editorials indicate is that there is a direct contrast between respectable behavior for the race and the type of bodily adornment that Potter so thoroughly enjoys. But these same admonitions fail to recognize that Potter’s emphasis on clothing and bodily adornment is laden with subversive potential if we read it within the context of black expressive culture. More specifically, we can link the pleasure that Potter finds in clothing to some slaves’ penchant for ‘elite’ clothing styles. From daily activities to slave festivals, some slaves adopted elite dress not so much as to ape whites, but to express their own culture and ability to disrupt externally imposed restrictions. Shane White and Graham White argue that slave dress "disturbed the nuanced social order that clothing was supposed to display, blurring the borderlines between black and white, slave and free."¹⁶

For Potter, clothing is about autonomy and the liberties that it implies. At a time when most blacks were not paid for their labor, these belongings represent the materiality of that labor. While some black leaders would have certainly chastised her, it is apparent that Potter’s choices are based more on the pleasures of self-fashioning than on fulfilling a narrowly defined construction of black womanhood. Furthermore, I contend that Potter’s conception of freedom differs from black middle class ones. Consider, for example, a significant change in her travel plans regarding a popular black resort: "I had intended
stopping at the Yellow Springs that season, as many of our aristocracy were there; but concluded not to do so” (97, emphasis mine). Though she acknowledges a connection to black elites, her choice not to go is telling. Ultimately, her working-class immodesty, her proclivity for luxurious clothing, or generally speaking, the manifestations of her pleasure, all signal her ideological distance from black elites.

Equally important in Potter’s efforts to recover her property is the multi-layered element of resistance at work in Potter’s exchange with the railroad agent which not only captures her clever narration, but also effectively points out the ways in which experiences of black pleasure run counter to white expectations about African Americans’ role in the public sphere. Potter’s aggressive exchange with the agent would be difficult to believe if it were not indicative of a recognized pattern of black female verbal resistance. And as Zafar reminds us, this type of ‘dressing down’ is common occurrence in the text: "By ‘dressing down,’ we mean a scolding, if not a social leveling. To be dressed down is to be publicly divested of social garments—figuratively defrocked, unveiled, exposed.”

Also important in fully understanding the radical element of this scene is the way in which Potter critiques the limits of traditional female domesticity. Potter’s laughing response to the agent’s shock that "his wife never had a dress cost so much" destabilizes the assumed economic security of marital relationships, while also juxtaposing her economic capacity against his wife’s. That as an unmarried working-woman Potter can afford luxuries that a white male cannot or perhaps will not purchase for his wife is problematic. That a black woman can afford such luxuries is even more disturbing for the agent. But in typical fashion, Potter demands that she be treated with equal respect. In so doing, she reaffirms that
for women, especially black women, economic independence is key in determining the tenor of social relationships. It therefore comes as no surprise that she takes pride and pleasure in her ability to effect change: "Every morning I went down to the office after breakfast, staid there till dinner time; went to dinner, returned, and staid there till night; and I assure you my tongue never stopped nor was I tired commenting on all that came under my notice ..."(101).

Likewise, her efforts are of signal importance to the black female body insofar as the comparison between the agent’s wife and Potter’s alludes to the antebellum belief that black female bodies were either lascivious objects or grotesque workhorses. And if we are to believe, as do Shari Benstock and Suzanne Feriss, that fashion and clothing "having served traditionally as the cultural sign of the feminine,"18 then Potter’s actions have radically subversive implications. We can read her refusal to be denied and her insistence on obtaining the value of her clothing as an act of recovering, reclothing the black female body that has been both figuratively and literally disrobed by years of enslavement. Potter obtains the monetary value of her clothes to prove that she is a free black woman. Her articulation of pleasure thus rises to a politicized act of recovering dignity for the black female body.

Potter’s transatlantic and domestic migrations also reflect her efforts to depathologize the black female body by refashioning the migrating body from an enslaved object to a laboring subject. Given this emphasis on travel, her text both resonates with and retreats from conventions of black women’s travel narratives of this same period. Mary Mason has identified a tradition of social activism in black women’s travel narratives: "Travel or journey becomes synonymous with action and commitment to social change.... Afro-American women’s travel literature was established at the center of public discourse: in the
slave narratives' role in the national debate about slavery and in the spiritual autobiography's role in the discussion of women in the church."19 Along similar lines, Carla Peterson suggests that this level of social activism complicates black women's relationship to home and whiteness and argues that these issues "...were of particular importance to black women in the antebellum period as they toured communities constructed by 'our people' as well as more foreign locales--as ethnographic observers, cultural workers in the fields of abolitionism and racial uplift, or lecturers to promiscuous assemblies, exposing themselves to the public gaze."20

The frameworks set up by Mason and Peterson are extremely useful in discerning Potter's intervention in this genre. Though Potter's travels offer her opportunities to effect change, they are as much about her own pleasure as they are about activism. Indeed, she is definitely pleased about the opportunities that travel affords her: "Here I had an opportunity for seeing still more of England. I visited all the watering-places in my capacity of hairdresser, Dover, Brighton, Broadstairs' Bend; saw the curiosities of every place and was delighted with everything ..." (37). To some extent, she even enjoys being the object of the gaze: "It was curious to see and hear the people wonder who I was, and what country or nation I had come from, as I strolled through the parks, palaces, and promenades ... I acquired the French language ... and was not long learning to understand remarks made of myself ... I can not forbear mentioning a pleasant complement paid to me" (24-25). Potter constructs Europe as a much more civilized space for African Americans and one in which the dominant class is far more welcoming, a point that she comments on after an Englishmen helps her find her way home: "Several people had been sent out to look for me to no purpose,
and, on thanking the gentleman for his kindness in bringing me home, I cried with a joy I never felt before, and wondered what rich or grand person in America would have done so charitable an act" (29). Ultimately, the image that Potter constructs of Europe suggests that there are few impediments to equality and personal success. Potter's view of Europe places her in conversation with her well-known male contemporary, William Wells Brown who also enjoyed the freedom of European society. William Andrews argues that for Brown, "Europe becomes a standard of civilization to which the land of slavery cannot measure up." In light of the emphasis that Potter places on personal satisfaction, it is therefore no surprise that Potter's attempts to effect social change coalesce around personal slights and limits imposed on her sense of liberty.

The relationship between social change, labor, and pleasure is important if we are to understand the extent to which Potter's travels challenged the norms established by her contemporaries. For example, texts such as Nancy Prince's *A Narrative of the Life and Travels of Mrs. Nancy Prince* (1850) chronicle her work within social institutions such as schools and churches. Potter's labor, not large-scale communal activities, are the justifications for change. Witness her exchange with an English employer:

My lady, her daughter, and my little responsibility having entered the carriage, the door was suddenly closed, and I was pointed to a seat beside the footman, behind the carriage. I very respectfully declined this honor, and marched myself back into the house.... The next day I was summoned to the lady's presence, and asked my reason for not accompanying her to London. She was surprised when I told her that in America, even a female slave acting as a lady's maid ... always had a seat inside of the carriage with the family. She then said that in consideration of my being an American, she would overlook the matter; but had I been English, she should certainly have discharged me. Afterward, when they required my attendance from home, I always went in the carriage. (33)
What initially appears to be merely a disagreement between employer and employee is raised to heightened significance by virtue of the invocation of national allegiance. Ironically, she is able to secure fair treatment in England by invoking the history of slavery in America. In typical Potter fashion, when she attempts resistance she does so by invoking the narrative of the oppressed. Potter's reference to slavery is not meant to suggest that American slaves receive proper treatment. Potter does, however, invoke slavery as a gauge with which to determine the way she expects to be treated. Though her oppression is certainly in no way analogous to a slave's, she uses her very personalized affront to chastise her employer for believing that her position as a laborer justifies improper treatment. By raising the specter of slavery, she forces her British employer to recognize and correct her own behavior. Furthermore, in telling her readers that she later received proper treatment by always riding in the carriage, Potter reifies her suggestion that European society is more amenable to her needs.

Though Potter's travel throughout Europe played an important role in the construction of her working-class consciousness, her domestic travels proved to be the most important in giving her opportunities to speak out against slavery and racial injustice. The body of the working woman serves as the basis for her critique. Consider, for example, Potter's response to an employer who speaks to her lover in French, believing that the Potter could not understand the conversation:

As soon as he left, I went and fastened the door, took my chair, and sat down right before her, and told her, word for word, what they had been saying, and told her never to treat any person with contempt before another because she was rich and highly educated, for there were many simple looking people, and poor people, who understood more than those who were speaking of
them ... The lady became agitated.... I told her the circumstance I would mention.... she offered me money, but I told her money would never seal my lips, nor anything except kindness ... (163)

In this reversal of power, Potter uses the perceived invisibility of her position by using it to claim legitimacy for herself and those in similar positions.

Potter's laboring experiences in New Orleans also provide her with ample opportunities to critique varying levels of racialized abuse. Potter's stay in New Orleans marks a significant change in the text in which she recognizes herself as an outsider, even among her 'own people.' Almost as if she has been thrust from her working-class security, Potter is made aware of the limits of the geographic mobility that she prizes. In particular, she is made aware of the dangerous terrain that the South represented for both free and enslaved African Americans: "The time had come when my lady and gentleman were to go to Alabama; they expected me to go along, but by the advice of the uncle, I did not go" (43). What she does not mention in this brief exchange is just as important as what she does mention. Slave states such as Alabama were far less hospitable to free blacks, and her presence there would drastically alter her own construction of liberty by placing her at risk of being kidnapped. Liberty, or the opportunity to experience liberty--the same reason that she does not visit Alabama--is the same reason that she enjoys in New Orleans. Like Cincinnati, New Orleans also had a large free black population, so not only does Potter observe the materiality of slave life, she also acknowledges the presence of both Southern working-class and elite black populations. As I have pointed out, Potter takes great lengths to disassociate herself from elite African Americans, which is especially apparent in her reaction to the elite black community in New Orleans. Not surprisingly, Potter reserves her harshest critiques
for activities of black elites in New Orleans, as evidenced in her reaction to a black slave owner: "I got so outrageously angry at her proceedings, that I got a petition drawn up by an old citizen, and signed by a goodly number of the most influential citizens which I determined myself to present to Congress, to prevent the colored people from owning slaves" (191). What is important in this scene, aside from her critique of black slave owners, is the mechanism through which she seeks to effect change. Potter does not appeal to the hearts of her readers and therefore eradicates any chance for sympathetic allegiances. Instead, Potter turns to the legal system to exercise the rights of her American citizenship. As Lauren Berlant points out in the case of Harriet Jacobs and Frances Harper, anti-slavery discourse becomes an opportunity to test black women’s relationship to American citizenship: "The women in these texts each determine, under what they perceive to be the pressure of the necessity of history, to behave as native informants to an imperial power, that is, to mime the privileges of citizenship in the context of a particular national emergency." Like Jacobs, Potter’s national emergency is slavery. Although she does not remark on the outcome of her efforts, the narration of the incident underscores Potter’s commitment to pushing the boundaries of her own conception of liberty.

Potter is further upset by the material conditions of slavery that she sees in New Orleans, and thus occupies the stance of the ‘ethnographic observer’ in stating: "... slaves have nothing provided for them to either eat, drink or wear, they work hard all the day, and at night they plunder what they can from some of the rich plantations. If they are not caught, they are smart...." (182). The missing element in Potter’s narrations is key in understanding the relationship between herself and her sense of social activism. In all of the narrations of
slavery in New Orleans, the element of tragedy is absent, and in its place are narratives of resistance and redress ranging from a literate slave who writes passes for other slaves (156) to a group of slaves who attempted to poison their owner (158). I contend that these retellings are meant to restore dignity to the condition of the slave by privileging agency. This is especially important considering Potter’s readers who would have only seen fugitive slaves. Indeed, Potter raises this issue in stating that: "... these poor creatures are worked to death and when worn out ... all at once a charitable feeling rises up in the master’s breast, and he gives them free papers, puts them on cars, and sends them off to Cincinnati. This I can attest to, as I have one in my house now" (185). Potter’s efforts to assist former slaves, either by housing them or telling their stories, represent her refusal to narrate tragedy. Even at a moment when a tragic response to the "worn out" body of the enslaved would be fitting, Potter infuses this narrative with a sense of redemption.

The example of the common woman that Potter gives us greatly destabilizes many of the standard tropes used to analyze black women’s antebellum writing. While Elizabeth Keckley’s insider/outsider text, Behind the Scenes at the White House, would seem to be the expected companion text, Keckley’s near refusal to address race differentiates her from Potter’s engagement with charged racial issues. However, we can read Potter’s model of a self-reliant, working-class subjectivity in Frances Harper’s post-Reconstruction novel, Iola Leroy. Harper’s Aunt Linda also struggles to attain the rights of liberty, and by extension, the rights of citizenship. And, like Potter, Aunt Linda finds pleasure in her freedom to speak aggressively against instances of racial injustice. Admittedly, Aunt Linda’s is not as
cosmopolitan as Potter, but her representation is nevertheless an important example of the common woman’s intervention in the struggle for racial justice and economic autonomy.

RECONSTRUCTING FREEDWOMEN

Frances Harper’s _Iola Leroy_ (1892), recounts the Civil War and Reconstruction through the lives of the black population on the Gundover Plantation by detailing the title character’s comfortable upbringing and her fall into slavery. Once Iola is freed from slavery, she begins a search for her family members, a reconstruction of the nuclear family which is meant to parallel the reconstruction of the newly freed black population. And, once her family is reunited, she commits herself to a proper marriage and a life time of teaching African Americans in an effort to uplift the race. The role of uplift is important in understanding the context of the novel as well as the author’s motivation for writing the novel, especially considering that Harper intended the novel to be of ‘lasting service to the race.’

Thus, the novel outlines the changes that could improve the lives of newly freed African Americans. Hazel Carby recognizes this centrality of uplift in the novel: "In _Iola Leroy_ a commitment to uplift is shared by a community of intellectuals who are represented as being responsible for the formulation and articulation of race issues." Carby’s assessment of the novel is certainly accurate and is also indicative of the scholarship on the novel. However, I am most interested in the way in which understanding the role of the folk in the novel introduces an aggressive and subversive aesthetic to the narrative that challenges the idealism inherent in the novel.
I contend that if we examine the relationship between the folk and the intellectuals we can understand how Harper uses this relationship to create a double-voiced narrative that expresses traditional notions of black uplift while simultaneously narrating the anger and frustration faced by many African Americans during the Reconstruction era. The folk as a whole are important to the development of the novel’s radical aesthetic, but I want to focus primarily on Aunt Linda’s function as the common woman in this text. While "Iola’s role in the struggle is enacted within the boundaries of the traditional expectations of women as mothers and nurturers, expectations that form the cornerstone of the cult of true womanhood," Aunt Linda’s role is constructed outside of the borders of traditional domesticity. Aunt Linda’s characterization also continues the model established by Eliza Potter by emphasizing pleasure and economic autonomy. While it may seem unusual to suggest that Aunt Linda finds some pleasure in what is clearly a life of hardship and struggle, I argue that this pleasure comes from her ability to speak freely and aggressively on issues affecting the race. And to return for a moment to Ishmael Reed’s assertion that pleasure is that which makes life easier, Aunt Linda’s critiques of inter-and intra-racial politics alleviate the tensions resulting from narrowly defined principles of nineteenth century black female subjectivity.

The novel’s opening chapter immediately establishes a distinct separation of experiences and ideas between the folk and the elite. For many elite black leaders, the folk operated as a manifestation of the natural and those uninhibited by social restriction and expectations. Houston Baker writes, "In the basic sense the term refers to all black people in America. In a more definitive sense, however, it refers to that ‘unsophisticated,
homogenous group" of black people in America."26 Although the folk in *lola Leroy* may fall under the rubric of Baker's definition, they are nonetheless important if we are to understand the varying levels of resistance at work in the novel. Carby remarks on the use of the folk in the novel by pointing to the varying levels of meaning of folk life in the novel: "The opening chapter ... establishes that the slaves exercise a good deal of control over their lives. Their coded language and gay and humorous appearances are disguises for the furtive exchange of news ... the 'folk' are manipulators of skills that become weapons, not least of which is literacy" (xix). Carby's assessment points to the politicized space that the folk occupy, but their actions go beyond the acquisition of literacy and underscore their willingness to participate in subversive and sometimes violent acts of resistance. More specifically, we have to read the function of common people or the folk in the novel as evidence of embedded narratives of subversion. Consider, for example, two instances of aggressive female resistance cited in the novel. One instance involves a laundry woman whose work advances the Union's war efforts: "... when we were encamped near the Rebel lines a colored woman managed admirably to keep us posted as to the intended movement of the enemy. She was engaged in laundry work, and by means of hanging her sheets in different ways gave us the right signals" (129). Aunt Linda recounts a second instance of folk resistance that centers on a female slave's confrontation with her owner: "Ole mistus war up den, an' I war down; now, she's down, an' I'se up ... De wuss thing she eber did war to sell your mudder, an' she wouldn't hab done dat but she snatched de whup out ob her han' and gib her a lickin'. Now I belieb eb in my heart she war 'fraid of your mudder arter dat. But we women had ter keep em from whippin' us, er dey'd all de time been libin' on our bones" (159). I linger on these
two instances because they underscore the extent to which Harper uses the folk to speak the unspeakable. Although these two instances may not initially seem to be out of place, we have to keep in mind that the uplift novel typically privileges intellectual resistance rather than physical resistance. It is therefore no surprise that these two instances occupy very little narrative space. By narrating these two instances of folk resistance, Harper signals her knowledge of preexisting narratives of slave resistance. Ironically, the second instance of the female slave who physically overpowers her owner echoes Douglass’s fight with Covey detailed in his first autobiography. In so doing, Harper revises the trope of the master/slave struggle that Douglass made famous by placing the struggle within a female context. Furthermore, the retelling of this scene could indicate Harper’s willingness to revive the revolutionary spirit that was present in Douglass’s autobiography. But more importantly, these two instances of folk resistance allow Harper to enlarge the scope of uplift discourse by making space for the articulation of a radical subversion of power.

We can heighten our understanding of Harper’s use of the folk by examining the specific narrative functions of Aunt Linda as the novel’s common woman. As we have seen with Eliza Potter’s *A Hairdresser’s Experience in High Life*, the common woman is already inconsistent with conventional approaches to resistance. Therefore, the common woman is free to test the boundaries and content of black women’s writing by vocally expressing a range of emotions, not least of which is anger. Although anger would seem to be a natural response to the post-Emancipation racial climate, Claudia Tate suggests that the expression of anger is noticeably absent in black women’s post-Reconstruction novels:
While we understand the sexual exigencies of black writing of the period, we have difficulty appreciating why black women deleted anger from their realistic context. Doing so ultimately meant that they could seldom mention race in a realistic context, and certainly they could not mention directly the "race problem." This restriction did not arise from choice but from convention. The only way that black "lady" writers could make their novels address racial protest was to demonstrate the extent to which black people were capable of expressing fine thoughts and feelings. By appreciating the conventions of literary gentility or sentimentality for communicating the reformist agenda of black women writers, we come to understand the rationale for what initially seems to be wholesale "whitewashing" of the race problem.\textsuperscript{27}

Tate's assertion is certainly true if we do not factor in the narrative functions of the common woman. As I have pointed out with the previous instances of folk resistance, Harper has already begun to use the folk to articulate the anger that she herself cannot express. With Aunt Linda, Harper capitalizes on the common woman's freedom, allowing her to voice the anger in her critique of temperance and corrupt voting practices:

Dem Yankees set the me free, an' I thinks a powerful heap ob dem. But it does rile me ter see dese mean white men comin' down yere an settin' up dere grog-shops, tryin' to fedder dere nests sellin' licker to pore cullud people. Deys de bery kine ob men dat used to keep dongs to ketch de runaways. I'd be chokin' fer I'd eber spen' a cent wid dem, a spreadin' dere traps to git de black folks' money. You jis' go down town 'fore sun up to-morrer mornin' an' you see ef dey don't hab dem bars open to sell dere drams to dem hard workin' cullud people 'fore dey goes ter work. \textit{I think some niggers is mighty big fools...I ain't runnin' down my people. But a fool's a fool, wether he's white or black. An' I think de nigger who will spen' his hard-earned money in dese yere new grogshops is de biggest kine ob a fool, an' I sticks ter dat.} (160-161, emphasis mine)

The dichotomy between what Harper can say as an elite intellectual versus what she can say through Aunt Linda is made even more apparent if we compare it to an excerpt of one of Harper's speeches. Consider, for example, Harper's remarks on corrupt voting practices in her 1893 speech, "Woman's Political Future": "I do not think that the mere extension of the
ballot a panacea for all the ills of our national life. What we need to-day is not simply more voters, but better votes. To-day there are red-handed men on our republic, who walk unwhipped of justice, who richly deserve to exchange the ballot of the freeman for the wristlets of the felon; brutal and cowardly men, who torture, burn, and lynch their fellow-men, men whose defenselessness should be their best defense and their weakness an ensign of protection."

Although Harper's speech is a strongly-worded critique of corruption, we have to keep in mind that this speech is meant to galvanize African Americans to participate in reform efforts. It is also important to note that Harper's speech is devoid of racial invectives and personal anger that we see in Aunt Linda's critique. Thus, as a race leader, Harper's words must always serve as tools of political empowerment. In contrast, Aunt Linda is never constructed as a race leader and is therefore free to level personal attacks against both whites and blacks. Harper alters the perception that the folk do not have a politicized voice by having Aunt Linda discuss the very timely issues of temperance and voting rights. More importantly, Aunt Linda refuses to 'whitewash' the race problem by openly addressing the implications of faulty reconstruction politics. Indeed, neither Harper nor Iola would ever 'run down' her people, and as Tate indicates, expressions of anger are a liability in a novel meant to counter stereotypes about blacks' suitability as citizens. Harper's use of the folk realistically addresses the frustrations of a burgeoning nation attempting to reconcile racist activities with divisive intra-racial activities.

Harper continues to underscore Aunt Linda's role in the novel through the emphasis on domestic employment, which also allows Harper an opportunity to rehearse the debates between Booker T. Washington and W. E. B. DuBois. Although Iola Leroy was published
before Washington's Atlanta Exposition Speech and DuBois's *The Souls of Black Folk*, their respective theories of industrial and intellectual uplift were well known. While Iola's intellectual uplift is certainly privileged in the novel, the attention to Aunt Linda's activities indicate Harper's acknowledgment of the social and economic significance of women's domestic and manual labor. As Aunt Linda's gleeful response to a question regarding her life as a freedwoman suggests, the skills that she learned in slavery have served her well in freedom: "Oh, fust rate, fust rate! Wen freedom com' d I jist lit out ob Miss Johnson's kitchen soon as I could. I wanted ter relize I war free ... When de war ober an' de sogers war still stoppin' yer, I made pies and cakes, sole me to do sogers, and jist made money han' ober fist. An' I kep' on a workin' an' a savin' till my ole man got back from de war wid his wages and his bounty money. We had neber seen so much money in our lives befo', let alone hab it her ourselbs" (154). Aunt Linda's success parallels Potter's own success and insistence on economic autonomy. Also like Potter, Aunt Linda finds pleasure in her labor and the benefits that she receives from it. Interestingly, neither woman uses tragedy as a means of narrating their respective antebellum experiences. The absence of tragedy is especially telling in Aunt Linda's case because she is indeed a recently freed slave. This pragmatic, non-tragic approach to the slave past is reflected in many post-bellum slave narratives and is also a theme that Harper introduced in many of her speeches. 29 Carla Peterson points out that Harper's 1878 speech, "Colored Women of America," delivered at an international Women's Congress, is especially open to women's labor. Peterson writes: "In Harper's speech blacks are represented as existing on the margins of a capitalist economy and possessing little leverage for entering it ... Harper stressed the necessity of women's auxiliary labor to
supplement the family's income and advance black economic autonomy. Harper offered evidence of the continued importance of the antebellum tradition of domestic economy in which black women's in-house production of such items as cakes and preserved fruit ... contribute to the family's sustenance." Aunt Linda illustrates the success of this model as evidenced by her relative wealth and land ownership. Harper encodes this particular model of economic autonomy with added significance later in the novel when Aunt Linda expresses disinterest in literacy by stating: "... sence freedom's com'd I' se been scratchin' too hard to get a libin' to put my head down to de book" (156). This representation of a black woman's success through domestic work complicates Harper's reliance on the primacy of intellectual uplift by acknowledging that such sources of income are indeed central to the development of a strong black economic base. Although Harper does not imagine a fusion of elite and folk uplift communities that Hopkins does by the turn of the century, Aunt Linda's characterization nevertheless provides the space for the elite's recognition of alternative mechanisms of uplift.

These two illustrations of the common woman are crucial in delineating new analytical frameworks for black women's writing and culture. Both Potter and the fictional Aunt Linda denounce nineteenth-century American race relations, and they do so in a way that is specific to their position as laboring black women. As a result, the absence of the ideal of female domesticity gives readers a valuable tool for understanding black women's varying responses to emancipation and Reconstruction. Thus, representations of the common woman's rejection of traditional modes of resistance – as evidenced in her aggressive behavior and in her emphasis on labor – are important in defining the common woman's role
in effecting racial and gendered transformation throughout the remainder of the nineteenth century.
CHAPTER TWO
NOTES


3. Lorde, 58.


5. Eliza Potter, A Hairdresser's Experience in High Life. 1859 Reprint. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988) iv. Subsequent references are to this edition and will be noted in the text.

6. Despite the critically intriguing scope of this autobiography, a recent MLA search only turned up three citations for this text.


11. Dean, Introduction xxxviii.


15. Qtd. in White and White, 103.

16. White and White, 16.


20. Peterson, 89.


30. Peterson, 232.
THREE
WARRING IDEALS: GENDER, RACE, AND RESISTANCE IN THE AFRICAN AMERICAN NOVEL

The examples of the common woman's working class subjectivity represented in Eliza Potter's *A Hairdresser's Experience in High Life* and Frances Harper's *Iola Leroy* articulate the quest for citizenship from a female-centered perspective. However, as we see in Sutton Griggs's *Imperium in Imperio*, representations of the common woman are also important in texts by African American male writers. Indeed, Griggs represents both common and representational black women. Griggs takes up the task of representing black women within the decidedly restrictive ideological framework of black nationalism. This chapter focuses on the common woman's role in black nationalist politics.

By the turn of the century, black nationalist efforts were regarded as a necessity in the African American community. In 1899, Sutton Griggs published *Imperium in Imperio*, a proto-nationalist text, as a call to action to African Americans throughout the nation. Although sensationalism, intrigue, and melodrama permeate the novel, the message is clear—African Americans would no longer tolerate racial violence and state-sanctioned injustice. To embody his message, Griggs creates two male protagonists, Belton Piedmont and Bernard Belgrave, as representational models of African American manhood to lead the race into the future. Griggs combines varying narratives of history, war, and racial propaganda to create a nationalist paradigm for uplift based on education, self-reliance, and racial solidarity. The message of racial uplift in *Imperium in Imperio* was well-received by its intended African American audience; however, many critics have since ignored the novel.
As Bernard Bell has pointed out, "Imperium in Imperio" vies with Blake [Martin Delaney] as one of the most thematically radical Afro-American novels of the nineteenth century.1 And it is precisely the novel's radical politics and fantastic plot conceptions that have kept critics away or forced them into making misleading assumptions about the novel. Generally speaking, the criticism on Imperium in Imperio does not fully articulate the complex relationship between nation, race, and gender that is at the heart of the novel.

This chapter is an effort to understand the cultural work of the novel by examining the intersection of nation, gender, and racial politics. Central to my discussion is the role to which African American women were relegated in the creation and maintenance of the hyper-masculinized African American nation at the turn of the century.2 As such, this essay participates in the current black feminist critique of the masculinist bias inherent in the politics of racial leadership. For example, Hazel Carby argues: "[that] beneath the surface of ... [the] apparent sacrifice of individual desire to become an intellectual and race leader is a conceptual framework that is gender specific; not only does it apply exclusively to men, but it encompasses only those men who enact narrowly and rigidly determined codes of masculinity."2 Imperialist politics inflect Imperium in Imperio's 'rigidly determined codes of masculinity' which in turn translate into the desire for wealth, power, and patriarchal authority. At the same time, the novel enacts a process of effacement whereby the individual 'woman' is erased and is replaced with the symbolic 'Woman.' Anglo notions of patriarchal control are mapped onto the black female body, and black women subsequently become a part of the black male imperial design. This depiction of the black female body results in the movement of bodies from the auction block to the pedestal. However, as I will discuss
more in depth below, the novel contains its own foil – the simple reading of women as victims of both black and white patriarchal designs is complicated by key representations of women in the novel.

Three questions direct my discussion: (1) How did the dynamics between black masculinity, the African American community, and the nation contribute to the development of the black male subject?; (2) How did the specific formulation of the black male intellectual leader impact the black woman in the nation?; (3) And finally, what is the relationship between masculine fantasies of a new black nation, the place of the black woman in the nation, and the actual history of black women workers at the turn of the century? I address these questions through analyses of passages in the novel, letters from African American soldiers during the Spanish American War, and the historical development of black women in the work force from Reconstruction to the end of the century.

**Imperial Bodies: Black Women and the Limits of Black Nationalism**

Historically, the representation of black women has been subordinated to the black male struggle for personal freedom and individualism. The widespread influence of Frederick Douglass’s autobiographies underscores the predominance of the individual quest for freedom and literacy, which were, of course, the primary markers of black masculine individualism. However, the development of the post-Reconstruction novel marked a shift in masculine ideologies from an emphasis on the masculine individual to the masculine nation via the plots of race leadership and patriarchal control. As a result, masculinity became a metaphor for the whole of the African American struggle. *Imperium in Imperio*
exemplifies the shift in African American male literature from the proto-liberation theology of the pre-Emancipation era to uplift narratives. Although the novel reflects the shift from an emphasis on the individual to an emphasis on the racial nation, the representation of women remains static; the one-dimensional representational heroine who is expected to fulfill her feminine duties by submitting herself to the goals of the masculine nation survives this shift. These gender dynamics are a part of the larger project of the uplift narrative as a method of racial instruction designed to teach the burgeoning black reading public the value of racial solidarity, while also correcting the Anglo American historical record. As William Andrews notes: “the challenge of producing literature that was both utile and dulce was exacerbated by the disparagement of ... [black writers’] intellectual and creative capacities and by the eroticization and marginalization of African American culture at the very time the nation was working toward unification.” To challenge this marginalization, African American male writers responded by crafting narratives that represented the trials and triumphs of male race leaders in their quest for masculine authority.

Griggs represents the crisis of black masculinity through the novel’s two representational men, Belton and Bernard. Despite dissimilar backgrounds, Belton is the dark-skinned son of a poor illiterate woman, and Bernard is the wealthy son of a white politician and his black mistress, both develop to be models of African American masculinity. Both are dedicated to the race and believe that the role of the black male is to be the guardian of the racial family, as indicated by Belton’s self-appointed goals: “He went through school, therefore, as though the eyes of the world were looking at the race inquiringly; the eyes of the North expectantly; and the eyes of God lovingly,—three grand
incentives to his soul." The novel follows the pair from their initial meeting in grade school to their eventual separation and reunion after college. By the time of their reunion, both men have enjoyed relative success as race leaders; however, Belton is an accommodationist and is based on Booker T. Washington; in contrast, Bernard is more radical and is based on W.E.B. DuBois. By the end of the novel, Belton is dead because of his refusal to take part in the Imperium’s plan to wage a war with the United States and to take over Texas and Louisiana for people of color. Though the distinctions between Belton and Bernard echo the differences between Washington and DuBois, to merely state that Griggs uses this dichotomy in black leadership to indicate the struggle between accommodationist politics and resistance is far too simplistic. More appropriately, the relationship between the two men is a metaphor for the complexities of attempting to unite African Americans from diverse backgrounds under a single model of leadership.

Perhaps more intriguing than the relationship between the two protagonists is the narrative of war and imperialism through which it is mediated. Using the subtext of the Spanish-American War, Griggs’s anti-imperialist narrative proves the extent to which representations of black masculinity responded to the historical challenges posed by the rise of American nationalism, industry, and expansionism during the late nineteenth century. For the burgeoning black nation, the Age of Empire was a study in contrasts. On the one hand, American expansionist politics continued the national pastime of race-based domination; on the other, it afforded black men an opportunity to participate in a national war and thereby earn national validation. For some African Americans, military service was a ‘golden opportunity’: “The uniform promised status, citizenship, and full partnership in the nation’s
destiny. Although domestic racism and the denial of constitutional protection led some angry black dissidents to oppose expansion and black soldiers’ participation, others argued that patriotic service to the American nation would earn recognition of and respect for the race’s manhood.”

Griggs capitalizes on blacks’ ambivalence regarding American national politics; and the Spanish-American War emerges as a gauge to determine the plan and actions of his militant black political organization, the Imperium: “At length, an insurrection broke out in Cuba, and the whole Imperium watched this struggle with keenest interest, as the Cubans were in a large measure Negroes. In proportion as the Cubans drew near to their freedom, the fever of hope correspondingly rose in the veins of the Imperium” (201). The deaths of twenty-six black and white soldiers aboard the American ship, The Maine, is yet another factor in the ultimate plan for revolution: “This aroused indignation among the members of the Imperium as did the destruction of the war ship ... all things considered, Bernard regarded this as the most opportune moment for the Imperium to meet and act upon the whole question of the relationship of the Negro race to the Anglo-Saxons” (203). Griggs later reveals that the Imperium’s domestic insurrection will take place during America’s struggle with Spain and with the help of America’s enemies. For example, one of the Imperium’s resolutions reads: “We will demand the surrender the Texas and Louisiana to the Imperium. Texas, we will retain. Louisiana, we will cede to our foreign allies in return for their aid. Thus the Negro will have an empire of his own” (252). The importance of foreign allies indicates American black antipathy to American expansionism, while also hinting at the possibility of viable cross-national unions.
Griggs’s fervent critique of American imperialism notwithstanding, Belton’s and Bernard’s nation-building efforts indicate their appropriation of tenets of imperialism to bolster their own constructions of the African American empire. The translation of the novel’s title, ‘Empire within an Empire,’ suggests that the acquisition of a black nation-state and sovereign power is at the forefront of the nationalist platform. Furthermore, the Latin title foreshadows Griggs’s sustained references to the Roman Empire as a model for the black nation, as seen by Belton’s deliberations on his role in life:

That was a proud day in his life when he stepped out of the carriage and opened the University gate ... feeling that he, a Negro, was privileged to enter college. Julius Caesar, on entering Rome in triumph, with the world securely chained to his chariot wheels ... None of these were more full of pleasurable emotion than this poor Negro lad, who now with elastic step ... marched ... beneath the arch of the doorway leading into Stowe University. (49)

However, Griggs’s preoccupation with noted political periods does not end with the Roman Empire; he is equally fascinated with the American Revolution: “In history, that portion that charmed them most was the story of rebellion against England ... they went in search of everything that would throw light on this epoch. They became immersed in the spirit of the heroic age” (28). Griggs’s emphasis on classical political movements, clearly, is an attempt to situate the development of the black nation in particular historical frames. While Rome lends itself to an imperial context, the references to American politics represents the black male’s demand for inclusion in a democratic American social structure.

The concerns of the novel mirror the complex responses shared by many African Americans throughout the United States when faced with the question of imperialism. The letters and editorials of black soldiers printed in the black press provide a vital record of the
anxieties that the war effort produced in the lives black men and women. An 1898 editorial in the *Iowa State Bystander* characterizes the hypocrisy of the black presence in the war:

The American white man’s rule in dealing with the Negro ... in times of peace and prosperity [relegates] him to the rear, deprives him of his rights as an American citizen, cuts off his opportunities of existence, outrages colored women, burns down his home over his wife and children ... More than 500 colored men and women have been murdered by the American people in the past 25 years and now they have the audacity to talk about the cruelty of Spain toward Cubans.9

This soldier’s anger with American ‘audacity’ is indicative of many of the letters printed in the African American press during the Spanish-American War and anticipates the ‘doubleness’ of being black and American that DuBois voiced only a few years following the war.10 But as interesting as the soldier’s critique of national politics is his critique of the nationally sanctioned assault on his masculine identity. In this particular case, not only are the soldier’s basic rights attacked, but so are his patriarchal rights to protect his wife and children. And this desire to protect the black woman from racist society is a significant measure of black manhood.11

The same combined narrative of political frustration and desire for patriarchal control is seen in a letter printed in the Port Tampa, Florida *Gazette*: “[The] Negro of this country is a free man and yet a slave. Talk about fighting and freeing poor Cuba and of Spain’s brutality ... is America any better than Spain?”12 The author emphasizes the black woman’s lack of both racial and gender privilege: “It is one of the common experiences for a ‘colored’ woman to be grossly insulted, not only when they are alone, but even when she has an escort. It is all the same ... The escort is afraid for his own life.”13 As with the previous letter, antiracist critiques of United States imperialism involve the racist assault on masculinity.
The editorials and soldiers’ letters printed in black newspapers bridged the physical distance between soldiers and blacks in America; they allowed readers to create a shared identity mediated through their own oppression. As Benedict Anderson has argued, these print-languages created a unified field of exchange, allowing both African American soldiers and Africans Americans at home to engage in the experiences of war and its impact on the African-American psyche.\textsuperscript{14} In so doing, blacks truly embodied the belief of a nation within a nation as their fields of correspondence created an alternative historical narrative that complicated Americans’ (mis)representation of domestic and international political practices. The kind of community imagined is both critical of and dedicated to United States democracy. Despite the soldiers’ critiques, the letters also underscore their link to an American ideal so dear that one black soldier cried: “O! He is a noble creature, loyal and true ... Forgetting that he is ostracized ... yet as loyal true men, he answers the call to arm.”\textsuperscript{15} The letters essentially indicate that the actual critique of imperialism was borne more from a collective desire for domestic equality than for a quest for a Pan-African, trans-national freedom.\textsuperscript{16}

Inherent in the appeal for equality is also an appeal on the behalf of black women; however, within the context of this appeal, black women become the possession of black men. Both Griggs and the soldiers refer to the damage done to the black female body in relation to their own masculinity. The damage done to the black woman’s image is more injurious to the collective masculinity than to the black female identity. The black female body is portrayed as the symbolic battlefield upon which black males seek respect and revenge against white male privilege, as the battle to honor women becomes bound up with
narratives of Anglo patriarchy. Just as white men framed their relationship to white women in a narrative of protection, black males also ascribed to this same ideology. This same dynamic emerges more explicitly in the novel. For Griggs’s Belton, for example, “Woman now occupied the same position in [his] eye as she did in the eye of the Anglo-Saxon” (83). In short, black men vie for equality with white men based not only on the quest for national identity, but also on the basis of patriarchal control. Despite this emphasis on protection, however, black women’s concerns remained unacknowledged in the scheme of the African American nation.

While Griggs neglects women within the context of black nationalism, his contemporary, Anna Julia Cooper brings these concerns to the fore. Cooper identifies the neglect of women as follows: “The colored woman of today occupies a unique position ... she is confronted by both a woman question and race problem, and is as yet an unknown or an unacknowledged factor in both.” Cooper’s argument is a useful counterpoint to Griggs’s masculinist landscape. Cooper discusses black women’s growing agitation with the sexist parameters of the uplift movement, while also acknowledging racist oppression. She calls for both inter and intraracial equality and encourages women to actively participate in the economic and political operations of the nation. She also argues that the black male perception of women is comparable to the chivalric ‘sixteenth-century logic,’ that “they actually do not seem sometimes to have outgrown that old contemporary of chivalry—the idea that women may stand on pedestals or live in doll houses, but they must not furrow their brows with thought to attempt to help men tug at the great questions of the world.” Indeed, despite all of the historical markers of black women’s participation in the African American
nation-building process, Griggs creates one-dimensional female characters who are little more than representations of male fantasies. Such representations reinforced the black male’s mimetic interplay with white patriarchal ideology, as well as the limits placed on women’s role in the black nation. On one level, both Griggs and the soldier’s letters emphasize the creation of a private and safe space for black women that evokes the same rhetoric that white males applied to women under the cult of true womanhood. The ‘pedestal mentality’ that marked Anglo antebellum gender relations is inflected with ethnic implications that, in the name of protection, seek to move black women from the public, hyper-sexualized space represented through memories of the auction black to the private, de-sexualized sphere of the pedestal, as seen in Belton’s desires for black women to hold the same social position as white women. Through this act of mimicking, the black male assumes that the only role for women is defined specifically through the male gaze. The black female is not an actor in the black nation but rather an instrument of it; she enters the masculinist progression of the narrative only to serve as a spectacle of female submission, a mere marker of male dominance.

A number of one-dimensional depictions of women appear in the novel, including a self-sacrificing mother and a fallen wife; however, Viola emerges as Griggs’s model for the idealized black woman. Undeniably pure, beautiful, and Victorian in almost every way, she embodies the aesthetic ideal of the educated black male elite. She is so convinced that her own needs are secondary to those of the nation that she commits suicide so that she can die for the nation, as opposed to marrying her mulatto lover, Bernard. For Viola, marriage to a
mulatto would signal the eventual death of the race and also her own betrayal to the nationalist cause, a point that she reinforces in a letter to her beloved:

The intermingling of the races in sexual relationship was sapping the vitality of the Negro race and, in fact, was slowly but surely exterminating the race. It demonstrated that the fourth generation of the children born of intermarrying mulattoes were invariably sterile or woefully lacking in vital force ... My first step was to solemnly pledge God to never marry a mulatto man ... My other greatest task was to persuade the evil women of my race to cease their criminal conduct with white men. Ours would have been an ideal home. But it was not meant to be. I had to choose between you and my race ... (173-175)

Though on the surface Viola's decision to die for the nation rather than work within it seems to suggest agency, her drastic resolution in fact accentuates the extent to which she has become seduced by the male-specified image of the black nation. Her decision is not merely a choice between Bernard and the race, but between gender and race. What appears to be a subjective choice based on race, reduces her to an object status mitigated by gender. Her death signifies her support of black male nationalist ideology and its sexist overtones that identify the primary role for women as the silent reproducer in the name of the nation. The reference to the 'evil women' of her race and their 'criminal conduct' reinforces limitations on black women's desires, while also underscoring the notion that women are merely pawns in the scheme of African American uplift. This antiracist critique participates in the criminalizing and policing of black female sexuality.

Although Griggs's representation of black female subjectivity emerges in sexist discourses, one intriguing example of black female resistance in the novel evinces the historic intersection of gender and economic opportunity. Ironically, women were able to foster the economic and ideological development of the black nation through their
participation in the domestic sphere, a space most commonly associated with oppression. Their activities extended the scope of the uplift movement beyond its emphasis on elite representational female figures and forged a less exclusive model of resistance and collective nation-building. Griggs's representations of female domestic work reflect the historical pattern of African American migration and economic development. Blacks' mass movement to urban spaces in the 1880s contributed greatly to the overall growth of black populations throughout the nation, and by the turn of the century, thirty-two cities had a black population of ten thousand or more.²⁹ The movement to urban areas coincided with the overall growth of urban centers, which increased the demand for female domestic workers. As a result, and also because there were few factory or clerical jobs available to black males, the black urban population was overwhelmingly female.³⁰ In contrast, domestic service became the fastest growing urban profession, and because blacks and whites typically considered domestic work a 'female job,' black women outnumbered black men in a number of cities, including New York, Baltimore, and New Orleans.³¹

Griggs openly critiques these racist labor practices in stating that "[the black man] would have made an excellent drummer ... clerk ... cashier ... but the color of his skin shut the doors so tight that he could not peep in" (129). What initially appears to be Griggs's general commentary on race relations and employment practices eventually turns into a gendered critique when he contends that unemployment is also a threat to black masculine respectability: "If a man of education among the colored people did such manual labor, he was looked upon as an eternal disgrace to the race. He was looked upon as throwing his education away and lowering its value ... so here was proud, brilliant Belton, the husband of
a woman he fairly worshipped [sic], surrounded in a manner that precluded his earning a livelihood for her" (130). Griggs's critique underscores central dilemmas in African American representational politics. On one level, his argument that Belton is unable to earn a livelihood for his wife reinforces the primacy of the patriarchal family romance. Secondly, that an educated man could not find acceptable employment destabilizes the primacy of representational men as race leaders, and ultimately indicates that despite education, he is vulnerable to racist practices, especially when he attempts to gain a measure of equality. More importantly, these frustrations reflect that Griggs cannot imagine the need for an expansion of what is deemed economically acceptable for the black nation. In short, he dismisses alternative occupations that are not considered middle-class even though such positions are contributive to the development of the black nation.

Perhaps Griggs had these historical developments in mind during Belton's cross-dressing episode in the City:

He went to New York and completely disguised himself. He bought a wig representing the hair on the head of a colored woman. He bought an outfit of well fitting dresses and other garments worn by women ... He now had the appearance of a healthy, handsome, robust colored girl ... In this guise Belton applied for a position as a nurse and was successful in securing a place in the family of a leading white man. He loitered near the family circle as much as he could ... sometimes he would engage in conversation for the purpose of drawing them out on the question of the Negro ... He felt that the Negro was easily ruled and not an object for serious thought. The barbers, the nurses, the cooks, and washerwomen, the police column of the newspapers, comic stories and minstrels were the sources through which the white people gained their conception of the Negro. But the real controlling power of the race that was shaping its life and thought and preparing the race for action, was unnoticed and in fact unseen by them. (133)
Belton’s cross-dressing episode is only a temporary performance, but it is important for my reading of the novel because it raises two crucial issues. First, this episode addresses the extent to which Griggs imagined masculinity and respectability as the primary markers of black national identity, or more appropriately, ‘the real controlling power of the race.’ Secondly, this scene also registers, even as it denigrates, the resistance potential inherent in black women’s labor at the turn of the century.

Historically, the most prominent of such resistance activities took place in the laundring industry. By the turn of the century, from 50 to 70 percent of all adult black women in large southern cities were employed as domestics or laundresses. Of the two positions as domestic servant or laundress, many black women preferred the laundry industry because of its relative benefits to their and national identity. Unlike domestic service that required women to remain in Anglo homes, laundering gave black women relative autonomy from whites that allowed them to stay at home, while simultaneously caring for their own family. This cottage industry also gave women an opportunity to engage in commercial exchange on a limited basis and in the process, gain a measure of self-esteem through the use of shrewd trading skills. Laundering allowed black women to turn the tools of their enslavement against their oppressors and reconstruct them as valuable tools. One former slave’s complaint, “I have done a mountain of washing and ironing in my life,” soon became a virtual rallying cry for black women’s collectivism.

The many advantages inherent in laundering were countered by just as many disadvantages, and on the whole, laundering hardly paid women a reasonable wage for their considerable expenditure of energy. A typical schedule for a laundress included picking up
the clothes from two or three families on Monday and returning them on Saturday. The labor was grueling and called for the clothes to be boiled in a pot, scrubbed on a washboard, rinsed, starched, wrung out, hung out, and ironed. The process was so difficult that women often enlisted the help of their children. Prompt payment was never a given, and customer complaints resulted in non-payment or possible imprisonment. Even so, black women virtually had a monopoly on the laundering industry, and because it was indispensable to urban life, they were often able to subvert racial contempt by underscoring their importance within the urban economy.

One group of laundresses in Jackson, Mississippi, printed their demands for equal pay in the June 20, 1866, edition of the Jackson *Daily Clarion*:

At a meeting of the colored washerwomen of this city ... the subject of raising wages was considered and the following preamble and resolution were unanimously adopted: Under the influence of the present high prices of all the necessaries of life ... we the Washerwomen of the city of Jackson ... thinking it impossible to live uprightly and honestly in laboring for the present daily and monthly recompense, join in charging a uniform rate for our labor, and anyone belonging to the class of washerwomen, violating this, shall be liable to a fine regulated by the class ... We do not wish in the least to charge exorbitant prices, but desire to be able to live comfortably if possible from the fruits of our labor.

Although the *Daily Clarion* did not print the outcome of the women’s demands, their revolutionary zeal was not in vain, but was the impetus for a number of later acts of opposition.

A much publicized strike of 1881 in Atlanta, Georgia, also proved that the washing societies had the means to at least temporarily paralyze urban centers. The “Washing Society,” or the “Washing Amazons,” as they were derogatorily named by the *Atlanta*
Constitution, boasted of a large membership of women that worked to acquire wage increases in the laundering industry. The city retaliated by arresting members and forcing the city council to propose a twenty-five dollar licensing fee for all washerwomen. Their actions prompted a very public test of wills between the women and the city government which included a written manifesto to the mayor, stating their demands: "We can afford to pay these licenses, and will do it before we will be defeated, and then we will have full control of the city's washing at our own prices, as the city has control of our husbands work at their prices ... Don't forget this. We mean business this week or no washing.\(^{29}\) Unfortunately, the group lacked the economic strength to hold out indefinitely and its members were forced to return to their former positions at the same rate of pay.

The Washing Society and its predecessors demonstrated that black women were neither licentious nor docile, but willing and able to exert power and negotiate when their individual and collective rights were jeopardized. For example, their skillful negotiations of their domestic talents embody Griggs' own model for American labor relations: "Furthermore, by denying us clerical positions, and other types of labor, we shall be forced into enterprises of our own to furnish labor" (233). This particular wave of labor resistance places black women within an historical frame of active opposition and participation in the labor force.\(^{30}\) Indeed, by initiating a movement based on the economy and language of the oppressors, black women not only played out Griggs' emphasis on the importance of black labor expressed in the cross-dressing episode, but they also went one step further than the revolutionary model proposed in Imperium in Imperio. While Griggs supports a violent overthrow that could easily have been suppressed by American forces, the women actively
engaged in a movement that destabilized local urban economies. Black women not only exerted their power in the American nation, but also proved that they were capable of working for the well-being of the black community.

Griggs's depiction of women's work is a complex one in which he both acknowledges and retreats from the black female domestic as a site of resistance, and does so by linking revolutionary tactics with rigid, patriarchal, and middle-class norms. On one level, Griggs would have his audience assume that women's work is of little value. The truth of the matter, however, is that black women have many wage-earning capabilities, while representative black men have few. This passage also demonstrates a critical disregard of working-class labor. The laborers that he references, 'the barbers, the nurses, the cooks, and washerwomen,' are inferior only because they are not the persons commonly thought to be middle-class. Such occupations were nevertheless crucial to the development of the African American economy because these were the positions that were economic staples of the black community and therefore provided a measure of independence and resistance capacity for those in service. And as one historian points out, many domestic workers passed their aspirations for a better life on to their children, in whom they inculcated ambition through education.\(^{31}\) Griggs ignores this particular aspect of racial uplift by failing to acknowledge that domestic workers were the precursors to a future generation of representational leaders. He does, however, register his awareness of the importance of black women's work through his performance. Yet, he represses the actual history of black female resistance by underscoring the need for resistance mechanisms that are better suited to his own model of representative identity.
What remains interesting is that regardless of his motivations, Belton indulges in the act of cross-dressing, which raises the question of what it means for a representative black male to perform as a common black woman. A possible response might be that despite the emphasis on class markers and the economy of the black nation, the scene reflects black male anxieties regarding the maintenance of the nation, the ideology of black male representative politics, and the inability to acknowledge women as intellectual and economic equals. It is precisely because Belton’s performance is so authentic that he is able to perpetuate a sexist philosophy that argues that black women are defined by and must submit to the parameters of black masculinity. Belton’s performance as a woman erases the real female body, or more appropriately, it erases the real woman that does the work. Given that Griggs’s perception of the representational woman is deeply rooted in the cult of true womanhood, it is worth noting that Belton’s performance is not that of a representational woman, but of a non-elite common woman. Griggs idealizes representational women to such an extent that he would dare not appropriate her, but he has no problem assuming the identity of a woman that he perceives to have little narrative or historical significance. Indeed, Griggs underscores the male ownership and representation of the black female body in Belton’s desire to redress the black female image: “He thought that while he was a nurse, he would do what he could to exalt the character of the colored woman” (133). Essentially, men can “exalt the character of the colored woman” better than a woman could. In short, Griggs participates in an act of critical cross-dressing in which he proposes that men surpass women, even at being women.32

Male critics have read Belton’s performance of femininity somewhat differently. Wilson J. Moses argues that the scene is bizarre and surrealistic and suggests it shows how
black men were emasculated at the hands of a racist system. However, both Griggs's representation of the scene and Moses's reading of it overlook the cultural relevance of black women's work in the latter half of the nineteenth century. As I have argued, it is precisely through the realm of female domestic labor that Griggs and Moses devalue, that black women were able to create an affirmative space and become speaking subjects.

To explain black women's resistance solely in terms of rebellion against unfair labor practices is to reduce the radical scope of their efforts. The economic ramifications of their efforts notwithstanding, their movement would ultimately dismantle prevailing cultural stereotypes about the competency and sexuality of black women. Although Griggs presents a disparaging view of working-class blacks, black washerwomen did indeed make important gains. Perhaps one of the most notable victories was the decriminalizing of the black female body. As seen in the letter from the Jackson washerwomen, the desire to live honestly was critical to their demands. Implicit in this desire to live 'uprightly and honestly' is an appeal to be free of debilitating stereotypes placed on black female sexuality. The women achieved this goal by underscoring not only their intellectual capacity, but also their morality and self-possession. More importantly, they took up the cause for themselves without the patriarchal mechanisms seen in the soldier's letters or in Imperium in Imperio. Black women participated in a collective act of self-creation in which they articulated the stipulations of their self-protection and sustenance, thereby giving women the space to care for themselves. Their actions proved that they did not need male protection or authority to exist and resist within a racist social structure.
Nowhere was this resistance more important than within the African American community. This resistance not only rejected the restrictions of the cult of true womanhood, but it also confirmed that black women did have an economic and cultural role in the development of the black nation. Whereas the cult of true womanhood essentially argues that women’s only value is in the home, the efforts of black women proved that women could successfully work inside and outside of the home. Their activities further reflected two prevailing notions of black nationalism—collectivism and self-determination—which solidified black women’s proficiency in employing the practices of the black nation. Despite the historical facts, Griggs was not open to the possibility of women’s participation as workers in the development of the black nation. As a result, Belton does not acknowledge that his earnings were the outcome of his masquerade as a black woman.

*Imperium in Imperio* is important for what it reveals about the complexities of the development of black nationalist thought. The novel depicts African American struggles for identity and autonomy as complex ones that incorporate mainstream political ideologies, while also privileging a masculinist definition of blackness. Like many struggles for freedom and sovereign rights, women are the last to be completely free. When considered together, *Imperium in Imperio* and the actual history of black women’s domestic resistance also indicate that a lot remains to be learned about the struggles for freedom of people of color at the turn of the century. The black women’s labor movement that the novel alludes to not only represents the shattering of certain racist stereotypes, but it also represents a challenge to us to rethink the historical narratives that, both in Anglo and African American contexts, have marginalized or excluded the contributions of black women workers.
CHAPTER THREE
NOTES


2. My use of the concept of the nation is informed by Benedict Anderson’s notion of the imagined community. For the purposes of this discussion, nation will refer to the African American community and the shared experiences and challenges that connect them across geographical and ideological lines. See Benedict Anderson, Imagined Communities (New York: Verso, 1983).


4. See Robert Stepto, From Behind the Veil (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1979) for his discussion of the quest for literacy in male authored slave narratives.


7. Bernard’s characterization is indicative of the qualities of many literary mulattoes, including George in Uncle Tom’s Cabin. In terms of appearance, he is more white than black. However, in terms of emotion and sensibility, he is more black than white, and it is because of this racial instability that he is regarded as a threat to public tranquility. See Nancy Bentley, "White Slaves: The Mulatto Hero in Antebellum Fiction," Subjects and Citizens, eds. Michael Moon and Cathy N. Davidson. (Durham: Duke University Press, 1995).


14. In Imagined Communities, Benedict Anderson suggests that the rise of print-languages laid the basis for national consciousness by dissemination information via print and paper to people across borders. As a result, they became aware of their fellow readers in their particular language field, this creating a secure community to which only they belong.


16. The relationship between the black American fight against racism and imperialism has often been critiqued by Caribbean intellectuals who feel that African-Americans are 'landlocked' in their historical view. The also contend that the discourse of imperialism was merely used as a timely segue into a discussion on American racism, thus avoiding the scope of complexities that accompany imperialism in its most traditional sense. See Carole Boyce Davies, Black Women, Writing, and Identity: Migrations of the Subject (New York: Routledge Press, 1994) 15.


18. Cooper, 128.


20. Franklin, 279.

21. Franklin, 279.


25. Jones, 125.


27. Sterling, 356.
28. The Jackson activities also set a precedent for a group of washerwomen in Galveston, Texas. In 1877, a group of washerwomen went on strike to protest the unfair treatment in many of the island's Chinese-operated, white-owned laundry establishments. The strike was so effective that it resulted in the closure of at least three laundry shops throughout the island. Sterling, 357.

29. Sterling, 358.

30. Not unlike black women's resistance of the latter half of the nineteenth century, antebellum resistance also found its strength in the domestic sphere; however, at times, its goals were often more deadly. There were a number of instances in which house slaves or cooks injected poison into the food of slave owners and their families. Although this type of resistance often resulted in imprisonment or death for the perpetrator, it nevertheless facilitated a temporary rejection of the southern social code.


FOUR

‘A Monthly Magazine of Merit’: The African American Public Press and the Democratization of Domestic Nationalism

Griggs’s representation of the relationship between black nationalism and the common woman marked a turning point of sorts for literary representations of the common woman. As seen in *Imperium in Imperio*, the common woman’s functions were portrayed as having a significant impact on the African American community. This same type of heightened visibility of the common woman is also apparent in the literature produced in the African American public press, including the *Colored American Magazine*. More specifically, the work of Griggs’s contemporary, Pauline Hopkins, represents the common woman’s movement from the margin to center in turn of the century dialogues on black nationalist politics and the public sphere. Thus, this chapter returns to a female-centered exploration of the common woman by examining the relationship between Hopkins’s construction of the common woman and the black nationalist agenda set forth by the *Colored American Magazine*.

In May 1900, when the Colored Cooperative Publishing Company printed the first issue of the *Colored American Magazine*, the African American community was in the midst of what historians now call the nadir of the black experience in America. African Americans throughout the nation were subjected to indiscriminate brutality in both northern and southern spaces, including the lynching deaths of 106 African Americans in 1900 alone.1 Black life in America also meant disenfranchisement, inadequate housing, and limited
employment opportunities. And throughout these national disavowals, the Plessy v. Ferguson decision of 1896 echoed in the minds of African Americans as a constant reminder of the lengths to which Anglo-Americans would go to in order to maintain structures of power. However, 1900 was also a year of complex contradictions, because just as it seemed black life would always be endangered by white power and violence, African Americans achieved notable successes: black-owned farms increased in number; black banks began to flourish, in cities ranging from Washington, D.C., to Birmingham, Alabama; and for the first time in history, the illiteracy rate among African Americans dropped below fifty percent. In an effort to bridge the gap between elite and working class African Americans, the founders of the Colored American Magazine sought to create a periodical that would unite all African Americans under the black nationalist goals of self-help, racial pride, and racial solidarity. As the first editorial states the magazine "aspire[s] to develop and intensify the bonds of that racial brotherhood, which alone can enable a people, to assert their racial rights as men, and demand their privileges as citizens."²

The Colored American Magazine's forceful political agenda was more than matched by the intensity and racial pride of its first editor, Pauline Hopkins. The magazine was committed to racial brotherhood and the primacy of the black "family" as a sustaining force in the nation. To this model Hopkins added a decidedly feminist platform that advocated active black female participation in the nationalist dialogues. Although Hopkins edited the magazine from 1900 to 1904, her name did not appear on the masthead until 1903, and she was not welcomed by all members of the Colored American Magazine editorial board. Hopkins's colleagues resented her radical approach to racial uplift because, like many
African American women, she was judged by the social dictates that she remain silent on certain issues in order to prove her gentility and femininity. However, Hopkins’s writing indicates that she was more concerned with instructing and reaching out to the black nation than she was with adhering to an African American revision of the cult of true womanhood. Elizabeth Ammons suggests that Hopkins’s ‘disruliness’ is perhaps one of the most compelling aspects of her work: "... the disruliness of her long fiction – its refusal to conform to inherited well-made novel dicta – attacks the ideas of rules itself. As we can now understand, Hopkins insistently defied the power structure – racial, sexual, intellectual, economic – that sought to contain and discipline her."3

It is precisely the ‘disruliness’ of her work that disrupted the masculine bias of the magazine. An editorial in the May 1900 issue of the Colored American Magazine testifies to the extent to which the editorial board prioritizes the relationship between masculinity and national equality:

Above all [CAM] aspires to develop and intensify the bonds of that racial brotherhood, which alone can enable a people to assert their racial rights as men, and demand their privileges as citizens ... The South is attempting to crush the manhood and self-respect out of the Negro; the South is determined to smile upon the servile, fawning, cowardly and sicko fantine [sic] negro and to frown upon the brave, manly, and aggressive negro. The South is bent upon a policy of extermination or subjugation; they will either exterminate the negro or subjugate him."4 (emphasis mine)

Given the overwhelming maleness of this particular manifesto, one wonders how it is that Pauline Hopkins played such a crucial role in the magazine’s development.

Hopkins’s importance to the Colored American Magazine can be read on two levels. Like other indomitable black women writers, Hopkins used the magazine to bring women’s
issues into the public sphere. Hopkins frequently traveled and lectured on behalf of the magazine, and in so doing, she merged both word and deed by making black women's lives of primary importance in the press that circulated throughout the black nation. Second and more importantly, Hopkins's work reached out to the masses of African Americans. As C. K. Doreski has pointed out, Hopkins's biographical series, "Famous Women of the Negro Race" and "Famous Men of the Negro Race" used the lives of prominent African Americans as an uplift model that would serve as examples of the potential for success in the lives of everyday black people.

But among Hopkins's most intriguing contributions during her tenure at the *Colored American Magazine* were her three serial novels – *Hagar's Daughter: A Story of Southern Caste Prejudice; Winona: A Tale of Negro Life in the South and Southwest;* and *Of One Blood: Or, the Hidden Self* – all of which mark her efforts to imagine alternative landscapes for black life. The characters and plots that she develops in these novels allegorize the changes that were taking place in black American life. Of the three serial novels, I am most interested in *Hagar's Daughter* because of its exploration of alternative representations of black respectability and the cultural importance of black women's labor. This chapter examines, comparatively, issues of African American respectability, the black public sphere, and African American nation-building within the context of Pauline Hopkins's first serialized novel, *Hagar's Daughter*.

My interest in *Hagar's Daughter* revolves around the narrative function of a family of black servants – Aunt Henny, Marthy, and Venus - all of whom are integral to the novel's resolution. I argue that they are the vehicles through which Hopkins reveals the discursive
nature of black respectability, and that the novel is an instructional text designed to bridge the class divide between elite and non-elite African American women at the turn of the century. Hopkins’s use of domestics stresses African American women writers’ continued efforts to construct varied representations of respectability and uplift that evolve from a cross-section of experiences as opposed to adhering to a narrowly defined theory of respectability. As a result, Hopkins constructs a working-class respectability that retreats from the traditional construction of black respectability through its emphasis on matriarchal authority and the cultural importance of black women’s labor. I am also interested in the transformation of Venus from a marginal character to the heroine of the text. Though Venus is an example of this working-class respectability, I argue that she epitomizes a new definition of black female heroism in turn-of-the-century African American literature. In Venus, Hopkins effects three important changes: she creates a character who is not the prototypical tragic mulatto, values her position as a laborer, and merges the folk past with the urban present. Writing at a moment of seemingly endless depictions of representational heroines, this narrative of heterogeneity indicates that the uplift movement need not be centered in Northern spaces and mediated through the educated elite. In short, Venus is the way through which Hopkins promotes a working-class heroine and critiques the use of the representational heroine as the only voice of resistance and uplift. Further, because the novel was serialized in the Colored American Magazine, Hopkins’s message makes a critical intervention in the politics of the black public sphere.
National Voices: Race, Journalism, and the Black Public Sphere

During Hopkins’s tenure, the magazine entered into myriad debates regarding the complexities of representational politics, bourgeois constructions of identity, and the future strategies of racial uplift. Unlike some black leaders who adopted an accommodationist racial platform, Hopkins wanted to revive the radical political nature that had once characterized African American life in New England at the height of abolitionist agitation. The novels continue the work of Contending Forces (1900) by suggesting that literary representations can mobilize African Americans to agitate for economic and social equality. And according to Nellie McKay, one of Hopkins’s "primary goals for CAM was that it should inspire the creation of an African American art and literature that would demonstrate the talents and skills of the group and prove to the rest of the world that black people, only recently released from slavery, were already as culturally advanced as other groups." In keeping with her own nationalist platform, Hopkins used the magazine to promote her belief in self-help, education, and a strict work ethic as a method of racial uplift. Hopkins believed that literature could be used as an instructive force in the lives of African Americans, and she used the Colored American Magazine as a vehicle to create and circulate a body of shared knowledge that would be beneficial to the ever-growing community of African American readers. Much like Benedict Anderson’s notion of the newspaper, the Colored American Magazine constructed an imagined community of readers that were separated by geography, but connected on the basis of a shared knowledge of black life and culture. Even more important is that the magazine’s readers represented a cross-section of African American readers, including the educated elite, male and female factory workers, carpenters, and
domestics, thus uniting African Americans from diverse backgrounds under the united goals of black nationalism. Indeed, the *Colored American Magazine* mapped such a community of black readers and thereby forged a distinct brand of uplift activity that relied on the shared knowledge and resistance politics of its readers.

To begin to understand the creation and impact of Hopkins’s imagined community requires an explanatory narrative about the emergence of the African American press itself. The African American periodical press has been a crucial component in the African American literary and protest tradition since the antebellum era. The black press—papers and magazines alike—was integral to African Americans’ view of themselves as a cohesive community and were ‘race papers’ as James Weldon Johnson points out: "They are race papers. They are organs of propaganda. Their chief business is to stimulate thought among Negroes about things that vitally concern them."¹⁰ Johnson’s statement points to the sustaining force behind the development and maintenance of the black press and the whole of the black public sphere. The use of race as a unifying factor is of signal importance to the black public sphere, especially considering the supposed democratic spirit that infused early models of the public sphere.¹¹ Originally structured as an open forum for debate among equal citizens, the forum became a bourgeois space identified by whiteness and masculinity. But despite the inherent disparities in the model, African Americans constructed the black public sphere as a response to conventional structures and mobilized those left out by virtue of the bourgeois public sphere’s defining qualities.

The originary moment of the black press dates back to 1827 with the appearance of the *Freedom’s Journal*, black America’s first newspaper. The quarterly magazines the
Mirror of Liberty and the National Reformer both appeared in 1838, and the African Methodist Episcopal Church Magazine and the L'Album Littéraire appeared in 1841 and 143, respectively.\textsuperscript{12} Though the Mirror of Liberty primarily reported on the activities of the New York Committee of Vigilance, and while the National Reformer was the journalistic organ of the American Moral Reform Society, both took up the anti-slavery cause. For, as periodical historian Penelope Bullock points out, the growth of the black press corresponds directly to the 'status' of black life:

The overall development of the Afro-American press was influenced by the status of Negroes in American society during the years between 1838 and 1909. The press began in the 1830s as a part of the organized activities of black people who were working for the emancipation of the slave and for the liberation of the free Negro from inequities and restrictions. As the status of free Negroes deteriorated during the 1850s and the early 1860s, they became increasingly alarmed about their situation. As a result, more periodicals were initiated than at any other time previously.\textsuperscript{13}

The legal and extralegal assaults on black life gave rise to one of the most important magazines of the era, Thomas Hamilton's the Anglo-African. Founded in 1859, the Anglo-African featured some of the era's most important and outspoken intellectuals, including Frederick Douglass, Frances E. W. Harper, William Wells Brown, and Martin Delaney. Though the Anglo-African preceded the Colored American Magazine by nearly half a century, the Anglo-African had a lasting impact on the Colored American's editorial board, who stated that "no periodical we have today has as brilliant a staff of contributors as the Anglo-African had."\textsuperscript{14} Arguably, the Colored American Magazine's own influential editorial board, including Angelina Grimke, William Braithwaite, and Benjamin Brawley, can be read as an attempt to replicate the Anglo-African's former glory. Also interesting is the
similarity between the magazine's emphasis on the cultural authority of black masculinity. Consider, for example, a statement appearing in the January 1859 issue of the *Anglo-African*:

"In order to assert and maintain their rank as men among men, [black people in the United States] must speak for themselves; no outside tongue, however gifted with eloquence, can tell their story; no outside eye, however penetrating, can see their wants."\(^{15}\) Like the previously quoted editorial from the *CAM*, masculinity is the unifying force behind national uplift, and such is the case for the climate that produced the *Colored American Magazine*.

The *Colored American Magazine* was the brainchild of four African American men -- Walter Wallace, Jesse W. Watkins, Harper S. Fortune, and Walter Alexander Johnson—who together founded the Colored Cooperative Publishing Company, the same company that published Hopkins's better known novel, *Contending Forces*. The Colored Cooperative Publishing Company was black-owned and operated, thus freeing the organization from the conservative restrictions sometimes generated by Anglo-American benefactors. One of the magazine's stated goals was to introduce a monthly magazine of merit into each African American home, and as Hazel Carby points out, "in the early years, the *Colored American Magazine* tried to create the literary and political climate for a black renaissance in Boston two decades before the emergence of what we now refer to as the 'Harlem Renaissance.'"\(^{16}\)

To initiate its design of creating and maintaining a black reading public and advertising audience, the *Colored American Magazine* sold subscriptions for fifteen cents and offered copies of *Contending Forces* as free gifts to new subscribers. Further, as the company's name suggests, it invited readers and contributors to become full members of the cooperative. Readers could become members by investing five dollars, and contributors
were made members through a process that gave them cash evaluations of their articles which were equivalent to certificates of deposit. This move is particularly important in terms of the community-building efforts of the Colored American Magazine. Because the magazine was headquartered in Boston, a central location on the map of African American migratory experience, the subscriptions and invitations to membership introduced a radical, urban sensibility into the Jim Crow south. For example, a regular column titled, "Here and There" was designed specifically to unite African Americans across regional lines. The column’s statement of purpose read: "Under this heading we shall publish monthly such short articles or locals as will enable our subscribers to keep in close touch with the various social movements among the colored race, not only throughout the country but the world. All are invited to contribute items of general news and interest." Ideally, the content of the magazine was meant to be an impetus for cross-geographic, intra-racial dynamics, thus democratizing uplift by de-privileging the notion of racial representatives and attempting to give voice to the whole black nation.

The creation of a self-sufficient and literate black nation was a unifying factor for both the Colored Cooperative and Hopkins, but despite their initial affinity, Hopkins’s particular brand of outspoken feminist leadership proved to be a thorn in the side of the male-dominated magazine. As I mentioned before, Contending Forces was offered as a gift to subscribers and, considering the in-house tension, the offer was probably made more to capitalize on Hopkins’s reputation than to commend her abilities or validate her feminist politics. Hopkins published her first short story, "The Mystery Within Us" in the first issue, in which it also announced that she would be the editor for the women’s department. This
could be read as a dismissive move that suggests that women can only address women's issues, but Hopkins nevertheless capitalized on her position to promote her views on equal rights for women and women's role in the uplift movement. She was also responsible for a series titled, "Famous Women of the Negro Race," which featured biographical sketches of prominent African American women in fields ranging from education to the arts. And as one critic points out, the series was part of Hopkins's effort "to celebrate an evolving sense of historical integrity and community" within the black public sphere. Likewise, her novels continued to reinforce women's place in the public sphere. Furthermore, by representing the construction of the common woman as a figure of resistance accessible for all of her readers, the importance of the common woman reached beyond the boundaries of class and geography to reshape expectations about the literary representations of black women.

In 1903, Hopkins became the literary editor and began to build professional relationships with other well-known writers and thinkers, including W. E. B. DuBois and William Monroe Trotter. Seemingly, the new promotion brought with it increased resentment from her male colleagues regarding Hopkins's growing role as an outspoken and influential contributor to the magazine. As Carby notes in a revealing 1947 article titled "Negro America's First Magazine," William Braithwaite, a former Colored American Magazine contributor, reveals the overwhelmingly male bias of the magazine. He implies that Hopkins should have been silent and grateful for the opportunities that she had to publish in the magazine. Furthermore, he praises only the work of Hopkins's male colleagues.
The magazine was purchased in 1904 by Booker T. Washington and Fred Moore, a prominent member of the National Negro Business League. During the summer of 1904, Moore moved the magazine’s offices from Boston to New York, and as literary historians Abby Johnson and Ronald Johnson point out, the development of the new tone of the magazine was unmistakable: "directed by Moore and Washington, Colored American Magazine shifted dramatically in tone. A conciliatory approach was discernible as early as May 1904."²¹ The shift was indeed dramatic, especially considering one of Moore’s early editorials: "The Magazine seeks to publish articles showing the advancement of our people along material lines, believing that the people generally are more interested in having information of the doings of the members of the race, rather [than] the writings of dreamers or theorists."²²

Perhaps one the most lasting ramifications of Hopkins’s dismissal was its impact on her literary career. Only a year after Hopkins was appointed literary editor, she was dismissed. A veiled dismissal notice appeared in the November 1904 issue of the Colored American Magazine and reads: "On account of ill-health Miss Pauline Hopkins has found it necessary to sever her relations with the Magazine and has returned to her home in Boston. Miss Hopkins was a faithful and conscientious worker, and did much toward the building up of the magazine. We take this means of expressing our appreciation of her services and wish for her a speedy return to complete health."²³ A similar statement appeared in the May 1905 issue. Curiously, poor health did not prevent Hopkins from working for other prominent magazines, including the Voice of the Negro, in which she published a commissioned piece in the December 1904 issue titled, "The New York Subway."²⁴ A series titled, "The Dark
Races of the Twentieth Century" followed from February to July 1905, also in the *Voice of the Negro*. Hopkins's was not suffering from ill health, and the truth of the matter is that Hopkins's feminism and radical resistance platform did not suit the accommodationist rhetoric favored by the magazine's new governing body. And as McKay points out, the gender bias was more of an issue than many were prepared to admit: "While Hopkins was forced to leave *CAM* because her political views were unacceptable to the new owners, given how few women held similar positions, she was undoubtedly also pushed out because she was a woman and controlling an important journal was not her place."25

But despite the questionable reasons for her dismissal, Hopkins nevertheless made an indelible impact on the *Colored American Magazine* and the whole of African American literary journalism. Arguably, Hopkins's tenure with the *Colored American Magazine* was the apex of her writing career, and as one critic points out, more and better fiction and poetry was published by the *Colored American Magazine* during the years that Pauline Hopkins was editor than at any other time in history.26

**Respectability and the ‘New’ Black Heroine**

Hopkins believed that literature should not only be of aesthetic merit, but should also fight racism and promote African American unity and power. Her first novel, *Contending Forces*, is based on this premise, as are her three serial novels. Likewise, Hopkins uses plots of intrigue and deception to underscore her commentaries on race in the novel.27 However, in the serial novels, Hopkins makes far better use of these same techniques. The high drama of the magazine novels were a part of Hopkins's effort to create a distinctly African
American brand of popular fiction. Hazel Carby comments on this transition in Hopkins's writing: "There was a more frequent use of physical action and confrontation in her fiction alongside her representation of social and intellectual conflict. These changes were an indication of her attempt to combine elements of popular fiction with a more didactic intent to create stories of political and social critique."^28

In considering Carby's suggestion that Hopkins's novels merge the didactic with the popular, I argue that this move also represents Hopkins's attempt to create a body of literature that was more inclusive. Given the elitist tone associated with the novel as a form, popular fiction by definition is geared to a more diverse audience. Such a move is fitting given the scope of the magazine's readers. But there was yet another function behind the transition in Hopkins's writing which was her concerted effort to create alternative landscapes of identity for African Americans at the turn of the century.

Constructing an imagined community of black readers entailed boundary crossing, which Hopkins achieved through the creation of narratives that disrupted the physical boundaries of north/south, and the class boundaries of representational and non-elite. Central to Hopkins's construction of female protagonists is their ability to successfully traverse these boundaries by challenging what her readers think of respectability. In the context of African American life, respectability is understood as an adaptation of the Victorian value system that stresses the principles of piety, sexual purity, temperance, and among other things, the capitulation to patriarchal authority. Therefore it is through what Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham refers to as the 'politics of respectability' that black men and women were able to participate in the discourse of racial uplift. For many African Americans,
respectability became a way of thinking about national reform; they believed that adhering
to the dominant codes of behavior would translate into the rights of citizenship. Out of this
emphasis on "manners and morals" developed a rigid set of class distinctions that created a
‘better class’ of blacks as an indicator of racial progress. This binary was indeed problematic,
especially considering that the assumption of the existence of a better class assumed that
there was a lower class, all of which reified paradigms of racism. Higginbotham takes note
of these complexities as they appeared both in black culture as a whole and in the black
Baptist church in particular: "In its denunciation of those blacks who rejected hard work,
piety, cleanliness, sexual purity, and temperance, the Women’s Convention unwittingly
reinforced prevalent stereotypical images of blacks."29 The thinking behind respectability
essentially eradicated alternate expressions of blackness, and this, as historian Kevin Gaines
points out, was counter-productive to the whole of the uplift movement: "For many educated
black men and women, uplift ideology often meant repressing anger toward whites, their
struggles to make themselves and their race acceptable potentially leaving psychic residue
of self-doubt and shame. An elite self-image that might overcome powerlessness and racial
stigma perhaps required the displacement of feelings of anger and shame onto other
powerless blacks, or perhaps, elites, even in the name of racial uplift."30 To a large extent,
Hagar’s Daughter is an effort to narrate the lives of those African Americans rendered
powerless by the narrowly defined rules of respectability.

Though all of Hopkins’s magazine novels are crucial to understanding alternatives
for black subjectivity, it is Hagar’s Daughter that most fully explains the common woman’s
transition form margin to center. The narrative action of Hagar’s Daughter centers on an
elite sector of late nineteenth-century residents of Washington, D.C., and focuses on the trials faced by a family traumatized by miscegenation. Like Hopkins's other novels, Hagar's Daughter is shaped by a revisionist historical narrative of the journey from slavery to freedom, and it is through this creative retelling of history that Hopkins explores the continuing impact of slavery on the lives of African Americans. The novel begins in 1860 and recounts the social climate leading to the Civil War and establishes the personal histories of the white families--the Ensons and the Sargents, and the black servant, Aunt Henny; her daughter, Marthy; and Marthy's daughter, Venus. In the introductory chapters, Hopkins depicts the brutality of slavery through the dueling Enson brothers--St. Clair and Ellis. In order for St. Clair to protect his share of the family fortune, he reveals that his brother's new wife, Hagar, has black blood. To save himself from the shame of what neighbors refer to as "the Enson horror," Ellis Enson plans to move his family to Europe, but mysteriously dies before finalizing his plans. After his death, his wife and child are remanded to slavery. However, in a daring escape reminiscent of Eliza Harris's daring leap across the ice in Uncle Tom's Cabin, Hagar jumps into a river to save herself and her child from slavery.

In a chapter aptly titled, "Twenty Years Later," the narrative action shifts to the Bowen family -- Zenas, his wife, Estelle, and his daughter, Jewel -- during their stay in Washington, D.C. The shift in location foreshadows the narrative twists and turns that constitute the rest of the novel. After a failed blackmail attempt, one murder, and Aunt Henny's and Jewel's kidnappings, it is revealed that Ellis Enson is alive and that Estelle Bowen is his long-lost wife, Hagar. In a reunion scene strikingly similar to the reunion scenes portrayed in Reconstruction novels, Ellis and Hagar realize, with the help of a
message found in a locket, that Jewel is the daughter that they thought they had lost years ago. The reunion of the nuclear family is also a reunion of sorts for the racial family considering that both Estelle (Hagar) and Jewel have to come to terms with their blackness. Hopkins uses this opportunity of the discovery of Jewel’s heritage to critique the limits of Northern anti-racism. Jewel’s fiancé, upset by the latest turn of events, is troubled by what it means for their future:

I think that the knowledge of her origin would kill all desire in me ... The mere thought of the grinning, toothless black hag that was her foreparent would forever rise between us. I am willing to allow the Negroes education, to see them acquire business, money, and social status within a certain environment. I am not averse even to their attaining political power. Farther than this, I am not prepared to go. (271)

However, he changes his mind only to find that Jewel has died.

Aunt Henny’s family also makes the transition from the south to Washington, D.C., the family now includes Marthy’s husband Isaac, and their two children, Venus and Oliver. Though these characters have limited narrative space, they are critical to the outcome of the novel. Isaac participates in the blackmail scheme, Venus solves the kidnapping, and Aunt Henny testifies in a courtroom scene.

The shift in locales should not go without comment because, as Carby points out, the change directly influences the focus of the novel: "Unlike Contending Forces, Hopkins’s serialized fiction was situated within a white community rather than a black social order ... the white world was represented directly through individual white villains who symbolized the power of white society to oppress and embodied greed and rapaciousness."32 The shift to Washington, D.C., serves the narrative function that Carby cites, while also participating
in Hopkins’s design for cross-class and cross-geographic community building. Significantly, turn of the century Washington, D.C., was the site of a *Colored American Magazine* branch office. That Washington is the nation’s capital and the center of national political activity underscores Hopkins’s symbolic efforts to place black life and concerns within the framework of national dialogues of race and political progress.

Just as Hopkins uses the shift to Washington, D.C. as a narrative strategy for African Americans’ inclusion in national dialogues, one of the most important efforts at inclusion revolves around her attempts to prioritize and politicize the life of the ‘folk,’ as represented through Venus, Marthy, and Aunt Henny. Hopkins’s use of the trio may initially give the reader pause because such characters are rarely the focus of novels; however, it becomes clear that they are part of a project to situate the folk within the larger discussion of racial progress. Consider, for example, the use of conjuring and black vernacular in the novel, which Hopkins uses to explore alternative constructions of black life. The presence of the folk serves the dual purpose of narrating the lives of African Americans commonly left out of racial politics, while also emphasizing folk contributions to the lived experiences of both Anglo and African Americans.

The role of the folk in the novel has recently become a source of great interest to critics. Kristina Brooks has an interesting view of Venus and her family that argues that Hopkins represents Venus and her family as minstrel stereotypes:

[B]ecause she uses the literary stereotypes of the tragic mulatto and generic minstrel figures like the mammy, buck, and wench, Hopkins imperils her subversive intention. Although her strategy is to destabilize racial difference through representations of mulatto characters and interracial unions,
Hopkins’s objectification of racial difference in several caricatures results in a mixed message about the value of African American identity.34 Brooks’s reading of the folk is a provocative one, but it does not fully capture the nuances of Hopkins’s depictions because Brooks refuses to see them as anything other than one-dimensional stereotypes. If we consider these characters as representatives of the folk committed to the twin philosophies of self-determination and self-reliance, not obsequiousness and dependence, then it is clear that they can claim success as subversive figures. In this vein, Brooks gives a slightly more charitable reading to Venus as a mediating figure:

The interpretively slippery Venus Johnson, who exhibits characteristics of both racial stereotypes and unique subjectivity, thus presents readers with some middle ground between the characters who inhabit the past and the nearly white, fully bourgeois African American characters who look toward the future. Hopkins objectifies Isaac, Marthy, and Aunt Henny within the novel in order to elicit varied reactions – dissociation, identification, and the recognition of irony, ridicule, and amusement .... With Venus Johnson, however, Hopkins embodies both the comic tradition of black minstrelsy and the uncommon (i.e. unrecorded) tradition of black heroism. Though objectified in particular instances, Venus is primarily an African American subject, whose representation remains distinct from those of her ancestors.35

Overall, however, Brooks’s analysis of both Venus and her family accepts the binary produced by the politics of respectability – that blacks must either conform to the narrowly constructed parameters of respectability or be regarded as outcasts who are not attuned to the urgency of racial uplift – that does not allow for a discussion of alternative constructions of respectability.

Venus and her family are meant to underscore the process, not merely the end result of racial uplift. This is especially apparent if we compare the perceptions of the slave past
for the mulatto and African American characters. For the mulatto characters, the slave past is a source of personal trauma and shame, as seen by Hagar's initial reaction to her personal history: "Vaguely, as in a dream, she recalled her stay in Rose Valley and the terror of her childish heart caused by the rough slave-trader. Could it be true, or was it but a hideous nightmare from which she would soon awake? Her mother a slave! She wondered that the very thought did not strike her dead" (57). However, the folk characters, specifically Aunt Henny, view the slave past in a more pragmatic light: "Aunt Henny was seventy, but save for rheumatism she had not changed since she left the Enson plantation. Sometimes she would bend her limbs, shake her head and sigh, 'Dey neber be easy goin' 'gin, fuh sho', but I got a heap o' hope outen dem whilst dey ben limber ..." (175). The period to which Aunt Henny refers — "Whilst dey ben limber" — is a reference to her own enslavement, a period in which her body marked her owner's wealth. But as opposed to expressing the anger characteristic of antebellum slave narratives, Aunt Henny's reaction privileges her survival and the ownership of her own body. As a result, her reaction is also more in keeping with the tone of postbellum slave narratives. William Andrews argues that postbellum slave narratives viewed slavery more as a period to endure rather than a period to rebel against:

In the postbellum slave narrative, a slave does not have to fight back to claim a free man's sense of empowering honor; diligence in his duties and pride in a task well done say as much or more about a black man's respectability as running away, especially if that black man is a family man ... the success stories that these "new men" chronicle in their post-emancipation years are designed to demonstrate that the course they followed as slaves prepared them well to seize opportunity in freedom and turn it to honorable account, both socially and economically.36
For Aunt Henny, then, her post-Emancipation 'success' can be read in terms of her job in the U.S. Treasury and home ownership. The characters represent a panoramic view of black life that does not revolve around representational ideals, but instead depicts the experiences of the thousands of African Americans in the post-Emancipation era. And it is precisely the slippage between the binaries of elite and non-elite that facilitates Hopkins's construction of folk respectability.

Hopkins's construction of folk respectability reflects some values of traditional black respectability, even as it simultaneously subverts and transforms its underlying logic. The notion of the home and family as markers of respectability is an important site for examining Hopkins's revision of respectability. Consider, for example, the description of Marthy's home:

Marthy Johnson knelt on the kitchen floor surrounded by heaps of white clothing sorting them into orderly piles. It was six o'clock on Monday morning. The gaudy little clock on the mantel, flanked by red vases, elaborately gilded and filled with paper sunflowers, had just finished striking. The coffee pot was giving out jets of fragrant steam, and the pan of hot corn pone was smiling in an inviting manner from the back of the range. The square deal table between the windows held plates, mugs, knives and forks for three. (168, emphasis mine)

Hopkins's construction of the home seemingly conforms to nineteenth-century ideologies of domesticity by representing it as an affirming site of love and privacy. This depiction also politicizes the home insofar as it represents Marthy's efforts to achieve autonomy and stability as a freedwoman. And as Carla Peterson notes, such reconstructions of the home have a profound impact on social relations since "the African American domestic sphere is
neither private nor public but generates an in-house economy in which children are sheltered, goods produced, and the community taken care of.  

But just when it seems that Hopkins has capitulated to tradition, she revises the trope of domesticity by carefully encoding the material effects of the home with a sense of cultural importance. Though similar in tone to elite constructions of the home, Marthy’s home differs significantly. As Higginbotham points out, respectability’s emphasis on manners and morals often left little room for individual expression: "Through leaflets, newspaper columns, neighborhood campaigns, lectures, and door-to-door visits, an army of black Baptist women waged war against gum chewing, loud talking, gaudy colors, the nickelodeon, jazz, littered yards, and a host of other perceived improprieties." Marthy’s colorful and slightly excessive home decorations would have certainly differed from those found in a more respectable black home. However, Marthy’s belongings are not necessarily an outright rejection of respectability as they are an attempt at self-expression. The centrality of self-expression is especially enlightening if we understand it in the context of post-Emancipation. For many African Americans, the freedom to decorate both the body and the home indicated their ability to define their lives according to their own desires and objectives.

One of Hopkins’s most important interventions in the reordering of the respectable black household is her replacement of patriarchal authority with a female centered household that refocuses attention on the common woman’s contributions to the black community, generally, and the black family, specifically. As Kevin Gaines notes, respectability was often bound up in issues of patriarchal control: "Many regarded the patriarchal family as a sign of the race’s triumph over the ruinous impact of slavery, and they wielded home life as a shield
against slanders against respectable black men and women." In this light, Marthy’s opinion of Isaac amounts to a literal assault on the rules of respectability: "... I got merried young when I’d daughter been playin’ with baby rags ... I tell’s you ef I’m moulderin’ in the clay to dus’ an’ ashes tomorrer, – gittin’ jined to a man’s a terrible ‘sponsibility, ‘specially the man ... Ike Johnson’s been gittin’ me inter trubble ever sense ..." (219). Indeed, this particular rendering of the black family differs greatly from the African American revision of the Victorian family structure, and by extension, the black family created in Contending Forces. Though the family in Contending Forces is headed by a female widower, the legacy of the upstanding fathers lives on as part of the family’s collective memory. However, the father in the Johnson family lacks any redeeming qualities and is actually a criminal participant in the plot that Venus solves.

The variation of the black family is a telling statement on Hopkins’s vision of both the black family and literary journalism. In showing that families can thrive without the guiding presence of a family patriarch, Hopkins makes an important intervention in gender conventions. Given that the rules of the sentimental novel could not support an absent and criminal father, the openness and accessibility of the periodical press facilitated Hopkins’s attempt to envision alternative experiences of black life. Hopkins is not supporting the dissolution of the black family, but she is affirming the site of the black mother as a sustaining force in the family, as seen in Marthy’s conversation with her son, Oliver: "I was able to sen’ your sister to school an’ keep her nice in spite o yer daddy’s racketey ways. Yer grannys holped me powful. Yer pa’s money don’ moun’ to a hill o’ beans in my pocket ..." (172). This valorization of motherhood is also meant to counter racist assumptions about
black female subjectivity, chief among them being the construction of the black mother as immoral and responsible for the decline of the black family.  

Hopkins’s version of respectability includes very specific ideas about black women’s labor and its impact on the black family. She continues the emphasis on the philosophy of racial self-help and self-determination by dismantling the stigma attached to domestic labor. Given Hopkins’s breadth of knowledge, she would have certainly realized that a number of domestic workers were among her readers and used Aunt Henny, Marthy, and Venus as symbolic invitations for these women to join the program of racial uplift. In this novel, domestic labor is constructed not as a detriment, but as an important source of income of special importance to the black family:

Does you think money’s jes’ a growin’ on bushes ready to shuck into your hand when you gits through college? Pears lak to me .... you’d better make up yer min’ to hussle aroun’ fer a living.’ Don’ you turn up yer nose at washin’, an ‘yer may jes’ thank God ef you gits a ‘ooman when you git jined that’ll help you out in that business when college learnin’ ain’t payin.’ And don’t spend yer extra money on silk dresses fer no ‘ooman to lay roun’ in. Caliker’s done me all my life an’ I ain’t the worst ‘ooman in the wurl’ neither. (171)

What begins as a healthy dose of mother wit actually becomes a critique of formal education and gender conventions and an affirmation of a strong work ethic. In warning her son of the unreliability of a college education, Marthy taps into the concerns held by many blacks that the strength/power of an education was sometimes devalued in light of American racism. "Washin," then becomes a buffer against white racism in its ability to provide resources despite the ever present threat of racism. Marthy’s resistance to formal education and "silk
dresses," the material markers of middle class respectability, further underscores her general
distrust of elite notions of uplift and progress.

Marth’s view of gender is also important insofar as she stresses the necessity of
black women’s labor in the maintenance and uplift of the black family. As Higginbotham
points out, some elite women’s groups did indeed work across class lines, but because uplift
had for so long been associated with the educated black elite, its relationship to the larger
black community was sometimes a mirror-image of problematic Anglo-American ideals.
Marthy arrives at her sense of working-class respectability through her own experiences and
efforts, not through her alliance with elite groups. Importantly, this representation suggests
that black female domestic workers did indeed have a sense of dignity and respectability and
were thus prepared to bring their own set of ideas for social uplift into the discourse.

Venus’s family is key to understanding Hopkins’s efforts to reconfigure
respectability, but Venus serves a different and perhaps more important narrative function
in the novel. Venus’s construction as a working-class heroine in the novel serves as a model
for urban black subjectivity at the turn of the century. Her role is especially important if we
consider her in light of the expectations of the readers of CAM. Tate points out that reader
expectations were essential to black women’s post-Reconstruction novels: "... the post-
Reconstruction domestic novels of African American women fulfilled the expectations of
their first public audience for pleasurable reading plots affirming the social meaning to which
it generally subscribed."41 Given the emphasis on traditional respectability in these novels,
it is worth noting that Venus’s appeal is quite different. Consider, for example, Tate’s
reading of the role of the heroine in these texts:
... whether assuming the conservative role of the 'domestic educator' or the more liberal one of "the woman of social compassion," the new domestic pedagogy identifies the black heroine as the authority of her own ego reformation as well as the instigator of servile reform in her community. The heroine uses both reason and compassion to select the proper mate to assist her in achieving her personalized communal ambitions. And finally, the heroine defines as well as manages an ideal household for an upwardly mobile family, mediating prosperity between the individual self and the collective black community.42

Though Tate's analysis is valuable for what it reveals about the construction of genteel African American heroines, it nevertheless privileges class affiliations and reifies the role of marriage and the traditional family in uplift efforts. The question at hand is what to make of a heroine who does not have a familial legacy or formal academic training, but nevertheless suffuses her community with a sense of egalitarian uplift that changes the scope of inter and intra racial relationships. Such is the case for Venus, who, lacking the qualities of the more traditional heroine, undergoes a process that not only reshapes the narrative function of the domestic in African American literature, but also provides the space for a new heroine in turn of the century African American literature.

We can begin to understand Venus's cultural impact by first placing her in the context of black women's historical movement from rural to urban spaces. As Patricia Hill Collins has pointed out, black women's migratory patterns significantly impacted their labor and social relations: "Migration stimulated substantial shifts in Black women's labor market activities, especially those of working-class women, as well as changes in African American family patterns and community organization. While racial segregation in housing separated African Americans from White Americans, gender relations within Black civil society separated men from women. Male space included the streets, barber shops, and pool halls;
female arenas consisted of households and churches." This emphasis on movement and space is crucial if we are to understand Venus as a figure who both confronts racism and rejects and reconfigures the limits of racial and gender boundaries. In this way, Venus prefigures the New Negro of the Harlem Renaissance who refuses to be hindered by such boundaries, and in so doing, she participates in and extends Hopkins’s overall project of reshaping respectability.

In Venus, Hopkins creates a character who successfully merges the folk past with the urban present, which, as Higginbotham points out, is no small feat considering that racial progression and folk retentions were often at opposite ends of the uplift spectrum. Higginbotham explains this phenomenon in the context of the black church: "Organized black church women disseminated throughout the black community the assimilationist message implicit in respectability, and they endeavored to implant middle-class values and behavioral patterns among the masses of urban blacks who retained rural folkways of speech, dress, worship, and other distinct cultural patterns." In contrast, Hopkins’s Venus holds a position with which many of her readers could identify; as a dark-skinned domestic servant, (Hopkins repeatedly refers to Venus’s physical features), Venus represents Hopkins’s efforts to put a face on the progress of the common woman. Consider, for example, these key descriptions of both Venus’s physical and mental traits:

... Venus preserved a discreet silence concerning the letter received on the night of the abduction, but the brain of the little brown maid was busy ... (218) ... I’ll see if this one little black girl can’t get the best as mean a set of villains as ever was born ... (221) ... and then the opening door admitted a young colored girl who had an extremely intelligent, wide awake expression ... (223, emphasis mine)
In addition to their common emphasis on Venus's skin color, the descriptions are also important in terms of their textual positioning. All of the descriptions appear at key moments in the text during which Venus is called upon to handle the crisis at hand. Given the continuing negative meanings attached to blackness, it is apparent that Hopkins is countering those images with the construction of Venus as a both dark-skinned and intelligent. Just as Hopkins counters stereotypes in *Contending Forces* by refusing to configure the mulatto as utterly tragic, she again counters stereotypes by affirming the dignity of blackness. In short, Venus is neither mixed race nor tragic, which allows Hopkins to further her project of creating a new nineteenth-century heroine. That Hopkins does not reveal that the white characters are black until the end of the novel also indicates her strategic avoidance of the tragic mulatto trope as a narrative necessity, which, in the end, enables her to reinforce the importance of blackness as both a narrative and an ideological construct.

The narrative that Hopkins constructs for Venus reconfigures the cultural meanings of black women's domestic labor. Both Marthy and Venus rely on a strong work ethic; however, Marthy conceives of work only through its relation to the black family, while Venus views labor as a method through which to challenge prescribed social boundaries. In so doing, Venus also challenges the actual meaning of domestic labor in the lives of black women. For some domestics, silence was a job assignment. As Collins points out, deference was key in determining the tenor of the relationship between employer and domestic employee: "Deferece mattered, and those women who were submissive or who successfully played the role of the obedient servant were more highly valued by their employers, regardless of the quality of the work performed."45 Collins further states that "the use of
space was also a major device in structuring deference behaviors. Domestics were confined
to one area of the house, usually the kitchen, and were expected to make themselves invisible
when in other areas of the house.46 I present these two commentaries on domestic behavior
not because they define Venus’s behavior, indeed they do not, but instead to show the extent
to which Venus reconstructs black women’s labor. As opposed to being degraded by the
visible/invisible status of the domestic, Venus capitalizes on this tension by using it to gather
the information she needs to find Aunt Marthy and Jewel. Consider her conversation with
a detective regarding her access to ‘private’ information:

I reckon I was, and a good job, or I couldn’t have this to tell you ... I was
standing there outside the door with the old Senator’s bootjack in my hand,
expecting that I’d have to go in and hit the General over the head with it to
protect the madam ... I just went in as soon as the General went out and I
picked the old lady up ... and when she came to herself there was nobody to
ask her what was the matter because they didn’t know what I could have told
them. (226)

Venus’s statement that her employers were uninformed "because they did not know what
[she] could have told them," serves a dual purpose in the text. In the immediate sense, her
statement fulfills the narrative function of providing the necessary information to save Aunt
Marthy and Jewel. On a larger scale, Venus enacts an historical method of resistance through
which she is also able to problematize the perceived privateness of the bourgeois white
home. Venus’s claim to knowledge exemplifies the hidden-in-plain-view resistance that
many domestics employed. Historically, the master class would speak freely in front of
servants believing that they could not decipher the meaning of their ‘private’ conversations.
But such conversations were a crucial source of information, and Venus’s ability to gather
such information destabilizes the supposed impenetrability of the elite white home. Indeed,
such a home becomes vulnerable to assaults on its sanctity from where it is least expected. Hopkins’s novel replaces the degradation of invisibility with an empowering use of it.

Venus’s ability to transgress prescribed boundaries is apparent not only in the home but also in other restricted spaces. As Collins has pointed out, patterns in black women’s labor and migration resulted in the construction of male/female spaces of social interaction. For a woman to enter such a space was indeed threatening, and Hopkins explores this phenomena through Venus’s willingness to move outside of the space sanctioned by her position. Interestingly, it is not the black male space that Venus initially enters, but the office of a white detective: "Presently a clerk entered the room and announced that a woman wished to speak with him ... Venus was not at all embarrassed by the novelty of her surroundings, but advanced toward the chief with a businesslike air, after making sure the retiring clerk had actually vanished" (222). In entering this space in an empowered, not servile state, Venus reestABLishes what is acceptable for the new black heroine. While traditional black heroines resolved to rely on marriage and the home, Venus’s move extends the heroine’s role into the public arena. This extension into the public is not the negative one usually accorded to black women; rather it is a foray into the public sphere that enables resistance. Ultimately, moving beyond the private into the public becomes a professional achievement. The detective asks her to take part in a daring rescue effort in which Venus must travel south dressed as a young man in order to rescue Aunt Marthy and Jewel from kidnappers. Though Higginbotham suggests that the transgression of male space can jeopardize a woman’s respectability, Venus actually uses this opportunity to confirm/renew her own sense of respectability.
After Venus has saved her grandmother and employer from certain death, she emerges as a new kind of heroine, one that does not replicate the class bias of more traditional race representatives. As such, Venus is pivotal to the emergence of a newly imagined uplift community in which representational heroines and common folk women can be represented as equals. Consider this passage near the end of the novel:

Supper was served in Mrs. Bowen’s [Hagar] private parlor. Anyone who entered the room would have been surprised at the kind solicitude and graciousness shown old Aunt Henny who was an honored guest. Mrs. Bowen’s attention was evenly divided among her step-daughter and the Old Negress. Venus waited on the company and for the time all thoughts of caste were forgotten while the representatives of the two races met on the ground of mutual interest and regard. (240)

With this passage, Hopkins comments on the necessity of cross-generational and cross-class uplift and respect, or as the text terms it, "regard." At the center of the newly imagined community is Venus who represents the past and the future. Though Venus’s skills as a novice detective have earned her a job offer and social mobility, she does not reject her beginnings. Indeed, she returns to the past during crucial moments: "Venus forgot her education in her earnestness, and fell into the Negro vernacular, talking and crying at the same time" (224).

Hopkins’s vision of the racial family was a radical one that called for a reevaluation of African American uplift politics. The message that she intended for her readers suggests that African Americans did not have to embody Anglo-centered bourgeois constructions of identity but could instead ground uplift in the continued significance of their own shared past. Thus Hopkins hoped that African Americans from Texas to Massachusetts and from
across the class spectrum, would open the pages of the *Colored American Magazine* at the same time every month to join in a collective struggle for racial freedom and justice.
CHAPTER FOUR

Notes


10. Qtd. in Doreski, 72.

11. See Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society,* trans. Thomas Burger with Frederick Lawrence (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1989), and Nancy Fraser, "Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy" in *The Phantom of the Public Sphere,* ed. Bruce Robbins (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993).


15. Qtd. in Bullock, 11.


17. Ibid., Introduction, xxxii.


19. Doreski, 75.


22. Mckay, 12.

23. Quoted in Johnson and Johnson, 8.


25. McKay, 10.


numbers refer to this edition and will hereafter be cited in parentheses in the body of the text.

32. Carby, Introduction, xxxvii.

33. It is important to note that in 1899, Washington, D.C. had the largest African American populations in the nation, a fact that probably influenced Hopkins's decision to use as the novel's site of narrative action. By the turn of the century, Washington, D.C. had a population of 86,700 African American residents. Other cities with large black populations included Baltimore, with 79,300; New Orleans, with 77,700; Philadelphia, with 62,600; and New York City, with 60,700. Incidentally, all of the cities, with the exception of Philadelphia, had CAM branch offices. See Christian, 286 for a discussion on the growth of African American urban populations.


35. Brooks, 146.


38. Higginbotham, 195.


41. Tate, 6.

42. Tate, 141.


44. Higginbotham, 196.

45. Collins, 57.

46. Collins, 57.
EPilogue
THE COMMON WOMAN AND THE WORK OF RESISTANCE

As we have seen in the preceding chapters, representations of the common woman are very much indebted to nineteenth-century political and intellectual debates surrounding slavery, emancipation, and the struggle for equality and citizenship. While middle-class representational heroines usually enter such debates, the common woman is an alternative to the bourgeois, respectable heroine, and exists outside of the frameworks of traditional resistance and uplift efforts. It is precisely because the common woman is not constructed of as a conventional, respectable race leader that writers are able to represent her as a more assertive and subversive character. Ultimately, the common woman facilitates a heightened understanding of nineteenth-century African American struggle for freedom and equality, while also creating a new imagining of black respectability.

Also important to understanding the usefulness of the common woman is the role of recovery. Not only does this figure give us a new interpretive framework, but it also gives us new texts to read. While many of the texts that I have discussed in this project are part of the African American and/or American literary canon, others such as Mary Prince’s The History of Mary Prince, Eliza Potter’s A Hairdresser’s Experience in High Life, and Sutton Griggs’s Imperium in Imperio, are certainly on the margin of African American literary studies. As I have pointed out, a partial explanation for their exclusion is due to the lack of an interpretive framework that recognizes other forms of resistance.
The available images of the common woman are important because they change the way we read and understand nineteenth-century African American literary production. Considering that much of the scholarship on women's writing from this era centers on sentimentality and the domestic ideal, the common woman's subversion and manipulation of domesticity is a useful contrast to such models. As we have seen, the common woman became the means through nineteenth-century writers could voice violent and aggressive critiques of racist national practices. With the exception of Mary Prince, who reserves her harshest critiques for British national policies, all of the common women discussed in this project make an effort to hold America accountable for its legally sanctioned racial injustice. As a result, the common woman reveals an identifiable pattern of alternative resistance that destabilizes the primacy of the representational heroine as the only voice of black resistance.

From Dinah's radical rejection of sentimentality to Venus's skillful manipulation of the rules of black respectability, the common woman has provided an important focus for evaluating canonical and non-canonical nineteenth-century texts. Indeed, by the turn of the century, the common woman emerged from the shadows of nineteenth-century contexts to become an acceptable alternative voice in black women's resistance efforts.

The West Indian slave past and its resistance practices provided an important cultural script for the articulation of the common woman's activism. Indeed, Mary Prince's narrative, *The History of Mary Prince* proved to be an important voice in the struggle for West Indian liberation. Although Stowe's use of the West Indian slave in past in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* does not prioritize black liberation, Stowe's characterization of Dinah as a marker of West Indian resistance challenges the perceptions of blackness available in the novel.
As the battle over American slavery intensified during the late 1850s, Eliza Potter’s *A Hairdresser’s Experience in High Life*, may have initially seemed to be the very antithesis to the struggle for black emancipation. However, as we have seen, the narratives of economic and personal autonomy in *A Hairdresser’s Experience in High Life* and Frances Harper’s *Iola Leroy* allowed the common woman an important freedom to speak the anger and frustration that elite activists could not. Moreover, Potter’s text breaks new ground in black women’s writing by linking pleasure and economic autonomy to a heightened sense of liberty. Indeed, liberty and the struggle for citizenship are central to an understanding of her autobiography. Frances Harper also examines the issues of equality and citizenship in her post-Reconstruction novel, *Iola Leroy*. *Iola Leroy* is immediately concerned with the uplift and representational politics, but the folk are central to the novel. In particular, it is Aunt Linda who proves to be one of the most intriguing representations of the folk in the novel. As the novel’s common woman, Aunt Linda follows in the model of economic independence established in Potter’s autobiography. Also important in Aunt Linda’s characterization is the way in which Harper uses her to voice the anger and frustration of the majority of blacks in the post-Reconstruction era.

The struggle for equality intensified by the turn of the century as seen in Sutton Griggs’s proto-nationalist text, *Imperium in Imperio* (1899). *Imperium in Imperio* is also invested in issues of citizenship and equality and uses the platform of black nationalism to pursue these issues. But despite the overwhelmingly masculine bias inherent in his black nationalism, Griggs’s novel makes space for a reading of the common woman’s intervention
in black nationalism. The historical narrative of black women’s organized labor activities is crucial in understanding Griggs’s portrayal of the common woman.

Griggs’s contemporary, Pauline Hopkins makes a valuable contribution to the study of the common woman through her work in the Colored American Magazine and in her serialized novel, Hagar’s Daughter. As we have seen, Hopkins uses Venus as a new imagining of black respectability that acts as a bridge between elite and non-elite African Americans. By the end of the novel, Venus has moved from the margin to the center of the text and becomes an important member of a democratized uplift community.

The influence of the common woman can be seen in black women’s twentieth-century texts, most notably those from the Harlem Renaissance. We can see traits of the common woman in a number of literary and cultural texts, including Nella Larsen’s Quicksand, Jessie Fauset’s Plum Bun, and the song lyrics of 1920s blues singers, in which the common woman emerges as a site of subversion and resistance. We tend to see Janie Crawford, the heroine of Zora Neale Hurston’s Their Eyes Were Watching God, as one of the earliest representations of the common woman’s working-class subjectivity. However, we can see that Janie Crawford’s characterization follows in the tradition of earlier common women, including Eliza Potter, the representation of Aunt Linda, and perhaps most importantly, Venus Johnson. I single out Hopkin’s Venus Johnson because she is an important transitional character between nineteenth and twentieth century representations of the common woman. Her manipulation of prescribed social spaces, as well as her subversion of traditional black respectability make her an important precursor for heroines such as Janie Crawford.
Despite the dawn of a new century and revived hopes for an equitable society, during the era of the Harlem Renaissance black America was still in the throes of a struggle for racial justice. At the forefront of the movement were a group of black intellectuals who believed that their artistic production would facilitate greater understanding between the races. This idea of a politicized aesthetic should sound familiar because the notion was at work as early as the turn of the century as seen in the work of the *Colored American Magazine*. Hazel Carby has argued that the era of the *Colored American Magazine* is a precedent for the era that we now refer to as the Harlem Renaissance:

...definitions of the Harlem Renaissance are notoriously elusive; descriptions of it as a moment of intense literary and artistic production, or as an intellectual awakening, or as the period of the self-proclaimed "New Negro" are concepts that are not applicable only to Harlem or the twenties. This particular cultural moment has come to dominate Afro-American cultural history and overshadow earlier attempts of black intellectuals to assert their collective presence .... The staff of the *Colored American Magazine* considered their journal to be a tool in the creation of a black renaissance ... but in no comparative study has been undertaken to reveal the relationship between the intellectual activity of Boston at the turn of the century and Harlem in the twenties.¹

Carby’s assertion is certainly true, and I would like to draw another parallel between Boston and Harlem. The periods are also similar in their efforts to create alternative representations of African American life. More specifically, I argue that like Hopkins, Hurston attempted to create a new model of black female respectability though Janie Crawford. Like Venus, Janie is inextricably linked to the slave past through her grandmother's experience in slavery. Also like Venus, Janie uses labor as a tool of empowerment. But perhaps the most important similarities between the two characters are the ways in which they traverse prescribed social boundaries and reorder black respectability.
From Janie's manipulation of the male space of the porch at Jodie's store to her return home following Tea Cake's death, Janie stands as an alternative to the more traditionally respectable heroines created during the Harlem Renaissance. Janie's version of black female respectability rejects middle-class patriarchal family structures and instead opts for a female-centered liberty in which she is free from external expectations regarding black female propriety. My primary point in identifying the similarities between Janie and Venus is to underscore the continued significance of the common woman in twentieth-century contexts. Ultimately, the common woman proves to be an important and lasting figure of alternative resistance and female liberty in the landscape of African American literature.
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