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ERA BELL THOMPSON: CHICAGO RENAISSANCE WRITER

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

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This dissertation examines and elevates the life and work of Era Bell Thompson, an obscure 20th century black American writer and journalist. Significant research in the archives of Chicago's Carter G. Woodson Regional Library's Vivian G. Harsh Research Collection unveiled the Era Bell Thompson papers. After spending years retrieving and examining over 100 boxes of material in the archives, the contributions of this important writer and intellectual to American women's literature and history will finally be fully recognized.

An integral part of the Chicago Renaissance movement (1930-1960s), Thompson differed culturally from the collective group of African American migrants from the South. She also worked in a traditionally male profession. Both circumstances contributed to her obscurity, but they also enhanced her point of view. Thompson, raised in North Dakota at the beginning of the century by her ex-slave father, offers a unique perspective as one who speaks from both inside and outside the American mainstream. As the first and only woman editor and writer at Johnson Publishing Company, she established a writing career as a foreign correspondent for *Ebony* magazine at a time when women and blacks were not traditionally found in such positions. A textual analysis of her autobiography, *American Daughter* (1946), travel narrative, *Africa, Land of My*

Fathers (1954) that includes a comparison to Richard Wright's *Black Power* (1954), and various articles published in *Ebony* and *Negro Digest* between 1947 and 1974 found Thompson to be a significant African American woman writer, comparable to Zora Neale Hurston.

Era Bell Thompson is best known for her use of humor and understatement as a way to critique many issues, including sexism, racism, and class-ism. She also uses humor as a radical means to shift the language of thinking about race. This is evident in her national and international writing, as Thompson framed African Americans worldwide positively, and provided readers with a broader perspective.

Preface

The Search for a Lost Writer

We are a people. A people do not throw their geniuses away. If they do, it is our duty as witnesses for the future to collect them again for the sake of our children. If necessary, bone by bone.

Alice Walker (December, 1976)

I discovered Era Bell Thompson at the end of the 20th century. I was a graduate student preparing for the Ph.D. Qualifying Examinations in literature at Rutgers University. I learned about her autobiography, *American Daughter* (1946), in the pages of Joanne M. Braxton's book *Black Women Writing Autobiography: A Tradition Within a Tradition* (1989). After over three years of research, most of it archival retrieval of over a hundred boxes of materials in the Chicago Public Library's *Vivian G. Harsh Research Collection of Afro-American History and Literature* in Illinois, I have come to realize that Braxton's scholarship was the most substantial analysis of *American Daughter* that had been done. I became impressed and curious about this overlooked black woman writer. I had suspected that Era Bell Thompson, like Zora Neale Hurston, was another lost literary mother. When Hurston's biographer, Robert E. Hemenway reminds us of how the novelist Alice Walker found Hurston's grave, "in a field of waist-high weeds" with "only the depressions of unmarked graves to guide her to an approximate spot," he notes that "Hurston's final resting place is symbolic of the black writer's fate in America" (3). Tragically, Era Bell Thompson is yet another example of a black woman writer who has suffered such a fate.

In Chapter 5 of her book, “Motherless Daughters and the Quest for a Place: Zora Neale Hurston and Era Bell Thompson,” Braxton pairs *Dust Tracks On a Road* (1942) and *American Daughter*. She notes that Hurston and Thompson both “represent the first generation of black women autobiographers that did not continually come into contact with former slaves. Their texts reveal a growing sense of displacement that is geographic, cultural, and social; it is accompanied by a reevaluation and rejection of the traditional female role” (144). Hurston and Thompson not only completely rejected traditional female and male roles, but they harshly and openly criticized a patriarchal system that contributed to their historical suppression. Similar, too, were the respective historical periods in which they were struggling to establish themselves as literary and intellectual women in male dominated eras—the artistic renaissances in Harlem and Chicago.

According to Pamela Bordelon, “Margaret Walker, whose professional career followed closely on Hurston’s...remembers Hurston as the only torchbearer. Evaluated in light of these social and racial barriers, it is evident that Hurston bore the burden as well as the accolades of being the first black woman to escape the narrow confines of the South and establish a professional writing career” (Bordelon, 19-20). Thompson is unique in that she is the only black woman to escape the isolation of North Dakota and establish a professional writing career in the same racially segregated, male dominated Chicago world in which her contemporary, Margaret Walker struggled to publish. It is telling that Walker never once mentions or acknowledges Era Bell Thompson, especially in her literary biography *Richard Wright: Daemonic Genius* (1988) where she discusses the imperiousness of the black press and the publishing empire in which Thompson was a major figure and the only female editor. Perhaps she never met Era Bell Thompson, but

how could she *not* have known who Thompson was? Both writers published articles in *Phylon*'s Fourth Quarter 1950 issue along with Gwendolyn Brooks, Arna Bontemps, Sterling Brown, Robert Hayden, Langston Hughes, Alain Locke, J. Saunders Redding, and George S. Schuyler among others. These names all appear on the magazine's masthead in alphabetical order with Thompson's name appearing directly above that of Margaret Walker as contributing writers. In October of 1952, the *Jackson Advocate* ran a major two-page spread with photographs announcing the 75th Anniversary Celebration of the Jackson College Literary Festival. The photographs of participating artists and celebrities included that of "Margaret Walker Alexander, poet" and "Era Bell Thompson, journalist and author." It is evident that both writers had personal and literary relationships with many of the same abovementioned writers, yet they did not appear to have known each other personally.

In the "Foreword" to Robert E. Hemenway's *Zora Neale Hurston: A Literary Biography*, Alice Walker recalls, "The first time I heard Zora's name, I was auditing a black literature class taught by the great poet Margaret Walker, at Jackson State college in Jackson, Mississippi" (xi). Considering Margaret Walker's part in helping to save Hurston from literary oblivion, I wondered how she could have missed the equal importance of one of her own contemporaries—Era Bell Thompson—as an autobiographer, humorist, and a national and international journalist during the 1940s, 50s, 60s and into the 1970s. Now I realize that Margaret Walker was too close to her own historical moment to "see" the era fully.

G. Lewis Chandler, who was a frequent contributor to *Phylon*, addressed the issue of canon building in 1951 when he confronted the myth of the “American Negro” failing to “produce belles-lettres in sufficient quantity and high quality.” He writes:

One does not have to be a literary scholar to know that the establishment of belles-lettres evolves slowly, that the emergence of a truly great literary artist or the flourishing of a school of such artists invariably comes to light only after the passing of many centuries of a people’s existence—. (384)

Chandler uses Western European literary history as a point of reference, noting, for example, that “over nine hundred years in the civilized part of her history passed before England contributed a Chaucer and a Gower to the Literary Hall of Fame” (384). Of course, African American canon building has only recently begun. Writers from the antebellum era are still being discovered in the 21st century. For example, *The Bondwoman’s Narrative* by Hannah Crafts, an original handwritten manuscript of 301 pages dated 1850, was found, bought, studied and with the help of many contemporary scholars of the 19th century, published in 2002 by Henry Louis Gates, Jr. A fascinating “autobiographical novel,” this work belongs with Harriet Jacobs’s *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, Harriet Wilson’s *Our Nig*, Hurston’s *Dust Tracks*, Thompson’s *American Daughter*, Richard Wright’s *Black Boy* (1945), and Gwendolyn Brooks’s *Maud Martha* as well as other autobiographical texts. The study of creativity, humor, and art in the African American literary canon will be explored through *American Daughter* (in Chapter Two of this dissertation), entitled *American Daughter’s Laughter and Pain: A Close Reading and Discussion*. It is just recently that now, after decades of obscurity, Hurston, one of America’s most prolific black woman writers is recognized as a literary mother and a major contributor to the Harlem Renaissance period, to African American culture, American history, the genre of autobiography and to the field of anthropology.

Era Bell Thompson established a career as a national and international journalist and editor for the world's most widely read black magazines—*Negro Digest* and *Ebony*. In terms of belles-lettres, Thompson distinguished herself with her own editorial column in *Negro Digest* that she comically called “Bell’s Lettres” (June 1949–November 1951) that received national attention. Many were very funny commentaries, written from the first person perspective. The author of two autobiographies—*American Daughter* (1946) and *Africa Land of My Fathers* (1954)—Thompson became a master of using the genre of autobiography and of using humor as a literary strategy in her work; she was incredibly successful at bringing humor into the pages of the “Negro press.” For example, Era Bell Thompson had been a contributor to Dewey Jones’ column of the *Chicago Defender* (1923–1924), publishing poems and prose, creating comical characters, including the cowboy moniker Dakota Dick. It is apparent that Thompson more than simply created this character; she literally became Dakota Dick, cross-dressing and stepping over the gender boundary when still a teenager, a strategy of protest and humor that would become a staple of her life’s work. Era Bell Thompson fell into decades of obscurity partly because she was left out, yet was part of a major movement in African American art, music, literature and history, a period that is just beginning to receive scholarly attention—the Chicago Renaissance. And ironically, Era Bell Thompson was one of the reigning literary figures during this pre-Civil Rights era of the 20th century where black journalism and its effects on the people helped create the energy that drove the Chicago Renaissance.

The connection to Zora Neale Hurston is significant in many ways. Hurston is a major figure of the Harlem Renaissance while Thompson is a major figure of the Chicago

Renaissance. Although Hurston published *Dust Tracks On a Road* (1942) at the end of her career, Thompson's *American Daughter* catapulted her into a professional writing career that began in 1946 and lasted almost 40 years, placing her at the center of the Chicago movement. In retrospect, it is almost as if Zora Neale Hurston passed the torch to Era Bell Thompson.

The Chicago Renaissance grew out of one of the most momentous yet least heralded sagas of American history—the great migration of four million Americans of African descent from the rural South to the cities of the north during and after the two World Wars of the twentieth century. Many migrants wanted to escape the horrors of sharecropping and Southern terrorism, so they traveled to Chicago seeking comparatively well paying factory jobs and better schools for themselves and their children. Robert S. Abbott, founder and publisher of the *Chicago Defender* championed this movement; sensationalistic news and banner headlines, along with its use of Pullman porters to distribute the paper throughout the South gave the *Defender* a great advantage over its rivals. Besides the *Defender*, the Chicago edition of the *Pittsburgh Courier*, *Chicago Bee*, *Chicago Whip* and several smaller community newspapers, there were few magazines that offered publishing outlets to aspiring black writers. *Negro Story*, Dorothy West's *Challenge* and *New Challenge* were magazines that “served as the national announcement of the Chicago Renaissance,” according to the *Oxford Companion to African American Literature* (Andrews, 132). A high point of the renaissance saw John H. Johnson launch Johnson Publishing with *Negro Digest*. In 1945, he and white editor Ben Burns went on to start *Ebony*, which would soon be the most widely read black magazine in the world. Era Bell Thompson was hired two years later, becoming one of

the very few black women who established herself as a writer and editor for a major publisher during the renaissance. She excelled in a journalism career that lasted nearly 40 years. Ben Burns, author of *Nitty Gritty: A White Editor in Black Journalism* (1996), recalls Era Bell Thompson, who despite being 4 feet 11 inches tall was a powerful figure and the only female executive at *Ebony*:

One of the first black editors hired at *Ebony* who was able to cling to the job through successive waves of ruthless firings by Johnson was Era Bell Thompson, the North Dakota author of an excellent autobiography, *American Daughter*. Era Bell eased her way to an *Ebony* office desk in the fall of 1947 on the basis of having written a book...She became a fixture on the staff, compensating for her diminutive stature with a combination of chip-on-the-shoulder bravado and super-sharp wit that was a plus in her writing style. Era Bell eventually became international editor before her death in 1986. (101)

A *Chicago Defender* article notes that during the renaissance, *Negro Digest* and *Ebony* “made Chicago the undisputed center of Black journalism in the United States” (5/16/98). As a prominent editor at *Ebony*, Thompson was in direct contact with both Harlem and Chicago Renaissance writers, making it apparent that the creative energy generated in Harlem had not simply ended in 1929; it had moved geographically to Chicago and merged to form the Chicago movement. Her position at Johnson Publishing Company allowed her to help keep in print both Harlem and Chicago Renaissance writers well into the 1960s and even the 70s. Her literary and personal friends included Langston Hughes, Arna Bontemps, William Stanley Braithwaite, Alain Locke, Robert E. Hayden, Carl T. Rowan, Gwendolyn Brooks, Willard Motley, George S. Schuyler, Jack Conroy and Mahalia Jackson, to name a few. Thompson’s importance as a literary figure is reflected in a letter from Harlem Renaissance poet Georgia Douglas Johnson who wrote to her in 1950 “to say that the February *Ebony* has struck a new high, both in subject

matter and the deeper and far reaching business of heartening its many readers who are so much in need of a word of encouragement and cheer” (Unpublished letter). This dialogue with the Harlem Renaissance writers was crucial to the Chicago movement. In addition, becoming international editor exposed Thompson to many areas of the world where she established professional and personal relationships. This exposure helped expand her awareness of racial and gender identity, which makes her unique and original perspective so valuable. It was Thompson’s extensive world travels while on assignment for *Ebony* that opened the international market to John H. Johnson’s publishing empire, an achievement for which Thompson has never received recognition. Thompson’s articles also gave *Ebony* readers a broader understanding of the world. However, the Chicago Renaissance planted its roots in the city’s South side, also called the “Black Belt.” This vibrant “city within a city” was also proudly referred to as Bronzeville where black businesses thrived and civic institutions flourished. Poet Gwendolyn Brooks, who was the first black person to win a Pulitzer Prize, achieved this with her first book of verse, *A Street in Bronzeville* in 1945.

Like 1920s Harlem, Chicago offered an explosion of creative energy generated by a new race spirit and gender consciousness. This feeling perhaps points to a new “New Negro” culturally, socially, and economically. It was an era that Era Bell Thompson clearly represents and perhaps even defines—as a woman, a feminist, an African American, author and successful journalist. Instead of choosing marriage and children, she chose the freedom to travel and to write, a difficult task for a woman especially at a time when “Rosie the Riveter,” once lauded as “an indispensable part of the life of the community” during World War II, became a “threat to America’s cultural, social and

economic security and stability” after the war.¹ Thus American women, white and black, became the focal point of a media campaign that emphasized domesticity and femininity. The effects of this campaign on black femininity are most apparent in texts such as Gwendolyn Brooks’s *Maud Martha* (1953).

Era Bell Thompson was known to be a remarkable and unusual person and one of the most important Chicago Renaissance writers, intellectuals and symbol makers. In interviews with me, several of her surviving contemporaries referred to her as “a woman before her time.” *Black Writers* recognizes her as “one of the most prominent black women journalists in American history. An ardent feminist (long before the views became politically fashionable), she refused to adhere to the sexist journalistic definitions of ‘women’s stories’ and ‘men’s stories.’ This resistance produced a perspective that “shattered previously accepted notions of appropriate ‘female’ journalism.” Therefore, Thompson broadened the minds of her audience by deconstructing “both racial and gender barriers” (617). *Black Writers* notes:

According to Judith Long in a *Nation* book review [of *American Daughter*], Thompson, in the course of her educational and professional pursuits, “crosses and re-crosses the [racial] tracks many times, never losing that wit and tenacity,” two personality traits she needs in the Chicago of 1933 where being black, educated and female are no assets to finding work.” (617)

When Era Bell Thompson arrived in Chicago in 1933, the small brown-skinned “girl” looked much younger than her 27 years and spoke with a “strange” Midwestern accent. Thompson felt alienated from the segregated black community in which she lived; she was shocked by blatant manifestations of colorism, sexism, and racism. Born to parents who homesteaded in North Dakota territories in the first decade of the twentieth century,

¹ Noted by Maria A. Brown, Professor of History and Women’s Studies at El Camino College during a national conference in 1999.

Thompson was reared in a racially and culturally isolated environment. Her connection with other African Americans primarily had come through the Chicago *Defender* that one of her three brothers mailed home. She was the youngest child and the only surviving daughter. When Thompson was twelve years old, her mother died suddenly. Although Thompson lived with her father into adulthood, she lacked any black female role models. And for reasons that are unclear, Thompson never wrote about her own family's interesting connection to slavery (her father was the slave master's son). Reeling from culture shock and appalled by the "color-line," Thompson recalls her first impression of the segregated black Chicago world she was restricted to in *American Daughter*:

I began to look around me and evaluate the world in which I found myself. Comparing it to white standards, weighing it on white scales, I found it wanting; found myself hating the common Negro who had recently migrated from the South without benefit of freedom or education, who, having never had rights of his own, lacked respect for the rights of others. I hated his loud, coarse manners, loathed his flashy clothes and ostentatious display of superficial wealth. Yet by his standards, all of us were judged; for his actions, all condemned and imprisoned in a black ghetto, separated from all the other peoples of the city by covenants of prejudice and segregation. (253-254)

However, although Thompson was appalled, she was also fascinated with the dynamics of race, class and gender in America and elsewhere in the world. And unlike the rage and anger of Richard Wright's *Native Son* and *Black Boy*, humor is the hallmark of *American Daughter*. Era Bell Thompson had learned early that a sense of humor is required in order to survive the sexism and racism that became a common reality in twentieth century America. Sadly, although I had read Braxton's book and managed to acquire a copy of *American Daughter*, I still had a difficult time finding this lost writer.

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ERA BELL THOMPSON: CHICAGO RENAISSANCE WRITER

By Eileen De Freece-Wilson

Introduction

Era Bell Thompson and the Chicago Renaissance

Woman must put her self into the text—as into the world and into history—by her own movement.

Helene Cixous (1975)

When Era Bell Thompson arrived in Chicago in the fall of 1933, she came with a newly earned bachelor's degree—the equivalent of a double major in sociology and journalism—and the dream of making an impact as a writer and journalist in the male dominated Chicago literary world. By the 1950s, Era Bell Thompson was well on board at Johnson Publishing as the only female managing editor and writer on staff, and it is more than probable that many unsigned *Ebony* articles published during that time had been researched and written by Era Bell Thompson. Unfortunately, she was not allowed to use her byline for much of her early writing at *Ebony*--unlike her male colleagues—until she fought for her right to be recognized as the author of her own work. This is evident in an angry letter dated February 18, 1952 that Thompson addressed to John H. Johnson. She writes, “I am the only managing editor who has regular columns in all three publications [*Ebony*, *Negro Digest*, and *Jet*] none for which I receive credit or recognition.” The tension expressed in this letter by Era Bell Thompson is disturbing as she argues for her rights as a professional journalist. She further states,

When I came to this job, I was a published author with a following of 200,000 readers, but during the four-and-a-half years that I have been in your employ, I have had only one *Ebony* byline. On the other hand, Mr. Clayton has had 8 in 3 years, Mr. Burley 5 in 9 months, and in the May issue, three editors, all with less than a year's tenure, are being given bylines. (2)

Thompson's situation was unusual, but not her treatment. Educated, professional black women writers routinely suffered similarly during that era as victims of outright sexism, racism and exploitation.

However, in 1933 Chicago, Era Bell Thompson was well aware of how daring her desire to work as a professional writer was; the fact that it was at the height of the Depression, and that she was a woman *and* an African American did not deter her. She came to Chicago after failing to secure financial support to pursue graduate studies at Howard University. Thus she opted for work, joining the throngs of job seekers pouring into the city. The first week, she went to the University of Chicago hoping to gain some field casework experience, and they offered her a part-time working arrangement, "but they were not very insistent. Colored girls, the lady inferred, were not very reliable," Thompson recalls in her autobiography *American Daughter* that would, ironically, be published by the University of Chicago Press in 1946. The second week, Thompson met with an aged and ailing Robert S. Abbott, founder and publisher of the *Chicago Defender*, the largest black newspaper in the world, but to no avail. It was not that she had no writing experience—she had been a contributor to Dewey Jones' children's column of the *Defender* during the 1920s publishing poems and prose, creating funny characters, such as the cowboy moniker Dakota Dick. It was actually very clever of Thompson to use an alliterative male pseudonym like Dakota Dick to attract a wider reading audience; it is also probably no accident that Dakota Dick is reminiscent of the

black ex-slave cowboy Deadwood Dick who was the inspiration for a popular fictional character from the 1800s dime novel by Edward L. Wheeler. Presumably, Thompson knew about the legendary Deadwood Dick and had perhaps read Wheeler's novel. However, under her comical male facade, Era Bell Thompson frequently reveals a feminine consciousness that she often uses to explore her own internal conflict as a young black girl coming of age alone, without her mother, lacking any attachment to a community of black women, or any African American community living in North Dakota. This is especially evident in a satirical piece entitled "My Clowning Glory," an early example of how Era Bell Thompson uses humor to mask feelings of self-depreciation, and also to create ambiguity. Clearly, her racial and cultural isolation is realized in this free verse poem published in the early 1920s.¹

MY CLOWNING GLORY

Hair.

Colored folks hair!

Tiny crisp black kinklets, sprouting from an
almost hidden ecru dome.

My knotted head flew back with a careless
jerk and my childish hand went up to smooth
back the imaginary curl which haunted my
eyes. Slowly the fingers encountered the
foremost sprigs of resistance then gradually
became hopelessly ensnared in an under-
growth of impenetrable jungle foliage. The
hand retreated, and a shade of poignant sad-
ness spread slowly over my already shaded
countenance as I reluctantly withdrew my
wistful eyes from the silk mass of golden
curls across the aisle.

But this too was hair.

My hair!

It had bangs too.

All over!

Just then a cruel gust of wind swooped down
upon me. Far up in the center of the battle-

field stood ten million strands of stubborn
rigidity. Ten million sentimentals: all up in
arms for their country. Each laboring for its
own end.

Independent, unyielding, gallant. Individual-
ity at its best. Surrendering only before the
mighty ordeal of oil and fire. But conquered?

Never!

In every drop of water, in every bead of
perspiration lie five thousand germs of mutiny
ready to overthrow the sources of good and
replace the old tyrannical kingdom.

Deep brunette, dyed-in-the-wool, steadfast,
no-run brunette.

Hair?

Yes Lord!

My hair, your hair.

A colored woman's clowning glory!

DAKOTA DICK

The use of the word “clowning” in the poem’s title is clearly a reference to the popular stereotyped images of African Americans as “clowns,” “buffoons,” and “Uncle Toms.” From a female perspective, the cliché that “a woman’s hair is her crown” comes to mind as the Bible refers to a woman’s “crowning glory.” Specifically, a “crown” is to be revered, connoting one’s status, like a King or Queen, whereas a “clown” is to be laughed at and ridiculed, like a jester or fool. The tension that is created by using the term “clowning” with “glory” adds to the poem’s satirical tone. In other words, Era Bell Thompson is not just commenting on hair as the first line of the poem might indicate; she is discussing “colored folks hair” and uses the exclamation mark to emphasize this point. But even more specifically, she is addressing her own feelings about her hair texture, especially when compared to the hair texture of the other (white) females in her North Dakota neighborhood. Thompson’s “crisp black kinklets” contrast sharply with “the silk mass of *golden* curls across the aisle” [my italics]. This reference to “golden” hair is

suggestive of Alice Walker's discussion in her book *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens* of the 18th century slave poet Phillis Wheatley who wrote about the "golden" hair of her mistress in, as Walker notes, "stiff, struggling, ambivalent lines" cleverly masking all kinds of emotions regarding Wheatley's ironic situation as an artist and intellectual, though enslaved (237). Era Bell Thompson's connection to Wheatley is pertinent, as this issue with black hair has negatively affected black female self-esteem for generations. In addition, Wheatley and Thompson share the experience of being unable to write openly about their feelings because of their restrictive existences, thus they both mastered the skill of "masking" using other literary strategies, like irony and sarcasm. Like Wheatley, Thompson has been misunderstood, which has contributed to her literary obscurity.

In her poem, Era Bell Thompson humorously presents the stereotypical connection of African Americans to the primitiveness of the African jungle when she says that her fingers "became hopelessly ensnared in an undergrowth of impenetrable jungle foliage." The humor in these lines is expressed through Thompson's mimicking of the girl "across the aisle," mocking her with the "careless jerk" of her head and "smoothing back the imaginary curl." Yet, Thompson is "haunted" by the golden curls, and she feels a "poignant sadness" as she moves "wistful eyes" away from the "golden curls across the aisle." Part of the humor is in Thompson's use of language; "kinklets" and "kinkdom" are her creations.

In "My Clowning Glory," the battle is an old one: the struggle between good and evil. In this case, it's "good" hair as opposed to evil or "bad" black hair that must surrender to "oil and fire" in order to be acceptable in a society that considers white skin and straight hair to be the norm. In *Black Metropolis* (1945) St. Clair Drake and Horace R. Cayton

point out that “the advertisements in the colored papers continue to call attention to such products as X SKIN WHITENER which promises ‘the thrill of lighter, fairer, brighter, younger-looking skin,’ or Y HAIR POMADE—‘Know the Joy of Straighter, Glossier Hair—Good-bye, Hair Kinks’” thereby effecting millions of black women (461). These advertisements imply that finely curled hair textures are “bad” when compared to straight hair, and that dark skin is undesirable. In the poem, there is a clear indication of brown-skinned Era Bell Thompson’s self-depreciation as she says, “a shade of poignant sadness spread slowly over *my already shaded countenance*” in comparing herself to the white girl with the blond curls “across the aisle” [my italics]. Certainly, this comparison of hair texture and skin color highlights how much Thompson stands out as different physically from other (white) females in her environment. She also criticizes the segregationist system, as being “across the aisle,” echoes being “across the railroad tracks.”

Humorously, Era Bell Thompson uses personification to emulate the battle between (bad) curly and (good) straight hair in “My Clowning Glory.” The “cruel gust of wind” seems to rouse the “ten million strands” on the “battlefield” that are “all up in arms for their country.” Here, Thompson’s ambiguity is apparent, especially when she calls the army “sentimentals” rather than “sentinels.” An argument could be entertained that Thompson made a mistake and actually means “sentinels,” which would fit the idea of there being an army fighting a battle. However, I am convinced that Thompson created “sentimentals” in the same way that she created “kinklets” and “kinkdom.” The use of “sentimentals” is interesting as it recognizes the emotionalism, the feelings of African Americans who must endure “the exceedingly complicated preparations and processes used in ‘straightening’ the hair of colored women (and some men) who have not been

favoured with ‘good hair,’” as noted in *Black Metropolis* (460-461). The use of “sentimentals” may also imply the so-called “tender” or “child-like” nature of African Americans, another popular cultural stereotype. Still, Thompson appears to hint at something positive as she fights against the destruction of black female self-esteem in a racist and sexist world. In fact, Thompson is struggling to maintain her own self-esteem; this is apparent in her use of “My” in the title and its repetition six more times throughout the piece. While many African American writers of that era speak from the collective perspective of “we” and “us” (Paul Laurence Dunbar is one example), Thompson underlines her sense of isolation from the collective group by using “my” and “I.” Perhaps realizing that she will never be that golden-haired white girl, Era Bell Thompson tells us that like the individual “strands,” of hair, she must also be “Independent, unyielding, gallant” and an individual in order to survive in a hostile environment. Like the “strands,” Thompson must survive the assault of “oil and fire” in her life, but she will never be “conquered.” Thompson emphasizes this point by stating emphatically, “Never!”

Furthermore, Era Bell Thompson uses humor to soften the reality that something as simple as a “drop of water” or plain “perspiration” can undo the painful process of hair straightening in a moment. Thompson calls this a “mutiny” to “overthrow the sources of good and replace the old tyrannical kinkdom.” The “sources of good” in the piece almost sound ironic as it seems that Thompson is ready to accept her own natural “Deep brunette, dyed-in-the-wool, steadfast, no-run brunette.” She ends the poem emphasizing how problematic it is for many “colored women” who no doubt battle every day with

their own “clowning glory,” suggesting the daily attack against black female self-esteem and self-worth.

Ambiguity is apparent in the phrase “five thousand *germs* of mutiny” in the context of the word “germs,” from the Latin *germen*, or sprout [my italics]. However, “germs” also implies a negative context since a germ is also a microscopic animal, plant or other organism that could cause disease; germs can be bacteria, viruses, or protozoa. This particular definition of “germ” would attack yet another popular stereotype used to describe African Americans: that they are an intellectually inferior species, not fully human, and thus, like germs or viruses, are, as W.E.B. DuBois noted at the turn of the century, a “problem” in (white) America. Obviously, the hardship African Americans suffered in the early decades of the 20th century, especially of the southern migrants, did not go unnoticed by Era Bell Thompson even though she was culturally isolated from the collective group geographically. Her knowledge of the Great Migration and information about black people primarily came from the *Chicago Defender*. And this knowledge is clearly expressed in “My Clowning Glory.”

As a young girl living in North Dakota, Era Bell Thompson had very little knowledge about the millions of African Americans living in the South. Although she understood that her darker skin color, her “Negro” blood, was somehow a stamp of assumed inferiority to most Caucasians, supported by so-called “scientific proofs,” Era Bell Thompson never believed any of the propaganda. Even so, she relates many instances where she suffered the degradation and irrationality of racism in *American Daughter*. At one point, she recalls “the statement in our textbook that said Negroes were black folks with kinky hair and a thick skull that education could not penetrate” (142). According to

St. Clair Drake and Horace R. Cayton in *Black Metropolis*, “Since the early days of the slave trade, dark skin-color has been considered a mark of inferiority—social, economic, and political—in the Anglo-American world. Africa has become the master-symbol of benightedness and savagery, its people being thought of as lowest in the scale of culture and civilization—perhaps even not fully human” (266). I can only imagine Era Bell Thompson’s humiliation and shame knowing that her own schoolbooks supported these myths meant to demean and deflate the humanity of her people. Taking into consideration her own early personal experiences with racism, coupled with having access to the radical, indignant Chicago *Defender* made such an impact on Era Bell Thompson’s psyche, that she eventually chose to be a writer and journalist, a mouthpiece for her disparaged people.

In *Land of Hope*, James R. Grossman discusses the astounding impact the *Defender* had on people throughout the country. Calling the paper “fearless, sensationalist, and militant,” Grossman notes, “To black southerners, the *Defender* represented unapologetic black pride, dignity, and assertiveness. From its inception, it offered itself as a crusader against the white South” (74, 75). And it did just that in the most graphic, gory details. I can surmise the thoughts and feelings of a very young Era Bell Thompson as she read about acts of barbarity and depravity committed against black people living in the South. For instance, Grossman notes one such article that a young Era Bell Thompson may have read, a *Defender* issue with the front page banner headline, “Southern White Gentlemen Burn Race Boy at Stake” that detailed, in a carnival atmosphere typical of mob violence, the horrific torture and burning death of a black boy with “red hot pokers” and “soothing irons” that were used to gouge out the boy’s eyes and dig “gaping places” in his “back

and sides” while he “moaned” in agony. As Grossman points out, the *Defender* was “more viciously anti-South than any other black newspaper” (75). It consistently attacked white southerners, spreading what Grossman calls “invective too dangerous to express openly in the South, identifying white leaders as ‘looters, grafters, lazy sinecurists, general no-accounts’ persecutors, killers of Negro men, seducers, ravishers of Negro women” (78). A point that Grossman emphasizes in his book notes the strong correlation between lynching and migration, and along with the influence of the *Defender* that “constantly reminded its readers of their oppression,” he credits the paper with being instrumental in propelling black movement from the south, making Chicago a popular destination for black Southerners. Apparently, Era Bell Thompson had learned early how black Americans were being brutalized in the South through the pages of the Chicago *Defender*, and given her choice to use a male pseudonym (Dakota Dick), it seems plausible that Era Bell Thompson also realized her own worth as a black female in the eyes of a racist and sexist world. Thompson shares her reaction to a lynching that occurred during the Chicago riots of 1919 in *American Daughter* after reading about it in the Chicago *Defender*. Thompson admits that it was “the first Negro newspaper I had ever seen” (113). The article affected her deeply. She says, “For a long time, I could see the lifeless body dangling from the tree” (113).

Three months before Era Bell Thompson was born in 1905, a thirty-seven-year-old Robert Sengstacke Abbott was “peddling on the streets and from door to door copies of a four-page paper, the Chicago *Defender*, bearing an arrogant subtitle, ‘The World’s Greatest Weekly,’” write Arna Bontemps and Jack Conroy in their book *Anyplace But Here* (103). Abbott, who would be known as the first black American millionaire was at

that time publisher, editor, business manager, and complete staff. During World War I, Abbott started a campaign to entice the Southern black agrarian masses north. By 1920, the *Defender* was a huge success with a circulation of 230,000, and with the help of Pullman porters who distributed the newspapers throughout the country the Chicago *Defender* became, in the words of Robert Bone, “the greatest single force in Negro journalism” (461). Sadly, when Era Bell Thompson finally met Robert S. Abbott for the first time in 1933, he was basically near the end of his life. In *American Daughter* she recalls that

Mr. Abbott, old and ill, was no longer able to leave his home. With bitterness he told me how his trust in others had been betrayed, of the need for loyal, intelligent young men and women to carry on in his place, yet he knew the note he was giving me to take to his office would do no good, that his recommendation no longer carried weight. (250)

Still, Abbott wanted to give Thompson a chance, and obviously, given his own astounding success, his instincts about people remained sharp, even at the end of his life. Obviously, he sensed something special about Era Bell Thompson who would enter the Chicago literary world over a decade later.

Although Era Bell Thompson had grown up in North Dakota, far removed from the racial and cultural experiences of the majority of black people in America, like them she experienced the degradation and ignorance of racial prejudice and white supremacy. But since she was almost always the only African American in this environment, as well of course as the only black female, writing poetry and prose from a young age helped her to cope with her isolation. Therefore, Thompson published many pieces in her high school and college publications. Also, Dakota Dick was not the only pseudonym that Thompson used in her earlier published work. After closely examining both her writing from the

Chicago *Defender* as well as many columns printed in the *Dakota Daily Student* during Thompson's college years at the University of North Dakota (UND), I believe that Thompson reserved her Dakota Dick character specifically for the *Chicago Defender* while the university columns were signed either "Arobel" or "Toney" (Era Bell Thompson's father's name was Tony).

The *Dakota Daily Student*, established in 1888, was student owned and controlled at the University of North Dakota, and it was a member of the North Dakota Central Press Conference when Era Bell Thompson attended in the mid-1920s. Published every Tuesday, Thursday, Friday and Saturday during the college year, the student newspaper provided many publishing opportunities for Era Bell Thompson who majored in journalism and served as one of seven Special Writers of what was called the "Stadium Staff." Apparently, Thompson was assigned sports coverage possibly because she proved herself to be an outstanding athlete at UND, having broken five state track records in one meet and excelling in tennis, field hockey, and basketball. However, under the column heading "Type-Louse Ravings," Thompson addressed many topics, using humor, satire, and to poke fun at professors, fellow students, courses, and the various academic disciplines. She cleverly created her own niche in the *Dakota Daily Student*. In one column she mimics the plays of William Shakespeare, and in others, she apes the British poets. For instance, in a piece called "Bromeo and Cascaret," a spoof of "Romeo and Juliet," Thompson writes two scenes, but in her version, they are called "Sceen Once," "Act Fast"; and "Sceen Twice," "Still Acting." She begins with a funny Prologue, and ends with an outrageous death. The byline at the end of the piece reads "Arobel Shakespeare."

In another column, the seriousness of domestic violence against women is presented in a satirical poem entitled, “My Man” that is highly disturbing. Its effectiveness as being *painfully* satirical is reminiscent of Jonathan Swift’s “A Modest Proposal,” which is an outstanding example of satire that unnerves and unsettles its readers. The poem struck me immediately as it reminded me of another poem with an eerily similar theme that was published over twenty years *later* by the Chicago Renaissance poet Gwendolyn Brooks. Interestingly, Brooks and Thompson became lifelong friends after meeting in the 1940s. Brooks told me personally in 1998 that she believed she was the last person to speak to Thompson before she passed away on December 30, 1986 as they had been planning to attend a New Year’s Eve party together.

In Brooks’ collection of poems, *A Street in Bronzeville* (1945) “the battle” is comparable to Thompson’s “My Man” as both authors explore the age-old problem of brutality against women in the domestic sphere. Strikingly, both poems are comprised of three stanzas, and Brooks also dabbles in satire, but on a lesser scale. Evidently, Era Bell Thompson was very aware and conscious of domestic violence, even in the isolated environment of 1920s North Dakota. She writes,

My Man

My man, he knocked me
 down the stairs,
 And kicked me with his toe;
 He ties me to the sewer pipe
 Because he loves me so.
 My man, he smashed me in
 the jaw,
 And knocked my front teeth
 out;
 With his big fist, and iron
 wrist,
 My man is so devout.

I cook his meals and mend his
 clothes,
 Sometimes I hold his hand,
 'Cause after all the ugly brute,
 Tho rough, he's still my man.
 ---Arobel.

It is interesting that Thompson repeats “my man” five times throughout the poem, including the title, perhaps to emphasize ownership, as if the speaker of the poem is so lucky. Such humor is Era Bell Thompson’s signature. In the last line of each stanza, it is implied that the abuse is so common it is really “love,” as expressed by the lines, “Because he loves me so,” “My man is so devout,” and “Tho rough, he’s still my man.” As is typical for women abused by their mates, there is denial. Fear, shame, and a total lack of self-esteem are common in such situations. The poem’s language excuses the brutality, as it is the way in which her “man” expresses his love. In the first stanza, being “knocked” down stairs and “kicked” is horrible enough, but the line, “He ties me to the sewer pipe” is a terrifying thought; abduction, rape and sexual perversion are inferred.

In the second stanza, the speaker of the poem is “smashed...in the jaw” and “front teeth” are “knocked...out,” implying the speaker’s conscious trade-off as it appears that her “man” is probably a good provider, with his “big fist” and “iron wrist”; it also suggests that the speaker in the poem somehow *enjoys* this treatment. More ironic humor. However, in reality, the man is the one in control while the woman is completely powerless and even at his mercy. This is disturbing since pioneer women and children living in the Dakota Territories were frequently isolated and sometimes subjected to abandonment, abuse, rape, and murder committed by husbands, fathers, and when left unprotected, by other men. Some of these women were Era Bell Thompson’s neighbors. In light of the recent acknowledgement lauding the importance of Thompson’s insightful

observations of horrifying health conditions afflicting African women and children during the end of colonial rule that was noted in her second book, *Africa, Land of My Fathers* (1954), these earlier observations of pioneer and native American women in the Dakotas deserve to be recognized as contributions to American women's literature and history.²

At the end of the second stanza of "My Man," Thompson is ambiguous with the meaning of "devout" that elicits ironic laughter. Comically, it infers that the speaker believes her man worships her, like a religion, and he is devout in his consistent abuse, an obsession that is "love." On the other hand, "devout" also refers to her man as being "religious," meaning respectable, which makes his brutal attacks all the more ironic and sinister. Clearly, "My Man" is an early example of how Era Bell Thompson uses humor and understatement as a technique to express her own anger and rage.

The last stanza seems to critique women who either believe they must play the "role" of caregiver and nurturer to be considered "good wives," no matter what, or that they have no other choices financially, especially living in the Dakota Territories in isolation with babies and young children to care for; therefore, feeling trapped, they remained in unhappy, abusive, even life threatening situations. When the poem's speaker says, "I cook his meals and mend his clothes," it seems there is little time for personal thoughts and desires; the speaker does not have any choice since refusing to "cook" and "mend" will probably result in a vicious attack against her and maybe even her children. Clearly, the poem's speaker is fulfilling the traditional female role, represented here as her man's personal slave. Still, after the graphic mental and physical abuse expressed throughout the poem, Thompson hits us with the last three lines, "Sometimes I hold his hand/ 'Cause

after all the ugly brute/Tho rough, he's still my man." The unconditional love of the woman is ironic as she holds "his hand," the same hand that causes her agony. The tone of "the ugly brute" is that of affection. It is ironic to think of such horrifying brutality as simply being "rough" treatment, but considering the reality of anyone living in such a volatile, dangerous situation the thought is very unsettling. Furthermore, the poem "My Man" can also be seen as an amplification of Era Bell Thompson's own alienation, which adds to the disturbance of the poem as readers consider that the speaker is the true focus of the poem, and not her "man."

Thompson's isolation in North Dakota, represented in the poem "My Man" is comparable to Gwendolyn Brooks' poem "the battle" but with one difference: Brooks' speaker is not at all isolated. Brooks, like her speaker, was part of a close-knit community of women living in racially segregated, over-crowded Chicago's black Bronzeville where there were many witnesses of violence against women. For those living in Gwendolyn Brooks' tight community of kitchenette apartments, privacy was a luxury. Thus, Moe Belle's brutal story in "the battle" is shared through gossip; and those critical black female voices are heard in the poem through the speaker, her "ma," and Moe Belle's "landlady." Still, the similarities between the two poems are intriguing. Both are written in three stanzas, differing only in line sequence as Thompson uses odd numbers with five lines in the first stanza, seven in the second, and five lines in the final stanza; Brooks uses four lines in each stanza. In addition, both poems exhibit rhyme schemes: Era Bell Thompson, in the first stanza, rhymes on the third and fifth lines, repeating this sequence in the third stanza; but in the second stanza, she uses rhyme on lines four and seven. However, Brooks uses rhyme on lines two and four in all three stanzas.

What differs greatly from “My Man” to “the battle” is the importance of having a community of women as expressed in Brooks’ poem. The sense of hope, and possibility of resistance is implied with the support of a female community in “the battle,” especially when the speaker says in the second stanza, “I like to think/ Of how I’d of took a knife/ And slashed all of the quickenin’/ Out of his lowly life.” However, that same sense of hope and conceivable resistance is totally absent from “My Man” as the speaker is truly on her own in rural North Dakota. Obviously, Era Bell Thompson is much more graphic in her depiction of the violence committed against the poem’s speaker, but when we learn that “Moe Belle Jackson’s husband/ Whipped her good last night,” and that they had “A knock-down-drag-out-fight,” we are mortified. In this way, we, the readers become part of the “gossip” and therefore a part of the community. But with “My Man” the reader is completely excluded. We, the readers, are in a sense, voyeurs helplessly peering in from the outside.

Besides writing for her high school and college newspapers, Era Bell Thompson had also published occasional articles and book reviews—in *Pulse* and *Physical Culture* magazines. Thompson tells us in *American Daughter* how after receiving fan mail “from colored pen pals beyond the hills” for her Dakota Dick writings in the *Defender*, and selling her first article to *Physical Culture* magazine for three dollars, she says she “hooked [her] wagon to a literary star” (152).

Yet, in those early Chicago years, Thompson took on domestic work and odd jobs so that she could maintain her room and board at the colored YWCA on Chicago’s South Side. According to James R. Grossman in his book *Land of Hope: Chicago, Black Southerners, and the Great Migration*, the first black YMCA, established in Chicago in

1911, was criticized by the black press for “catering to the ‘black Blue Stockings or better styled cod fish aristocracy of the race’” instead of aiding the newly arrived Southern migrants, following the examples of the Urban League and Ida B. Wells-Barnett’s Negro Fellowship League, organizations established by Chicago’s middle and upper classes that helped thousands of struggling migrants find work and a place to live in what was known as the Black Belt. Grossman notes how “the Wabash YMCA attracted criticism from others as elitist” (141). Indeed, considering Era Bell Thompson’s observations of the other young women living in the YWCA related in *American Daughter*, it is apparent that Thompson lived among the female black elite, as there were class distinctions in black Chicago. Thompson observes, “Many of the girls were pretty and expensively dressed...they were intelligent, well-mannered girls, with good schooling and from good homes” (194-195). Grossman explains the class structure in black Chicago. He writes, “Severely truncated at the top, this class structure rested less on wealth or contemporary white definitions of occupational status (except at the highest levels) than on notions of ‘refinement’ and ‘respectability’ maintained by the upper and middle classes” (129). However, Era Bell Thompson, a well-mannered college girl from a good home like the other young women, still “felt remote, apart, conscious of the difference between their backgrounds...wavering between the shame of not having and the pride of being able to do without,” she says in *American Daughter* (195).

I doubt nevertheless that any of the young ladies Thompson roomed with at the YWCA during the early 1930s received personal assistance from a state senator and former governor, as Thompson did. North Dakota governor Lynn J. Frazier, who later served in the senate, had been lifelong-friends with Era Bell Thompson’s father, Stewart

C. Thompson, also known as “Tony.” According to a local Driscoll newspaper article, Governor Frazier appointed S. C. “Tony” Thompson “as his personal messenger to the Legislature,” recognizing him as “the first colored man to be the governor’s messenger.” After Tony died in 1928, Senator Frazier remained in contact with Era Bell Thompson until the end of his life, as documented by their correspondence presented in her personal papers.

In *American Daughter*, Era Bell Thompson recalls that during her first year at Bismarck High School in 1921, her father “served his last session at the Capitol that winter, for it was the beginning of the end of Nonpartisan League control” (132). Therefore, he decided to throw a party for his “Capitol friends” at his home; Governor Frazier not only attended, he “was one of the last to leave” (133). In a sense, Tony Thompson could be seen as a representative Race Hero considering the definition provided by St. Clair Drake and Horace R. Cayton in *Black Metropolis*, who note that “any Negro becomes a hero if he beats the white man at his own game or forces the white world to recognize his talent or service or achievement” (395). There are many examples of such heroism in Tony Thompson’s life, documented by local newspapers of the era—in Iowa and North Dakota—that portray his involvement in early 20th century American politics. As the main role model for Era Bell Thompson, and because of the powerful impact he made on her life, the idea of Tony Thompson being a Race Hero, as well as the effects of black masculinity on Era Bell Thompson’s life, since her employer John H. Johnson was also a Race Hero, will be discussed more fully in the following chapters. However, Era Bell Thompson’s father’s relationship with Lynn J. Frazier benefited her decades after her father’s famous “Capitol” party, as she recalls that in 1933 “through

Senator Frazier's intercession, Howard University offered me part-time work, which would defray living expenses," efforts that aided Thompson's desire to pursue graduate studies; but without one of the two fellowships "that failed to materialize," Thompson realized that graduate school at that time was out of the question, so she instead sought employment in Chicago (248).

Era Bell Thompson must have been astounded when she first stepped into the Black Belt, an area that was designated as one of the world's largest concentrations of African Americans by 1930, especially coming from the isolation and rural lifestyle of North Dakota. Affectionately called Bronzeville, it was a place comprised of many different people, from the black bourgeoisie to the poorest Southern migrants. Thompson gives her first impressions of Chicago's Black Belt in *American Daughter*:

Chicago was a city of splendor and squalor, excitement and disappointment...I saw city slums, black slums, black poverty, and black prosperity side by side, for the streets of the Black Belt were dotted with Negro business houses, from imposing banks to greasy lunch counters, and in between were the white-owned food stores, foul with the smell of rotting vegetables and live poultry; white-owned clothing stores displaying cheap, gaudy merchandise, inviting credit. (195)

In Era Bell Thompson's observation, there exists understated criticism of white male exploitation that masks her rage at the indignity of the racial hierarchy that allows such impropriety to exist. Though Thompson was appalled by the worst of Bronzeville, she felt intrigued by the phenomenon of movement, the energy generated by the migration as it occurred in successive waves, beginning with the first initial mass movement in 1914, at the start of the Great War. *Black Metropolis* notes, "In 1910 Chicago's Negroes were a relatively small group of servants. By 1920, they formed a large segment of the industrial proletariat. Between war's end in 1918 and war's beginning in 1939, over 100,000 more Negroes were absorbed by Chicago's rapidly expanding economy" (76).

In the decade following Era Bell Thompson's arrival in Chicago, various odd jobs and living situations in black Chicago gave her many opportunities to learn about and try to understand the community. After each job, she realized that she gained "a little more knowledge and understanding" of her people (*American Daughter*, 257). At one point, she was confronted with the ideology of colorism when working for a young middle-class couple that could, and did pass for white. Thompson realizes, "I had unwittingly moved into a society of borderline people, Negroes who pass for white on the job, for economic reasons, but remain colored socially" which apparently fascinated her, but it also made her feel uneasy as she began "to feel a color line within the color line, boundaries within black boundaries," she explains in *American Daughter* (254). Although she had opportunities to leave black Chicago during the Depression years—her cousin wanted her to return to North Dakota, and the "Riley's" (actually the O'Brien's, her surrogate family) invited her to live in Ohio--she chose to stay in her "new black world" (255). It wasn't until Thompson worked for the Illinois Occupational Survey in 1935 as an interviewer that her eyes were truly opened to the horrifying living conditions of migrant masses new to the city. She writes in *American Daughter*, "It was my first contact with the intimate home life of the city's poor, and I was shocked by the illiteracy of the young as well as the old, the stark poverty in which they lived, the lack of shame and decency manifested in the telling of their stories, and I was touched by their deep appreciation for kindness" (260). Stunned by the condition of their homes, Thompson notes that "the majority of them were less than dungeons: bare, dirty, rat-infested rooms, crowded to overflowing, breeding grounds for crime and disease" (260).

Such horrifying conditions were also captured in photographs and prose expressed in Richard Wright's book, *12 Million Black Voices* (1941). Thompson's keen observations of the homes, or "kitchenettes" connect her to Richard Wright and other writers of the Chicago Renaissance. For instance, as already noted, Gwendolyn Brooks also explores "kitchenette" living through the various perspectives represented in her poetry and in her prose. However, while Thompson uses understatement in her observation of these "Negro homes," Wright bitterly attacks the full scope of corruption, angrily opposing the very idea of the "kitchenette," and he condemns all those who profited from them (and we cannot forget that in *Native Son*, it is revealed that the Daltons owned the "kitchenette" building that Bigger's family inhabited). Wright even hints at the possibility of genocide, which was actually not inconceivable, given the 1940s government project referred to as the "Tuskegee Experiment." In *12 Million Black Voices*, Wright laments, "The kitchenette, with its filth and foul air, with its one toilet for thirty or more tenants, kills our black babies so fast that in many cities twice as many of them die as white babies" (106). This horrifying statement is justified as the black and white photographs in Wright's book show readers the disgusting truth.

On the other hand, Gwendolyn Brooks presents an educated narrator who explores the subconscious mind of the character Satin-Legs Smith, one of those "kitchenette" dwellers in her poem, "The Sundays of Satin-Legs Smith." Focusing on a day in the life of a black male ghetto dweller, Brooks presents social commentary on racial disparity in Bronzeville, represented through the self-defined Satin-Legs who is a dismal failure in a segregated society that will not allow him to progress socially, economically, nor politically. Yet, Satin-Legs manages to survive. As a Southern migrant having "old

intimacy with alleys, garbage pails,” this former sharecropper no doubt understands what it means to be poor, exploited, and brutalized by Southern whites. But on Sundays, he sustains himself not by going to church, but by being oblivious to his downtrodden environment. He’s not even aware of his poverty as he prepares himself for his day, meticulously cleaning and dressing himself, as if he were a member of the Royal Family. Brooks comments on Satin-Legs’ concentration on presenting a stunning surface appearance by way of “wonder-suits in yellow and in wine/ Sarcastic green and zebra-striped cobalt,” outrageous “Zoot Suits” complete with “drapes,” “shoulder padding,” and “ballooning pants that taper off to ends” and hats “like bright umbrellas; and hysterical ties,” all taking the place of true material wealth. After a movie date, Satin-Legs’ various “ladies” offer, at the end of the night the superficiality of casual sex for the price of a “meat platter” dinner at Joe’s Eats. In the end, Satin-Legs Smith takes ownership of his lady’s “honey bowl,” “Whose waiting honey is deep and hot.” He can now be the exploiter, taking pleasure in controlling the only thing left in a society that constantly negates his manhood—the black female body. The poem also recognizes the benefits of enjoying the small things in life, an effective strategy for surviving in a hostile environment. Small pleasures, perhaps the only ones available, can soothe stress. Similarly, looking forward to getting into “lukewarm water” is an image from one of Brooks’ most frequently anthologized poems, “kitchenette building.” Satin-Legs is reminiscent of Era Bell Thompson’s initial appraisal of the people living in black Chicago, related in her autobiography. It almost seems that Thompson is describing Satin-Legs with “his flashy clothes and ostentatious display of superficial wealth” (254).

In 1938, Era Bell Thompson entered Northwestern University's graduate program in journalism, working for the WPA during the day as a clerk/typist, and taking a night class at the university. While a graduate student, Era Bell Thompson single-handedly started a one-page humorous newspaper in her office to ease some of the employee tension; she called it the *Giggle Sheet*. In *American Daughter* she says, "I got out a little one-page newspaper and surreptitiously passed it around the files. It made them laugh. I wrote another, poking fun at the higher-ups and flattering my best friends." The newspaper became popular and spread to other departments. One of the supervisors who read Thompson's *Giggle Sheet* told her, "You belong on the Writer's Project, where you can develop your talent. I'll see what can be done" (275). Unfortunately, since the salaries of "certified professional workers" were below Era Bell Thompson's salary, she had no choice but to stay. But if she had joined the Writer's Project at that point, she probably would have been a member of the South Side Writer's Group, along with Richard Wright, Margaret Walker, Katherine Dunham, and Gwendolyn Brooks, among others, all still in the initial stages of their writing careers.

The *Giggle Sheet*, which grew from a one-pager in 1938 to a ten-page newspaper in 1941, represents an early example of the positive nature of corporate publications on office employees. Thompson realized that humor, and especially laughter, relieves stress and creates a more positive feeling in people, thereby encouraging a more positive environment. Her ability to use humor effectively is a quality that defines her as an integral part of the Chicago Renaissance. Langston Hughes also uses humor in his "Simple" stories that were published in the *Chicago Defender* during the 1950s. Given the friendship that he shared with Era Bell Thompson, it is possible that the two writers

shared many conversations about writing. This connection to Langston Hughes, a Harlem Renaissance writer who helped establish the Chicago movement, will be discussed in the final chapter of this dissertation, entitled *Crusading Journalism During the Chicago Renaissance: Era Bell Thompson's Impact*.

Ultimately, Era Bell Thompson found herself at the center of the Chicago literati both as a focal point and as a facilitator of other writers' and artists' work. Her literary connection to such writers as Hughes, Brooks, Wright, and even the sociologist E. Franklin Frazier, to name a few, remains unexplored. For instance, it is not widely known that Langston Hughes and Gwendolyn Brooks were literary and personal friends of Era Bell Thompson, or that her only connection to Richard Wright is ironic; unfortunately, the publication of two of her books—*American Daughter* in 1946 clashed first with Wright's powerful *Black Boy* (1945), and eight years later, again with *Africa Land of My Fathers* in 1954 which coincided with *Black Power*, Wright's book on Africa that was released in the same month—were thwarted by Wright's literary prominence. And although it seems unlikely that Thompson knew E. Franklin Frazier personally, there is evidence that he used information from *Ebony* magazine in his book *Black Bourgeoisie* (1957) that had been apparently researched and written by Era Bell Thompson who could not use her byline, meaning she received no credit in Frazier's book, indicating the sexism she confronted in the corporate structure of Johnson Publishing. These literary links will be explored further in Chapter Three, entitled *Africa Travel Narratives of the Twentieth Century: Africa, Land of My Fathers and Black Power*, as well as the aforementioned Chapter Four.

Unwittingly, Thompson had stumbled into a burgeoning historical period now recognized as the Chicago Renaissance, referred to as the second literary flowering of African American cultural activity of the twentieth century that flourished in Chicago between the 1930s and 1960s, with the possibility of there being an early Chicago Renaissance period that happened simultaneously with the Harlem movement, especially regarding classical music, which figured more prominently in the Chicago Renaissance, including classical black composers such as Florence Price, Margaret Bonds, William Dawson and Lena Mc Lin. Popular music also thrived with Bessie Smith, Thomas A. Dorsey, Charles Albert Tindley, Mahalia Jackson, Louis Armstrong, Lil Hardin and King Oliver all associated with the city. This is evidence to support the idea that the two periods, Harlem and Chicago, overlapped. I maintain that this period is a crucial link in the formation of the African American literary canon and that it distinguishes itself by its longevity; it intersects and merges with both the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s and the Black Arts Movement of the late 1960s, creating an arc between the periods. Era Bell Thompson was a major literary figure within this renaissance.

In the Preface of the March 1951 issue of the Chicago based quarterly journal *Phylon*, editors Mozell C. Hill and M. Carl Holman struggled to articulate a context in which to address the effusion of “Negro literature” that flourished during the 1930s and 1940s, without having to “re-hash the ‘Negro Renaissance’ period.” That period—the earlier Harlem Renaissance—represented the male dominated New Negro movement that had ignored and overshadowed black women writers. The context that Hill and Holman sought in 1951—the Chicago Renaissance—was introduced by scholar Robert Bone in

his seminal essay, “Richard Wright and the Chicago Renaissance” (1986). Towards the end of his essay, Bone sums up his main thesis:

If the main thesis of this essay is valid—if there was in fact an identifiable generation of black writers holding the ascendancy from 1935 to 1950, and if this generation found its locus in the city of Chicago—then the current version of Afro-American literary history is in need of serious revision. The prevailing wisdom postulates a Harlem Renaissance in the 1920s, and a second literary flowering, associated with the Black Arts Movement of the 1960s. But our sense of the intervening years is at best vague and indistinct. (466, *Callaloo*)

I applaud Bone’s scholarship and his attempts to establish the Chicago Renaissance as an important period in the African American literary canon, but I am suspicious of his insistence on setting this period from 1935 to 1950, when by 1950 the renaissance was, from another, wider, more fairly inclusive perspective, in full swing. In addition, it is disturbing to realize that though John Johnson’s publications are discussed in his essay, Robert Bone never once mentions the journalist and author Era Bell Thompson. What is even more surprising is the reality that Bone’s most recent scholarship on the Chicago Renaissance continues to emphasize and focus primarily on male intellectual influences of the era, concentrating on the period’s sociological origins which Bone insists began with the ideas of University of Chicago sociologist Robert Park, whom Bone called “the most learned white [man] on black issues” at a conference I attended called “Creative Women of the Chicago Renaissance” in 1997. According to Bone, Park, along with his two “protégés” Charles Johnson and E. Franklin Frazier, helped to develop the basic texts of the period. Wright, St. Clair Drake and Horace R. Cayton are just a few of the male intellectuals of the era that Bone heralds. Unfortunately, that “sociological vocabulary emanating from the University of Chicago” that Bone reveres so much is the same one that “contributed to the contemporary attacks on and historical suppression of Zora Neale

Hurston and Ann Petry,” noted by the *Oxford Companion to Women’s Writing in the United States* (1965). Defining the period only in terms of “the school of Richard Wright,” “protest literature,” or “proletarian writing” as Bone so freely does in his essay guarantees the continual negligence and suppression of an integral body of literature, art, dance and music created by African American women that not only help fill in that gap in the period, but whose recognition is crucial in fully defining it. It is troubling that Bone’s earlier, once influential book, *The Negro Novel* (1965) contributed to the neglect of black women writers, especially Frances E. W. Harper who authored *Iola Leroy* (1893), a text that was summarily dismissed by Robert Bone in his book. Also, the idea that there is a “Chicago School” that defines the period, a term that Bone repeats throughout his essay, dismisses critical issues that affected black women in every major city, especially in the north, and not just Chicago. As a result of this kind of racist and sexist thinking, Ann Petry has been denied proper recognition within this period because according to Robert Bone, “she did not actually live in Chicago.” However, Bone fails to highlight the fact that much of Wright’s work was written and even published while he lived in Paris, yet Bone remained unchallenged when he recognizes Richard Wright as being the pivotal figure in the Chicago Renaissance.

However, the Chicago Renaissance differs from the Harlem Renaissance in that Chicago became the place where black self-sufficiency, determinacy and expansion into American culture took place more fully, as noted by the many “firsts” for African Americans that flourished during that time. For instance, in terms of literature and art, Gwendolyn Brooks was the first person of African American descent to win the Pulitzer Prize; photographer Gordon Parks was the first black person to be hired by the

mainstream *Life* Magazine; and the composer Florence B. Price was the first black woman composer in history to have a symphony she composed performed by a major orchestra. And just as Robert Bone points out, the black sociologists of the era like Charles S. Johnson, St. Clair Drake, E. Franklin Frazier and others also represent black “firsts.” Ironically, the same paternalism espoused by white scholars like Robert Bone became more and more obsolete during the Chicago movement as black artists and intellectuals increasingly positioned themselves so that they could research, study and write their own cultural and literary histories. Black journalism gave them the opportunity on a national scale to tell their own stories and become their own voice, a voice that was authentic and not subject to the manipulation and control of white benefactors, which often happened during the Harlem Renaissance (Zora Neale Hurston is one example of this). The many instances of black “firsts” that occurred during this time has become a hallmark of the Chicago movement.

Unequivocally, Era Bell Thompson’s connection to black journalism during this era is key to understanding the Chicago Renaissance, especially given her early exposure to the *Defender*--as an avid reader and contributor. And her contribution to the genre of American women’s autobiography with the publication of *American Daughter* (1946), and also to the travel narrative with *Africa, Land of My Fathers* (1954) needs to be fully acknowledged. The *Oxford Companion to Women’s Writing in the United States* notes Thompson’s autobiography *American Daughter* (1946) as “a necessary complement to the bleak portrait of black Chicago in [Richard] Wright’s *American Hunger* (written 1944, published 1987)” (166). Ralph Ellison, Arna Bontemps and Nelson Algren were among those who reviewed it. Poet, literary critic and journalist William Stanley

Braithwaite, a long time personal and literary friend, called Thompson's second book, *Africa, Land of My Fathers* (1954) "the creation of a poet's vision" (Unpublished letter, 3). Yet no substantial review of this book has been found and as far as I know it has never been reprinted, although the book was also translated and published in German in 1957. The author of two extraordinary autobiographies—*American Daughter* (1946) and *Africa, Land of My Fathers* (1954), Thompson excelled in her long career at Johnson Publishing Company. In 1963, she co-edited with another *Ebony* editor, Herbert Nipson, a book entitled *White on Black: The Views of Twenty-two White Americans on the Negro*. These essays, published in *Ebony* between 1950 and 1963, were written by a number of prominent white Americans, including Eleanor Roosevelt, Pearl S. Buck, William Faulkner and Billy Graham. Era Bell Thompson's name can be found in numerous magazine and newspaper articles, and in literary journals of the era alongside those of other well-known writers such as Richard Wright, Langston Hughes, Arna Bontemps, Margaret Walker, Sterling Brown, Owen Dodson, Gwendolyn Brooks, and George S. Schuyler, to name a few. Brooks, journalist Carl T. Rowan, and novelist Chester Himes mention her in their autobiographies. In 1946, poet Robert E. Hayden wrote to her seeking help in securing publication opportunities, inquiring about the Newberry Library Fellowship she had been awarded to write *American Daughter*. Her personal papers reveal that she had long-standing personal relationships with Brooks, Hughes, Bontemps, Schuyler, Willard Motley, Braithwaite, Alain Locke, and South African author Peter Abrahams, who along with Catholic missionary priests, helped smuggle copies of *Ebony* into South Africa when it was considered contraband by the government. Among her white literary colleagues were Jack Conroy, Bernard De Voto, Stanley Pargellis and

Elizabeth Kata, to name a few. She was highly regarded and respected by all her literary colleagues and friends, black and white. Her position at Johnson Publishing Company enabled her to keep in print many of the writers of both the Harlem and Chicago Renaissances, yet Era Bell Thompson today remains virtually unknown. Her many incredible contributions have been completely and blatantly ignored by most scholars of African American literature. How is it possible that such an obviously important twentieth century American writer as Era Bell Thompson, who was a national and international celebrity, remains neglected and relatively unknown?

The answer to this question is well known by scholars of women's writing. The deliberate devaluation, historical suppression, and neglect of America's black women writers seem to have become a tradition itself. Like Zora Neale Hurston, Era Bell Thompson is a glaring example of this disregard. It has only been in the last two or so decades of the twentieth century that the Harlem Renaissance women writers have gained some recognition. That is why establishing the Chicago Renaissance in wider terms is so critical; the period can help restore such neglected figures as Era Bell Thompson, Fern Gayden, Dorothy Sutton, Margaret Danner, and Margaret Burroughs, to name a few. It also elevates the literary prominence of newly discovered Harlem Renaissance writers by firmly entrenching them in the American literary tradition. For example, more than one source has indicated that Marita Bonner, associated with the Harlem Renaissance, should be credited with writing the first major work of the Chicago period. Her "Frye Street" stories, though not published in book form until 1987, were written both before and after she moved to Chicago in 1930; these anticipated issues of desolate urban conditions that Richard Wright presented in *Native Son* (1940). Nella Larsen, another Harlem

Renaissance figure and a Chicago native also anticipated these concerns in *Quicksand* (1928). Complete recognition of the Chicago Renaissance as a period lasting from the 1930s to the 1960s establishes the importance of black women artists such as Dorothy West, Katharine Dunham, Shirley Graham, Lorraine Hansberry, Zora Neale Hurston, Ann Petry, Gwendolyn Brooks, Margaret Walker and Anne Moody.

Many people who recall Era Bell Thompson usually remember her as a journalist, and that she wrote an autobiography. But evidently, it is now being revealed that Thompson was more, much more. Certainly, she was also a poet; I uncovered a manuscript of unpublished poems perhaps worthy of publication, including the first five chapters of a book Thompson left uncompleted called *Fifth Estate* that focuses on her journalism career at Johnson Publishing. At any rate, Thompson's work—all of it—deserves to be read and studied in the academy, and recognized as valuable American literature.

¹ Dakota Dick appeared in Dewey Jones's *Chicago Defender* column in 1923 and 1924.

² According to Scott McClintock, Member and Viewer Services of Thirteen WNET New York, after a search of the programming data base failed to locate the exact program which featured Era Bell Thompson's words, he wrote: "A look at her life and work indicates that her words could have been quoted in programs such as AFRICAN AMERICAN LIVES, AMERICA BEYOND THE COLOR LINE or RISE AND FALL OF JIM CROW. Unfortunately, transcripts for these shows are not available."

Chapter One

Biography of the “Interesting” Life of Era Bell Thompson: Lifting the Veil on an American Daughter

Research is formalized curiosity. It is poking and prying with a purpose. It is a seeking that he who wishes may know the cosmic secrets of the world and they that dwell therein.

Zora Neale Hurston

Era Bell Thompson’s first biographer, Kathie R. Anderson, who published the article, “Era Bell Thompson: A North Dakota Daughter” in *North Dakota History* in 1982, had sought to “remove the fiction in *American Daughter*” for her article. Anderson had even pursued inquiring about Thompson’s personal life in North Dakota and at Johnson Publishing Company, which made Era Bell Thompson a little nervous. She responded to Anderson, “I understand that you have contacted others about my background...if you are planning a book, heaven forbid!” The key lies in the two words that Thompson had underlined for emphasis, including the exclamation mark. Obviously, Thompson did not want her personal life to be revealed, at least not while she was still alive. However, like Anderson, I, too, sought the details of Era Bell Thompson’s fascinating and unusual life, and I now understand why Era Bell Thompson recoiled from the thought of being completely unmasked during her lifetime; she feared she might be misunderstood. In this chapter, I intend to reveal what is absent, silent, and unknown about the life of Era Bell Thompson in an attempt to better understand this overlooked black American writer.

Certainly, Era Bell Thompson’s perspective as an African American woman represents much more than the usual “triple” consciousness often assigned to black

women, to extend W.E. B. Du Bois' concept of double-consciousness espoused in *The Souls of Black Folk*; Thompson's outlook reflects a multi-consciousness, a sense that she can cross all kinds of boundaries whether intellectual, psychological, physical, or racial. In terms of gender, though Thompson acknowledged her femaleness, and has been recognized as a feminist, she still always utilized that part of her self as "one of the boys," especially being raised in a household full of males as the only daughter and the youngest child. This early alignment with black male conceptions of power, achieved through keen observations of her father, and relationships with three older brothers, empowered Era Bell Thompson who began crossing gender boundaries from a very young age, as noted by her use of the cowboy moniker "Dakota Dick," who reported from North Dakota in the *Chicago Defender* during the 1920s. Thompson once commented in the Black Women Oral History Project, "I used to pretend I was a cowboy, and write articles in Dewey Jones's column in the *Chicago Defender*. In my make-believe world, I was accepted" (9). Even then she had recognized that as a black female, she would not be considered in any way intellectually equal to black men (or any men); in fact, she spent most of her life as a black single woman fighting the stereotype that because she was a black woman, she might be a prostitute, a myth that she addresses in her books and other writing. Actually, Thompson represents what I recognize as a Race Woman and Hero, similar to Ida B. Wells-Barnett, Mary McLeod Bethune and others. With the publication of her autobiography in 1946, though Thompson announces herself as a daughter of America, at times her story is told, in a sense, with a sort of truncated "male" outlook in mind, as if Era Bell Thompson had really been born the fourth son in the family, and was fooling everybody with her female façade, represented by the idea of

Dakota Dick, a character that made her feel accepted by the outside world, thereby empowering her. It was this early empowerment that enabled her to later become “one of the boys” on the staff of one of the most influential black publications in the world-- *Ebony* magazine--where she was the first and only female editor. Furthermore, this ability to cross boundaries aided in her world travels, as she became acclimated to successfully navigating male dominated spaces, cultures, and politics all over the world. Much of her success has to do with early influences and role models. For Era Bell Thompson, those role models were specifically male--black and white. In fact, her main inspiration came from an ex-slave—her father. As an extremely gifted and talented person, she should be recognized as an important writer who has made a major contribution to black American women’s writing, especially in the genre of autobiography with the publication of her first book, *American Daughter* in 1946, and later as a professional journalist and foreign correspondent with her travel narrative, *Africa, Land of My Fathers* in 1954. In her books, Thompson perfected the first person narrative technique, a technique she used in her journalistic writing during her 40-year career as a writer and editor for Johnson Publishing Company in Chicago.

Besides her creative and professional successes, there lies a person who had no choice but to maintain her signature sense of humor in all aspects of her eighty-one years of life, as a way to survive changing and often hostile environments. I have noted, for example, that Thompson seemed to laugh easily at herself and others as a way to handle personal trauma or to mask harsh criticism, as often illustrated in her work; with access to her personal files, I managed to unveil a rare peek into the inner sanctum of Era Bell Thompson, a part of her self that she hid well from her professional friends, family and

colleagues. I also have unearthed an impressive manuscript of Thompson's many poems, a treasure trove of emotions, ideas, introspection, and literary nuance that offer various insights into Era Bell Thompson's psyche. Indeed, of all the materials read, copied, and studied in her personal papers, I discovered one piece of writing that best reflects the meaning of one terrible glimpse into Thompson's private world, a world in which the seriousness of deep despair, desolation and depression is best explained by way of a poem she wrote when her father, her idol and first role model, passed away on July 29, 1928; it had been published in an issue of the *Chicago Defender* with her signature byline, Dakota Dick. The poem is entitled "Alone!"

Alone I came
 Onto this earth,
 Alone was I
 Alone at birth;
 Alone I sang
 And laughed
 And played,
 Alone I sought
 My Lord
 And prayer.
 Alone must I be
 When I die?
 Alone, alone, alone
 Am I.

This fourteen line, thirty-eight word poem is a reaction to the loss of Era Bell Thompson's father, and perhaps it is also an elegy for her mother, lost so young as Thompson had, in her private scrapbook, placed the *Defender* clipping of the poem alongside her father's obituary that had been published in a local Driscoll, North Dakota newspaper. "Alone!" represents an example of ambiguity and introspection as the poem could, on the one hand, reflect her father's perspective, fearing having to die alone, meaning without all his children by his side since his wife had preceded him in death.

However, Thompson, who had been living in Chicago, experiencing her first trip there at the time of her father's illness and ultimate death, barely made it back to North Dakota before he passed away; she did not have enough train fare to leave Chicago right away. In *American Daughter*, Thompson recalls the urgent telegram she received from her uncle, James (Jim) Garrison (John Evans in *American Daughter*), her father's half brother, informing her of his grave illness. She writes: "A telegram from Uncle John said that my father was very ill, and that I should come home at once. I didn't have the price of the ticket. The next two days I lived in a daze, waiting for the money that would take me to him, hoping he would not die, but he was seventy-two. I hadn't realized before that my father was an old man" (198).

On the other hand, Era Bell Thompson's brothers had been unable to attend their father's funeral at all, which had been a terrible blow to grief-stricken Thompson. Therefore, twenty-two year old Era Bell Thompson, already devastated by her father's unexpected death, was left to bury him alone, with only "My Lord/And prayer" for comfort. Thus, the poem represents a double meaning in the biographical context. But it is also true that the poem's feeling could be representative of any man (or woman). The sense of guilt and grief emanates from the poem's repetition of the word "alone" ten times, including the title, punctuated with the emotional exclamation mark. The question, "Alone must I be/When I die?" is a question asked with the image of Thompson's dying father in mind from one perspective, but from another viewpoint, Era Bell Thompson rhetorically and metaphorically asks this question, perhaps in consideration of her own fate, feeling orphaned by her parents and abandoned by her brothers. Thompson felt overwhelmed by the pain of her immediate family's absence and the sorrow of having to

return, alone, to the grave of their mother who had been, at the time, deceased ten years; this ordeal was probably tearing open an old wound for Thompson who had been traumatized at twelve years-old when her mother suddenly passed away at the age of forty-seven. The poem “Alone!” is an example of how Era Bell Thompson tries to hide in plain sight, burrowing her self, the core of her private emotions, beneath, in this example, the anguish and despair of deep grief. For the first time in her life, Era Bell Thompson felt truly “alone.”

Another aspect of the poem that is revealed, in terms of Thompson’s grief over the loss of her father, is a sense of guilt, especially in light of a letter that her father had sent four months before his death. Reading closely, I recognized the implication that her father wanted his only daughter to return home to North Dakota, although he does not openly say so; naturally, he sensed his impending death. The letter impresses me because it is the only typed letter from her father in the collection. Thompson would later recall that her father learned how to type when he was seventy. I also sensed that Thompson may have previously quarreled or had a disagreement with her father. Thompson says in *American Daughter* that she departed for Chicago in early March, five months before he died. Her father, her earliest influence, always encouraged her desire to write, travel, and pursue a college education, but in this instance, he seemed to ache for her presence. He writes,

Dear Daughter,
I want to hear how you are & how are you getting along & have you anything in sight yet? You should [know] that you are my chile & always will be; yes, I forgive & forget...you have something to write, but I have nothing to write. Just finish[ed] my 4th treatment of Dr. Henderson yesterday for my back; I feel so much better. You must write often & I do. I am very sorry I have n[ot] got the money [because] if I did I would move to Chicago so I could be with you. Good By[e]; I cannot live much longer without you.¹

Reading these words must have been troubling to Era Bell Thompson, being so far away. She would painfully recall, “I’d already left home, trying to find a job” (Oral History 3).² At the time, as a young black woman seeking to define her self and establish a writing career in 1928 Chicago, she was hardly focused on the happenings of North Dakota; she had been overwhelmed with and shocked by her first real contact with black people in her entire life.

Four and a half months after receiving her father’s letter, Thompson received another letter dated July 24, 1928, informing of her father’s being rushed to the hospital “in a very serious condition,” where he had undergone surgery for “strangulation of the intestines,” but unfortunately, gangrene had set in. Privately, besides all the other emotions of grief, Era Bell Thompson suffered a sense of guilt—guilt for leaving her aged father in North Dakota when he had obviously been not well. Perhaps, as is common with children, she blamed herself. This guilt is evident in *American Daughter* when Thompson writes, “I wondered what it was that I had sought to escape, running back and forth from prairie to city, trying to find myself and my people, only to lose my father: not seeing the forest for the trees” (198). After the long, uncomfortable train rides back to North Dakota, Thompson reached her father’s bedside at the hospital in Bismarck. She says, “My father opened his eyes when I touched him, and for a brief moment the veil lifted. ‘My Baby, My baby!’ he whispered through fevered lips. ‘You come to me at last.’ His thin, yellow fingers clutched my hand, his eyes closed, and he slept again” (199). Thompson sat by her father’s bed all night with her Uncle Jim and his Irish wife, Ada (Ann in *American Daughter*). She writes, “All night we sat beside his

bed, waiting...Again I stood by helplessly watching the other part of me die. The breathing grew louder, the pulse weaker. I went to the window and looked out over the quiet town toward the bluffs by the river, gray and forbidding now...alone I stood by the window and prayed for my father to die” (200). Besides having a sense of guilt, Era Bell Thompson was also depressed, overwhelmed with grief, which spills over into the beginning of Chapter 12, “Secondhand Girl” of *American Daughter* as the sense of being alone is further emphasized. She says:

Alone, this time, I stood at the grave. Dry dust. Death. Emptiness. Then a merciful numbness crept over me, stifling unwept tears. Between two deaths I stood at prairie eventide; the last symbol of family lay lifeless at my feet. Gone, too, were the bonds and obligations, and in their stead a bereftness, a desolate freedom. My life now was my own choosing, and there could be no more coming home....My father was dead. (201)

Therefore, the poem “Alone!” reflects Era Bell Thompson’s deep feelings of grief, fear, guilt and sadness, emotions that she hid well from the outside world. The poem’s solitary echo would be felt throughout her life.

It makes sense to begin Era Bell Thompson’s life story with the man who was the dominant person in her life, her earliest role model—her father, a representative Race Man of the era who was also respected as a Race Hero by many who knew him. As mentioned previously, authors St. Clair Drake and Horace R. Cayton in their book, *Black Metropolis: A Study of Negro Life in a Northern City* (1945), define what it means to be one type of Race Man--the Race Hero. “The Race Man is usually a politician or a business man,” Drake and Cayton note in their book. However, as noted earlier, they also define a Race Hero as a Negro who “beats the white man at his own game or forces the white world to recognize his talent or service or achievement” (395). Era Bell

Thompson's father, Stewart Caval (Tony) Thompson, had been both a politician and a businessman who had been publicly recognized for his service and achievement by both blacks and whites. Tony had worked in the mines at Carbondale, Illinois and had held the position of treasurer of the local union there at the turn of the century. After he moved to Des Moines, Iowa, he became known as a "prominent Des Moines Negro" who advocated politically for the black communities of Des Moines and of Peoria, Illinois, as noted by local newspaper clippings of his speeches stored in Era Bell Thompson's personal papers. He also served as an attendant in both the Iowa and North Dakota State Senates in the first decades of the 20th century. One article, entitled "Colored Voters to Get Fair Play: Des Moines Man says New Rule Provides Chance for his Men to Get Better Jobs" states:

An earnest audience of Peoria's colored citizens listened to the commission form story of Des Moines by S.C. Thompson, a representative colored man of the Iowa capital, at Armory Hall, 523 South Adams Street, Thursday night. C.E. McNemar and judge I.C. Pinkney also made brief addresses in which they told of the colored man's opportunities under the democratic plan.

Thompson assured his listeners that the colored men of Des Moines are faring better in the way of municipal labor than was ever the case under the alderman system. The wages, too, are higher, the pay of laborers being \$2.20 a day whereas formerly it was only \$2.00. He advised his people to vote for the government under which they got the square deal and declared that in Des Moines that was the commission system. "At first I hesitated in accepting the invitation to your city because I thought my coming might be characterized as 'interference' by the opposition," said Thompson. "But the advantages of the new government over the old have been so manifest in my home that I felt it would be only my duty as a citizen to take the message of hopefulness and progress to my fellows in Peoria. Almost everything has improved, in every branch of city business," and then the speaker went on and enumerated the advantages Des Moines has enjoyed under the commission plan.

After moving to North Dakota in 1914, Tony Thompson again made an impact in state government. In January of 1917, Tony traveled to Bismarck to serve as private messenger to Governor Lynn J. Frazier who was the first Nonpartisan League Chief Executive; Tony

also served in the 1919 and 1921 sessions. His appointment as “messenger” was announced in at least two North Dakota newspapers. One article, entitled “Great Foot Racer Messenger for Governor” provides interesting information about Tony Thompson that is absent from *American Daughter*. The article states:

No appointment that Gov. Frazier made showed better judgment than that of S.C. Thompson of Driscoll, as his personal messenger to the Legislature. Mr. Thompson is better known as “Tony” a name, which was given him because he was the fastest foot racer in the neighborhood. And he still is fleet of foot. He is the first colored man to be the governor’s messenger. “Tony” has had distinguished people under his wing before. He chaperoned Pres. Cleveland and his bride on their honeymoon. He is some politician. Single handed[ly] in 1910, he elected a minor councilman in Des Moines, Iowa. He had the Municipal restaurant there. Tony is now farming at Driscoll. He is married and has four children, 1 girl and 3 boys. His oldest boy, Carl is 21. Oh, yes, Tony was also one of the guards at the naval parade at the inauguration of Pres. Harrison.

Tony Thompson’s obituary provides even further details about his earlier political life, stating that he “had the distinction of serving many dignitaries in an official capacity. When Cleveland, the bachelor, became Grover Cleveland, the husband, Mr. Thompson had the honor of chaperoning them on their honeymoon journey from the National Capitol to Deer Lodge Park, for Tony was the private car porter for the Cleveland’s on the Baltimore and Ohio.” In addition to Tony’s political life, he was also known to be a religious man “found annually at the Methodist Camp meeting at Jamestown and served as ‘chef’ at that event for a number of years.” Tony had actually met his wife while serving as a chef in a popular restaurant in Freeport, Illinois in 1896. He became known as an excellent chef in many communities, even preparing many of the family’s meals. In *American Daughter*, Era Bell Thompson recalls her experiences attending the religious camp meetings in Jamestown where her father was head chef. At one such meeting,

Thompson recognizes her father's multi-talented abilities, abilities that he used to survive. She observes, "He had changed again. On the farm he was lost, confused, dependent on the Lord; at the capital he was suave, genteel, dignified; but here in the hot kitchen, he was again Tony the cook, quick, sure, skillful" (85).

In *American Daughter*, Era Bell Thompson creates an exemplary image, a portrait of her father that recognizes him as a Race Man, Hero and pioneer to be admired and respected. She projects him as a man who did not fear society's restraints, even as a black man and ex-slave. Thompson recalled, "My father was the son of a slave-master. His mother was the cook in the so-called big house, so he was born a slave. He played with his white half brothers and sister, who taught him how to read and write. And as a young boy, he in turn taught the slaves...he was a very outgoing personality, a very vibrant person" (Oral History 2). This demeanor and attitude was unwittingly passed on to Era Bell Thompson, his only daughter. As a result, Thompson was well equipped to become a Race Woman of the 20th century. Her relationship with her father probably explains her professional success at Johnson Publishing Company where she had to work closely with another Race Man who made an impact on her life—John H. Johnson, her boss. I will come to the details of her relationship with Johnson later, in Chapter Four.

Hazel V. Carby addresses the idea of Race Men in her book of the same title (1998), noting the lack of the "reproduction" of Race Women. In the Introduction of her book, when Carby discusses W.E.B. Du Bois' *The Souls of Black Folk*, she writes:

Although [Du Bois] declares that he intends to limit his striving 'in so far as the strife is incompatible with others of my brothers and sisters making their lives similar,' beneath the surface of this apparent sacrifice of individual desire to become an intellectual and a 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. (10)

How ironic that in light of Carby's above observation, Era Bell Thompson, the only female in a family of males, had become an important intellectual and writer of the 20th century, over and above the accomplishments of her brothers, who barely made it through junior high school. Carby notes, "As an intellectual, Du Bois was obviously concerned about the continuity of intellectual generations, what I would call the reproduction of Race Men" (25). In Era Bell Thompson's case, that "reproduction" produced a Race Woman. The problem, says Carby, is that this focus on reproducing Race Men created an anxiety, and that "this anxiety continues to be evoked in the work of contemporary black male intellectuals," like Cornel West and others (26). As a result, black intellectual women like Era Bell Thompson continue to be undervalued in American literature. This gendered epistemology has also disenfranchised many other black women intellectuals historically, including Frances E.W. Harper, Pauline E. Hopkins, and Zora Neale Hurston.

In *Black Metropolis*, St. Clair Drake and Horace R. Cayton differentiate between the terms Race Man and Race Woman in their footnote, indicating that they are also operating with the same "narrowly and rigidly determined codes of masculinity" that Hazel V. Carby has pointed out in her book. They write:

The term Race Man is used in a dual sense in *Bronzeville*. It refers to any person who has a reputation as an uncompromising fighter against attempts to subordinate Negroes. It is also used in a derogatory sense to refer to people who pay loud lip-service to "race pride." It is interesting to note that *Bronzeville* is somewhat suspicious, generally, of its Race Men, but tends to be more trustful of the Race Woman. (394)

Drake and Cayton note that Race Women were considered to be more sincere and less willing to “ ‘capitalize on her activities like a Race Man,’ ” but they fail to pursue a complete discussion, only mentioning “Mrs. Mary McLeod Bethune” as a footnote (395). The most comprehensive discussion of Race Women takes a short, quick, dismissive paragraph in their book where they only recognize “civic virtue for the upper-middle class” Race Woman who provides “uplift” through involvement with organizations, and “contacts with white liberals, trade unionists, and politicians. She derives prestige as well as personal satisfactions from ‘advancing The Race,’ and she is the keeper of the upper-class conscience” (543). This obviously sexist attitude, teeming with class bias regarding the idea of Race Women is a clear example of how black male intellectuals have failed to imagine black women as intellectual equals, as Carby rightfully notes.

In terms of being influenced by a Race Man, Era Bell Thompson’s father was not the only such figure who made an impression on her private life. One aspect of Era Bell Thompson’s personal life that she had been very successful at hiding is her love life. Since she had never married, nor had children, friends, family and colleagues were curious. As a matter of fact, she kept her affairs such a secret that many people suspected that she may have been a lesbian, or certainly that she had something to hide. The question of Era Bell Thompson’s sexual preference surfaced more than once as I sought personal details about her life. However, there is no evidence that Era Bell Thompson was a lesbian. But if Thompson had known that her sexual preference would one day be questioned by so many people, I am positive that she would have enjoyed a great hearty laugh because after all, the joke is on us, which is her wonderful trademark.

Actually, Era Bell Thompson had experienced the passion of a long relationship with one particular man whom I believe she truly loved. His name was Sherman Briscoe,³ an information specialist of the United States Department of Agriculture who was also a journalist. Thompson had kept three photographs of Briscoe in her private collection along with a box jammed with love letters from Briscoe, including an old newspaper clipping about his professional success as a writer and “Race Man.” The newspaper article is entitled, “Sherman Briscoe Provides Service For Farmers” by Gaylord P. Godwin,⁴ a United Press International correspondent. The article, perhaps published in the mid to late 1950s, includes a shot of Briscoe, a dark, handsome man wearing eyeglasses, a white shirt and tie, and holding the receiver of a telephone to his ear. The petite Era Bell Thompson, who looked much younger than her age, for years maintained an athletic build from her college days when she was known as “the most representative co-ed in track” and other sports at the University of North Dakota; she and Briscoe probably made an attractive couple, well-suited educationally and intellectually. Godwin writes:

Briscoe, 52, is a Negro, born and reared on a sharecropper farm in Mississippi. He won an A.B. degree from Southern University, Baton Rouge, La., and an A.M. degree from American University, Washington. He taught school, edited a weekly newspaper in the south, and once was city editor of the *Chicago Defender*. He joined the department in 1941 and immediately began writing about agriculture as it affects Negroes. His work won him a superior service award.

The piece also notes Briscoe’s wide audience. “He mails copy once a week to about 160 Negro newspapers and magazines. If he has a feature story on the successful achievements of a Negro farmer, the copy also goes to other newspapers in the area,” Godwin explains. Briscoe states in the article, “I want to help the Negro to see the

brighter side of Negro life...I try to bring to the Negro the success story of Negro farmers. The Negro already knows of his failures and he seldom sees stories of the successes that Negroes have racked up. Such stories cheer them.” This kind of racial uplift communicated through the use of the black press during the Chicago Renaissance period further supports the argument that what spurred the mass movements of black people from the south had everything to do with the power of the press during this era, but the black press also reported helpful information to those who chose to remain in the rural south to farm instead of migrating to northern cities. Godwin writes of Briscoe, “His copy usually consists of a collection of news stories important to Negro farmers. He frequently explains the use of department facilities, especially those relating to soil conservation, credit, and extension, or education, work.” Godwin notes that there were “about 300,000 Negro farmers in the United States” at this time, with about 150,000 owning their farms and 135,000 on tenant and sharecropper farms. Through the use of “Negro agricultural extension workers in the 17 states of the southern region,” along with “Negro home demonstration agents who teach rural homemakers to grow year-round gardens, and can or freeze fruits, vegetables and meats to reduce out-of-pocket costs,” thousands of black farmers in the south were aided, thanks to the efforts of Sherman Briscoe. Clearly, Era Bell Thompson would have respected Briscoe’s efforts and commitment to help the black farmers who remained in the south, especially during a time when southern terrorism and violence towards blacks was at its peak.

Given the large number of love letters that Sherman Briscoe sent to Era Bell Thompson between 1961 and 1977, and recognizing that she had carefully “edited” his passionate words by whitening out and cutting away large sections of many letters in order

to mask the true nature of their relationship, I have discovered that Thompson's secrecy had more to do with her crossing yet another boundary—Sherman Briscoe was married. Since they both were journalists who traveled extensively, they could have met secretly in hotels in many locations, as indicated by their correspondence. The two probably first met in a professional capacity, given Briscoe's writing career, and perhaps they were even friends at first, but by 1961, it is clear that the two were lovers. Yet, Briscoe's obvious paternalistic sensibilities did not go unnoticed by Thompson, even though she loved him. For example, in a letter dated Dec. 11, 1961, Briscoe writes, "Enjoyed our little visit and I am glad I had the chance to see you again before your long voyage. You were sweet as always, only our visit was so short...Seeing you pack, & seeing you pretend at least to be taking my advice about what to take gave me a feeling of proprietorship of the most wonderful piece of property in the world." Era Bell Thompson, who edited everybody's letters that were sent to her, had underlined "a feeling of proprietorship of the most wonderful piece of property in the world." In addition, I find it interesting that Briscoe often refers to Thompson as a "girl," calling her "my sweet girl" on the one hand, but noting her as a professional woman on the other when he says, "It's hard for me to conceive of a career woman in an outstanding profession—and at the top of the profession being so tender and sweet." Briscoe's paternalistic tendencies are noted in another letter, in which he assures her, "don't worry about your weight. I would love [you] no matter what size. And I am glad you are short. It gives me an opportunity to love you as a woman and also to satisfy my fatherhood instinct. I feel a sense of being some kind of protector when I am around you." In addition to wanting to protect her, Briscoe enjoyed one of the few moments when Thompson unwittingly revealed a part of her

hidden “self” during a walk together. He writes, “I recall again and again our stroll through Central Park, and how frightened you were of the pigeons. That stroll was one of the great delights of my life.” Thompson rarely revealed her childhood fear of feathers, having been taunted by her brothers as children with the heads of butchered chickens on the family’s North Dakota farm. This rare view of Thompson’s vulnerability provided Briscoe with an equally rare opportunity to “rescue” her, giving him a glimpse into her private realm.

Briscoe’s letters are passionate, stamped with many endearments, such as “Be sweet, darling.” “I love you,” including salutations that begin letters with “Era Bell Darling.” There are many letters that were written during Thompson’s extensive world travels that imply the nature of their relationship. This is evident in a letter dated April 6, 1961: “The thought of having you in my arms again after all these months gives me a real lift.” In another letter, he writes, “I certainly know what I want. I want you—all of you everyday every hour.” On April 28, 1962, Briscoe confirms plans for them to meet as Thompson returns from a trip abroad. He writes, “I will make reservations for you at the Statler [Hilton] and for myself at the New Yorker. How is that? The two hotels are less than a block away, as you know, from each other. I’ll be at dockside when the S.S. France arrives. I’ll be prepared to play it coy and safe in case some of your staffers meet you.”

A letter dated March 29, 1963 reveals Briscoe’s situation as a married man. Era Bell Thompson had apparently threatened to end their relationship. He responded:

Era Bell, darling:
 Your last letter was disturbing. Of course, I can understand your feelings. I wish so much that things were otherwise. My home situation is trying and depressing. I have an extremely difficult problem. Some day I may tell you about it. But through these difficult months and years, your friendship has meant so much to me. Please don’t take it away.

Most of Briscoe's letters have been so carefully edited by Thompson that they lack dates, and some have been so dismembered that what remains is a mere paragraph when it seems that pages had been eliminated. In one letter, which I believe predated the sexual aspect of Briscoe and Thompson's relationship, Sherman Briscoe aggressively pursues her. He writes, "I had ached to hold you in a crushing embrace, but dared not. It was like having one foot in heaven in a position out of St. Peter's range of vision. You are afraid to enter because you feel sure he will throw you out, but you will not leave, because one foot inside is better than no glimpse at all of the promised land." This points to Thompson's struggle with her conscience as she had fallen in love with a married man. As a professional woman with a strong sense of ethics, Thompson probably tried to resist; ultimately, she made a personal choice.

The reality that Thompson was truly "the other woman" is reflected in a letter dated October 26, 1966 as Briscoe writes, "Was up to see my son and his family last week. Enjoyed it very much—especially taking my grandchildren shopping. We bought toys and candy..." Of course the "we" noted in his words probably refer to he and his wife or grandchildren. This situation emphasizes the feeling and meaning of Thompson's earlier poem, "Alone!" as Briscoe obviously enjoys his family while Thompson remains alone. Still, Briscoe passionately writes, "I'll always love you, no matter what. It's a case of great admiration growing into love. I have missed you all my life. Before I knew you existed, I needed a person like you—one gentle and kind and loveable." Yet, there is evidence that had Briscoe been divorced and therefore available to Thompson, the relationship might not have been successful, primarily because what seems to fascinate Briscoe about Thompson—her professional success—would have become problematic to

Briscoe if she had been his wife. This is revealed when Briscoe says, “You know, trying to win the real you and assure myself are real tasks. I seem to be wandering around in the corridors of your mind, trying to find an open door. They all seem to be closed, marked: Ebony, Africa, new book, VIP, and strictly private. This last door, or should I say, inner door is the one I really want to enter...”

Besides the obvious sexual compatibility, another strength of their relationship lies in the way each also connects professionally, both being journalists and writers concerned with improving the lives of African Americans. Although Briscoe’s letters, taken together, represent a sort of one-sided epistolary reading of their relationship, and of course noting Thompson’s many editorial excisions, it is apparent that this relationship predates what is common today when educated professionals marry or cohabitate—two professional “heads of household.” I sense that the two shared their professional successes, and even competed with each other in that sense. For instance, I noted a Post Script by Sherman Briscoe, after first confirming plans for the two to meet, writing passionately, “Darling, it will be so nice to see you and be with you. We should be able to do a lot of living in parts of those two days. Holding you in my arms, talking to and with you, dreaming and feeling dreams fulfilled, being silent, and saying more than mere words”; after ending the letter, “With love, Sherman,” Briscoe adds, “P.S. By the way, I addressed the student body at the American University of Cairo Wednesday morning. They wanted one of us to tell them about our exhibit, and its agricultural background. I was selected to do the job.” Here, Briscoe refers to the International Agricultural Exhibit held in Cairo, Egypt March 21-April 21 during the 1960s in which Briscoe served as “Stateside information coordinator.”

After awhile, it becomes clear that Thompson had threatened to end the relationship with Briscoe, perhaps on more than one occasion during their sixteen-year relationship. He responds, “I know our situation has been difficult, especially for you. I had assumed that my whole situation would have changed long, long ago. Still without the right to request anything of you, I have a need, a desperate need of your assurance, of your love. I love you.” In another letter, he says, “I have a feeling of being measured, as one does the hemline of a dress, and found too long or too short of the desired length. Your standards are high, your achievement tremendous. Not measuring up in the one sure way to ‘please’ is frustrating indeed.” Apparently, for some reason, Briscoe was unable or unwilling to leave his wife. Yet he still tried to hold onto his love for Era Bell Thompson. He writes, “In you I seek a home for a tired and worn spirit—a place of comfort, unguarded relaxation and repose. And I would like to provide the same kind of home of the spirit for you.” Thompson had underlined “home of the spirit” for obvious reasons; she noted that Briscoe wanted to provide a home of the spirit for her, but not a home in the material sense, indicating that she might have actually married Briscoe had he been unattached. At some point in their relationship, Briscoe began to complain about his stomach bothering him. He writes, “Era Bell, darling: This is my first day back at work since four days before Christmas—stomach again.” In another letter, he says, “I hope to make some farm visits next week. I have missed most of the tours so far because of my tummy.”

The last letter in this correspondence is dated July 1, 1977. Briscoe, then Executive Director-Emeritus of the National Newspaper Publishers Association: Black Press of America in Washington, D.C., writes on the organization’s letterhead, “Darling: Had a wonderful time. We must never be apart so long—six months at the most. Hope you

enjoyed your trip. Will call you on the 4th or 5th. Love, Sherman.” This letter reveals that Era Bell Thompson and Sherman Briscoe were still romantically involved. However, Briscoe’s correspondence ends abruptly here. *Jet* magazine’s November 15, 1979 obituary, “Black Press Crusader Sherman Briscoe, 70, Dies” states:

Executive director of the National Newspaper Publishers Association and a longtime fighter in the Black press, died of cancer at the Washington Hospital Center at the age of 70. Born and reared in Miss. [he] graduated from Southern Univ. and earned a master’s degree in Public Administration at American University, where he completed requirements for a doctorate.

After 27 years as an information specialist for the Department of Agriculture in Washington, where he was honored for superior service, Briscoe joined NNPA in 1970. He aided in the formation of the organization’s archives at Howard Univ. and arranged NNPA conferences and conventions. He was co-founder (in 1943) of the Capital Press Club, the nation’s oldest predominantly Black newsgathering organization, served for many years as the D.C. NAACP branch vice president, and was active with Phi Beta Sigma Fraternity. Survived by wife Revella, son Percy and daughter Marian Finley and three grandchildren. (16)

I believe that Thompson’s relationship with Briscoe ended with his death in 1979, seven years before her own death.

I noted two other suitors of Era Bell Thompson. One is revealed in a letter dated October 6, 1953. On Dennis Printing Plant letterhead, Charles C. Dennis of Monrovia, Liberia indicates that the two of them may have experienced a brief affair during Thompson’s travels through Africa. Dennis writes:

You were quite correct my dear, when you say you were greatly disappointed when you reached Rome and saw no letter from me; glad however, you got the letter two days later...The Paris trip was very swell, but you cheated me by going to Paris after I had left for Liberia. I would have been the happiest man in the world had we met each other in Paris. On your “Birthday,” August 10, while you were traveling in Venice, Milan, Zurich, Copenhagen, Paris and London I toast to your health in champagne with only my best friend around, Honourable Dukuly our Under Secretary of State...It is very nice of you not to have kissed any one in Monrovia but Griff* and Muriel...all of your kisses in Liberia should have been mine...I miss you terribly and think of you all the time. In my new office upstairs your picture taken with President Tubman and myself is right where I can see it all through the day...I will soon make “The Listener” a six page paper and the article in *Ebony*, something about “The

Garden of Eden in Africa” which I assume was written by you will come out in my first six page issue. Tons of love and kisses from one who thinks very dearly of you.

Not only does this letter from Charles C. Dennis reveal his intimate feelings for Thompson, but it also reveals how Thompson’s connections from her world travels benefited Johnson Publishing Company, opening the company’s publications to the international market as a foreign correspondent; she has yet to be recognized for these invaluable contributions.

Thompson’s other suitor, Coleman “Jock” Williams apparently overlapped a bit with the pursuits of Sherman Briscoe, as noted by a letter dated April 30, 1963. The sense of secrecy is apparent. Williams refers to Thompson as “Milady.” He writes,

Hi Milady—Instead of sending the note to the office of JPC, I searched till I found your Yule greeting for your home address. So, this is it...My dear. Did you receive a note at the office two or three days ago? I am not sure whether it was mailed or mislaid. Enough concerning that...I didn’t say too much that would be misconstrued...[I] expect to stop over and get a glimpse of the sweetest person I know, Miss EBT...See what magic power you radiate from afar? You ought to be aware of this one very ardent admirer even though there has been a long pause between notes...How are you, dear? Am very anxious to know; just always am thrilled to get even a wee note from you...hope I am not becoming too ardent, Milady...just have such a high admiration and respect for you that you engender my emotions to the Nth...So it would compensate in great measure for past longings to hear from you at your earliest convenience.

Plausibly, Thompson had been in the process of ending her relationship with Jock Williams as she and Briscoe became closer. Five months after Williams sent the above letter, he presented Thompson with a poem dated September 5, 1963. It is entitled, “My Ode to Milady Belle Lettres”:

No matter what may happen
That would tend to separate our ways,
Or what life brings...
My esteem for you could never descend
Into the limbo of forgotten things.

My mem'ries of you I shall proudly wear
 As recompense 'gainst the lonely, remaining years.
 And should you read this verse you should know
 That my esteem for you must be a part of me
 No matter what I do or where I go...
 All through life till eternity.
 And as I type the ending to this sonnet,
 I make a vow:
 You may depend upon it.

It is possible that Jock Williams had proposed marriage to Thompson, as the poem seems to indicate? The poem also implies that Thompson had rejected him, which makes sense considering the fact that by that time she had fallen in love with Sherman Briscoe.

Besides her father and lover, the two Race Men that had made an impact on her life, Thompson was also inspired by her foster father, a white Methodist pastor by the name of Dr. Robert Enlow O' Brian (Dr. Riley in *American Daughter*). Era Bell Thompson devotes two chapters of *American Daughter* to her life with the O' Brian family. But before discussing O' Brian's impact on Thompson's life, there is an interesting story about Thompson that prefaces her first meeting with O' Brian; it reveals Thompson's talent, creativity, and resourcefulness, qualities that enabled her to later accept Dr. O' Brian's assistance.

After her father's death, Thompson, left with funeral and hospital bills needing to be paid, reopened her father's used furniture store in Mandan, North Dakota. Thompson writes in *American Daughter*, "My father left no other debts, left no material wealth save a few dollars in the bank and a store full of furniture...so I reopened the store and began paying off the bills. It was the least I could do for Pop" (202). By May 1929, Thompson had sold the last piece of furniture in the store. It had been a very tough year for her financially, as her brothers were unable to help much. After she left Mandan, Thompson

lived and worked with her Aunt Ada and Uncle Jim Garrison in their new and used furniture store located in Bismarck throughout the next year. Her Uncle Jim had “built up a large repair trade,” she tells us in *American Daughter*, which interested her. She says, “At odd moments he taught me much about woodcraft, about refinishing and upholstering...I liked working with wood: liked the feel of it, liked to smell its clean out-of-door fragrance; liked the beauty of its grain” (209). It was this interest in furniture that inspired Thompson to enter a trade magazine contest to name a new mattress coil spring for The United States Bedding Company in Minneapolis in which she won the \$25.00 cash prize. Today, that name—King Koil—is still used by the company, which is now a multi-million dollar corporation. The results of the contest had been published in the trade magazine called *The Twin City Furniture Digest*; I discovered a copy of the piece in Thompson’s collection along with a picture, including Thompson’s advertising slogan, “There is no rest for the wicked, But the good ‘SLEEP BETTER.’ ” The article, entitled “Coil Spring Cash Prize Contest Ends,” states:

Miss Era Bell Thompson, employee of the Garrison Furniture Store, Bismarck, North Dakota, is the lucky young lady who won the \$25.00 Cash Prize. “KING-KOIL” is the name that Miss Thompson submitted. It will be used in connection with the Number 589 Coil Spring from now on.

Hundreds of suggested names were received, and it was only after considerable time had been spent in judging them that “KING-KOIL” was adjudged the winner. The judges felt that this name was most descriptive of the splendid quality spring it represents. It is brief, but carries a definite message, which classifies the spring as a better one than the ordinary. It is also easy to pronounce and easy to remember...The name “KING-KOIL” will make it much easier to order. By eliminating the number, there is considerable less chance of making mistakes. It also gives the dealers a definite name to apply in their advertising of the spring.

Now that the contest is over, The United States Bedding Company will be able to furnish the dealers with attractive cuts in mat form of the “KING-KOIL.”

In *American Daughter*, Thompson writes, “I was paid another dollar for a poem describing the spring” (209). The poem had also been published, probably in the same trade magazine, under the heading “Contribution” with the following preface: “The following poem was contributed by Miss Era Bell Thompson of Bismarck, North Dakota. We think it is a very fine send-off to “Old KING-KOIL.” The poem’s title is “Old KING-KOIL”:

Old KING-KOIL
Is a bed spring royal,
A bed spring royal is he.
All sprayed for you
In a Chinese Blue,
Or dipped in a Brown for me.

Old KING-KOIL
Is a bed spring loyal
With many more coils than most.
A sure satisfier
With side stabilizer,
A cushion between your bed post.

Old KING-KOIL
Is as true as the soil,
Fenced in with steel border wire.
Calm, restful, sublime,
Is Five Eighty Nine—
The best your heart could desire.

Besides the obvious use of the popular nursery rhyme “Old King Cole,” what is fascinating to me is the veiled manner in which Thompson refers to her race by using the line, “Or dipped in Brown for me.” This is significant because the officials at the company had no idea that Era Bell Thompson was African American. In addition, through the use of personification, the coil spring is gendered “he” and refers to “blue bloods,” mocking the blood quantum idea by using “Chinese Blue.”

After receiving the prize money for the spring coil and the poem about it, Thompson sent the company a furniture innovation that she created; it was an Automatic Day Bed with an end table and magazine rack attached, which the company bought from her for \$15.00. Her innovation appeared in *The Twin City Furniture Digest* in April 1930 with the headline: “A Practical New Creation.” Thompson recalls how, “knowing absolutely nothing about blue prints, I drew this thing and I couldn’t even draw! But I sent it to a woman, and they bought it. Several years later, I went to the Twin cities to see my product” (Oral History 10). Unfortunately, the experience was tainted by racism. She says, “When I went to Minneapolis, I called the company and went over to see them. Up to that time, it didn’t occur to me that they didn’t know I was black. When this fellow came out into the office and saw me, his attitude changed completely. He was almost rude. He didn’t even want to show me the bed” (Oral History 10-11).

Years later, by 1969, King Koil, Era Bell Thompson’s brilliant creation, had become a Division of The United States Bedding Company, called King Koil Sleep Products. The company’s advertising manager, Marvin Hartwig, wrote Thompson March 12, 1969 at *Ebony*:

While researching for a booklet on the history of the United States Bedding Company, we were wondering how the King Koil name was developed. In checking, the name Era Bell Thompson was mentioned as creator of the King Koil name. Edward L. Bronstien Jr., grandson of the founder and now president, recalled that...a young girl in North Dakota created the name King Koil. We believe that was you. We are interested in finding what you can recall regarding the naming of King Koil. Can you remember how you entered the contest, where, when, the prize, etc.? Also, did it take you long to think of the name...did it come immediately? We also want to extend an invitation to visit our plant in St. Paul the next time you are in our area. We would be more than happy to show you how King Koil products are made...we think you might be interested in seeing what has happened to the name you created.

Thompson's response, beginning "Guilty, as charged," goes on to answer Hartwig's many inquiries regarding her naming of the coil spring, including her invitation in 1966 to a luncheon by representatives of the company. She says, "On the way to the car that morning, I slipped on a patch of ice and broke an ankle. We tried again this year, and for the first time, I saw a King Koil spring." Thompson would later explain how the King Koil money contributed to her success:

With the money from King Koil, I went to Grand Forks for a visit. While there, I met Dr. Robert E. O' Brian, the minister of First Methodist Church, who talked me into returning the following year to work for board and room in their home and resume my studies at the University of North Dakota which had been interrupted by illness and lack of funds. When Dr. O' Brian accepted the presidency of Morningside College, I went with the family to Sioux City, Iowa, and was graduated in 1933.

In *American Daughter*, Thompson creates a comedic idea, an image of her life with the O' Brian family, satirically titling Chapter 13 "The Life of Rileys," a spoof of the popular situation comedy of the 1940s and 50s called "The Life of Riley," starring the actor William Bendix. The expression, "the life of riley" indicates that one is living the good life. In actuality, the term, "rile" means to annoy or vex, a more appropriate reference to Era Bell Thompson's experiences living with the O' Brian family. Unfortunately, her presence in their home created a life long riff between Dr. O' Brian and his mother that was never resolved. O' Brian said in a 1971 interview⁵ that his mother, who had worked for years as a secretary for the Ku Klux Klan that had a state headquarters located in Grand Forks, stopped speaking to him for aiding Era Bell Thompson and remained "absolutely unforgiving." He explained how when Era Bell was around, his mother pretended that she did not exist; she would not speak to her, look at her, or even acknowledge her presence. Dr. O' Brian's younger brother, Roger (Glen in

American Daughter) had also been involved with the KKK organization. Era Bell Thompson commented, “Dr. O’ Brian had a younger brother, Roger. There were seven boys in their family. Besides Roger, all the rest of them were preachers because the mother, who was an Indiana Ku Klux Klan officer, wanted it that way. So you can imagine what happened when he brought me into his home” (Oral History 14). O’ Brian laughed recalling the many congregation members, and even friends he lost because he chose to help Era Bell Thompson. Actually, she happened to be one of three young black women that O’ Brian assisted. One young lady was able to complete her college degree at UND; the other girl received free music lessons through the university’s music department, thanks to strings pulled by the good-hearted Dr. O’ Brian.

When Era Bell Thompson accepted Dr. O’ Brian’s offer to help her complete her college degree, she did not realize that his wife, Mrs. Mabel O’ Brian (Susan in *American Daughter*) “didn’t like black people, that she had a kind of a phobia about cleanliness, disease, and Negroes.” Thompson explained, “She was quite upset about having me come and live with them. Dr. O’ Brian was a very dominant man. He had his own way, was master of his house” (Oral History 14). Still, in the beginning, Era Bell Thompson lived in an awkward situation, but with no money or other options, she used her resourcefulness, and especially humor to survive and to excel. Shortly after Era Bell came to live with the O’ Brian family, Mabel’s irrational fears, based on myths and stereotypes about blacks, dissolved as she grew to love Era Bell Thompson. And Thompson’s respect and admiration for Dr. O’ Brian were earnest, considering what he had sacrificed to aid her; he inspired her completely. Thompson recalls the summer of 1931 when Dr. O’ Brian had two offers for the position of college president. “One was

from a Kansas school and the other was Morningside, a Methodist college,” Thompson recollected; “And I found out later they didn’t take the Kansas one, because I couldn’t have matriculated there, so they accepted the Morningside offer” (Oral History 15).

Besides being a Methodist minister and the president of Morningside College in Sioux City (1931-1936), Dr. O’ Brian had also served as Iowa Secretary of State from 1937 to 1939. He had been president of Tabor College in Tabor in the early 1940s. According to his obituary, he was born in Bryant, Illinois, but lived in Indiana as a child. He graduated from DePauw University in 1918, and received his masters and doctorate degrees from Northwestern University in Illinois in 1922 and 1926. He then received a doctor of divinity degree from Wesley College, then a part of North Dakota University in Grand Forks, and taught psychology there from 1928 to 1931. He became pastor of the ⁶first Methodist Church at Grand Forks in 1927, when he first met Era Bell Thompson. Later, he became president of Reo Foods Inc., a West Des Moines meat packing plant from 1944 to 1959. Afterwards, he spent two years in Nicaragua as a volunteer retired executive helping the companies there. Dr. O’ Brian had also been a World War I army veteran; he had been discharged because of injuries. In his retirement, he served as volunteer chaplain at South Coast Community Hospital in California. He was killed instantly in Laguna Beach, California October 26, 1977 while crossing the South Pacific Coast Highway after being struck by a car; he was 82. Era Bell Thompson was listed under survivors as his foster daughter.

Like Era Bell Thompson, Dr. O’ Brian was a unique person who lived an interesting and passionate life. Thompson had a tremendous amount of correspondence that spanned her entire life from Robert, Mabel, and their son Edward O’ Brian (Jan in *American*

Daughter). In one letter dated May 13, 1958, Mabel writes, “You make a perfect daughter, and we are so proud of your accomplishments.” In another letter dated January 16, 1962, Edward O’ Brian, who had become a successful patent attorney in Los Angeles, wrote to a Japanese friend in Osaka, Japan:

Within the next month or so Miss Era Bell Thompson of Chicago will be visiting Japan. Era Bell is the editor of *Ebony*, a major Negro publication here in the states. I do not think that anyone outside of Era Bell and the immediate O’ Brian family quite understands or even could understand the relationship which is involved here. As a practical matter Era Bell is the closest thing I have to a sister and is regarded as such. I have taken the liberty of supplying your name and address to Era Bell with the hope that she can contact and meet you during the time she is in Japan.

When Era Bell Thompson first came to live in the O’ Brian household, Edward O’ Brian had been four years old. Thompson recalls in *American Daughter* how the small boy took charge of her care. He asked, “You haven’t got a mother and father, have you?”

Thompson responded, “No.” He replied, “That’s all right. You live with us now. You can be my little sister, and I’ll let you have my mother and father so you won’t get lonesome” (220). Dr. O’ Brian would later remark that having Era Bell as part of his family had benefited his son Edward’s life tremendously, as he enjoyed friends from various racial and cultural groups, and that he lacked prejudice and fear of those who are different.

When Mabel O’ Brian passed away in August of 1983, she left Thompson an inheritance of \$10,000.00. Even after her husband’s death, she continued, though blind, to correspond with Thompson, never failing to invite her back “home” whenever she wanted to come. Thompson knew that she always had a home with the O’ Brian family.

By the end of her life, Thompson had traveled all over the world. She had made seven trips to Africa alone, one to research her book on Africa. While visiting the former Gold Coast on that trip, Prime Minister Kwame Nkrumah, then considered an eligible

bachelor, made a “pass” at her, which she does not mention openly in her book on Africa. One article notes of Thompson’s life, “She had been winned by a Watutsi king, been called a goddess in the Mountains of the Moon, interviewed Eleanor Roosevelt” who sent her Christmas cards with handwritten greetings for years; Thompson also “interviewed Louis Armstrong (in his dressing room while he was dressing), Adlai Stevenson, Mahalia Jackson who was a personal friend, and numerous heads of state, including Trujillo of the Dominican Republic and Prime Minister Lumumba of the Congo (now Zaire), both of whom were later assassinated.” One chapter of *American Daughter* (Chapter 4), “Blizzard-Bound,” “was entered into the Congressional Record by Senator William (“Wild Bill”) Langer,” the North Dakota Republican who supported Civil Rights in the 1940’s, as noted by his correspondence with Era Bell Thompson. Thompson had also been awarded the prestigious North Dakota Rough Rider Award, the highest honor bestowed upon a North Dakotan, and as part of that honor, she had her portrait painted by the portrait artist Vern Skaug, who also completed portraits of other celebrities, including Bette Davis, Julie Harris, Liza Minelli, Barbara Streisand, Mae West, and Angie Dickinson. Her portrait still hangs in the North Dakota state house. In fact, Thompson became friends with four North Dakota Governors and their families, including Frazier, Langer, Guy, and Arthur A. Link.

Era Bell Thompson had, in addition, survived a radical mastectomy of her right breast in 1964; she ultimately became a spokesperson for the American Cancer Society, and a volunteer for “Reach to Recovery,” perhaps having the distinction of being one of the first celebrities to speak publicly about her experiences. But what is unusual is that no one, not even her brothers, learned of her battle with cancer until she published the *Ebony*

1971 article entitled, “I was a Cancer Coward.” Her brother Stewart’s letter, dated August 27, 1971, reflects how her article affected many readers. He writes,

I just received your byline on cancer and I must say, your letter prepared me to know that you had been a victim of the disease. But have overcome it. This makes me feel good to know there is hope for others through your story on cancer. And thank God for your recovery. I am sure that all those that read your story and experience with cancer will take your advice and not be a coward.

Stewart’s letter and commentary on Era Bell Thompson’s piece is just one of many such letters they shared that created a closeness between them for many years, until he passed away February 21, 1981 at eighty-two years old. He was six years older than Thompson and the second oldest son.

After Thompson suffered a stroke in 1978, her speech became impaired and her mobility limited. She kept detailed records of her health and open “dialogue” with her doctors by way of many typed notes. She struggled with high blood pressure, diabetes, and arthritis, as noted in her medical journal. Even so, her humor is revealed in a hand written note in which she made a list of her various ills August 13, 1986, three days after her 81st birthday, and four months before her death. It reads: “1.flabby arms, 2.gas, 3.bad breath, 4.sleeplessness at night, sleepy in evening, 5.arthritis, 6.chin hairs, 7.eyes—can’t see, 8.bruise easily, but unknowingly, 9.tired-always,” then, at the end, she writes in big letters, “HA!”

Even though Era Bell Thompson juggled many health problems at the end of her life, she still had continued to enjoy her forty-year friendship with the poet and writer Gwendolyn Brooks, who had been anticipating attending a New Year’s Eve party with Thompson, and who had spoken to her on the phone to confirm their plans a few days before the party; however, Thompson never made that last party as she passed away in

her sleep December 30, 1986 at the age of 81. The curator of the *Vivian G. Harsh Collection*, Robert Miller, recalled that when Thompson's papers were retrieved after her death, he was impressed by how well organized everything had been, which was unusual and a curator's dream. "Era Bell even slept with her typewriter next to her bed," he remarked, explaining that her papers, which she had willed to Chicago's Carter G. Woodson Library, remain one of the most extensive and complete collections held in their archives. Her papers, he said, are today the example shown to other renowned black writers and artists seeking a collection in which to will their materials. Her original manuscript of *Africa, Land of My Fathers* is the only item not willed to the *Harsh Collection* as Thompson had previously promised it to Atlanta University in Georgia where it is still held in the library's archives. Miller surmised that I might have been the first person to read and examine all 100 boxes of materials left by Era Bell Thompson. Therefore, I realize the responsibility of having access to more information regarding her than any former writer or researcher. As a result, I recognize that what Thompson chose to leave *out* of her autobiography reflects her desire to protect her privacy, especially regarding unpleasant events and realities that she endured that deeply affected her life.

One silent and vacant space noted in *American Daughter* is that inhabited by her mother, Mary Virginia Logan Thompson (Mary/Mother in *American Daughter*). Era Bell Thompson was born August 10, 1905 in Des Moines, Iowa to Stewart Caval (Tony) Thompson and Mary Virginia Logan Thompson. She recalls in *American Daughter*, "By the time I was born, we owned the little cottage on the bank of the lake, and my father was a community leader and proprietor of a thriving restaurant" (15). Because of segregation and the many stereotypes and myths regarding black people, class

status was usually devalued. This is apparent when Thompson notes that her family was “the first Negro family to move into the little East Side community” in Des Moines, Iowa, and that “whatever fears the neighbors may have had about property devaluation were soon dispelled by the continuous improvements that went on about our home” (15). Thompson had been the last child born to her parents and was the only surviving daughter. Although her mother, Mary, had four children, she experienced six pregnancies. After her marriage in Freeport, Illinois in 1896, she gave birth to her first son, William Hobart (“Dick” in *American Daughter*) also in Freeport, February 1, 1897. A second son, Stewart Caval (“Tom”) came February 19, 1899 in Grant Park, Iowa. Then, the first daughter, Bernice Alberta (the one born with blond hair and fair skin), was born February 18, 1901 in Youngstown, Iowa; she died when only two years old. In 1902, another Thompson baby (unnamed) was born August 23, but died shortly thereafter, also in Youngstown. Next, Carl Caval (“Harry”) was born September 5, 1903 in Carbondale, Illinois; and finally, Era Bell came along August 10, 1905 in Chesterfield (Des Moines). Interestingly, I noted the “Thompson Family History” that Era Bell had neatly typed listed every birth as happening in different towns in Iowa and Illinois except for the births of Bernice Alberta and Baby Thompson who were both born in Youngstown, Iowa. This gives the impression that the family had moved a lot at the turn of the century. This situation must have been very difficult for Thompson’s mother, considering that she was, at that time also suffering the psychological trauma of losing two babies. Then, in the very next year, she gave birth to Carl. Mary had spent three consecutive years pregnant. So by the time Era Bell came along, the family had finally

settled down and was living comfortably for a while in “the cottage on the bank of the lake” before moving to North Dakota.

Adapting to the traditional roles of wife and mother, twenty-five year old Mary Virginia Logan married forty-year old Tony Thompson July 15, 1896 in Freeport, Illinois. Their marriage, reported by at least two local newspapers, described the event in the society pages, partly because Mary worked as a nursemaid for a prominent white Freeport family, and partly because of Tony’s local popularity. One article, dated July 16, 1896, entitled “A Happy Wedding: Tony Thompson and Miss Logan Joined in Wedlock,” offers some information and insight about Thompson’s parents, especially her mother. This article, photocopied from Thompson’s personal papers, lacked the publication’s title, or any byline, but it provides some interesting details that otherwise would be forever lost. I transcribed this article, as well as the other one, “Married Last Night” which was much more tattered and therefore a challenge to fully transcribe, as these clippings had been copied from the original newspaper articles. “A Happy Marriage” reads as follows:

The home of Mr. And Mrs. P. Lipscomb, No. 327 Clay Street, was the scene of a very pretty wedding ceremony last night which was witnessed by many of Freeport’s best citizens. The parties to the contract were Tony Thompson, the dashing and polished chef at M.M. Mayer’s Restaurant, and Miss Mary Virginia Logan, sister of Mrs. Lipscomb.

The ceremony was performed at 9 o’clock by the Rev. W. C. Spencer, pastor of the Baptist Church, and as the wedding of colored people is a rarity in Freeport, the ceremony was of great interest to the guests who completely filled the cozy parlor. The bride and groom were attended by Miss Henrietta Cannon, of Nashville, Tenn., and John Price, of Rockford.

The bride wore a very pretty gown of nun’s veiling trimmed with white silk and lace and carried a bouquet of white roses. And Tony, the happy groom! He was arrayed in a splendid suit of broadcloth, set off with a diamond stud, white gloves and a buttonhole bouquet. He also wore a “I-want-you,-ma honey, yes-I-do” sort of smile, which illuminated the entire room.

The bride’s maid, Miss Cannon, wore a gown of pink crepon trimmed with pink

crepon and lace. She carried a bouquet of sweet peas and pinks.

The wedding ceremony was both interesting and impressive, and at its conclusion the guests showered congratulations upon the happy young couple.

J.H. Johnson, head chef at Mayer's restaurant, acted as master-of-ceremonies and was a very busy man all evening.

Choice refreshments were served at the conclusion of the ceremony, and after looking at the many pretty gifts bestowed upon the bride, the guests departed for home.

Mary's older sister, Alice Logan Lipscomb, in whose home she was married, did not pass away until 1949; yet, there is no evidence that she spent much time, if any, with her niece, Era Bell Thompson after her sister Mary's death. In addition to her sister, Mary had also enjoyed a close female bond with her bridesmaid, Henrietta Cannon, a connection in her life that she probably lost, especially after the family relocated to North Dakota. According to Thompson's family history, there had been a third sister, Lenore Logan. However, Mary's father, apparently a black man named Randal "Bill" Logan, had been a plantation owner in Halifax, Virginia where she was born February 16, 1871. Later, "Mary and Alice had lawsuits with Reynolds tobacco regarding Grandpa Logan's farm...lots of skeletons in the Thompson closet!" Era Bell Thompson had written into her family history. At the time of her marriage to Tony, Mary had been "employed as a nurse girl at the home of Hon. Wm. O. Wright," as stated in the article "Married Last Night." The piece notes her as "a very pleasant young lady" who was "held in high esteem by the members of Mr. Wright's family." Of Tony, the article comments that he was "very popular with all who know him, and as a cook he has few equals."

Born in Virginia like her husband, Mary was also, like her husband, raised on a plantation, but the difference was that her father had owned the property. Thus, Mary and her sisters had apparently been raised with middle-class values; Mary had no choice but to "stand by her man" like a good, obedient wife. After spending many years living

comfortably, in relative security through most of her marriage, Mary no doubt suffered quite a culture shock having to move away from all she knew and loved to follow her husband to the cold unfamiliar bleakness of North Dakota, then a new territory recently opened for homesteading. Unfortunately, just at a time when a young preadolescent girl truly needs the guidance of her mother, Thompson's mother, Mary, died unexpectedly.

Another silent and vacant female space in Era Bell Thompson's life that she chooses to leave out of *American Daughter* involves the life of her paternal grandmother, and her father's reaction to that life. Tony's mother had been forced into a sexual relationship with her slave master, and Tony was their offspring. In *American Daughter*, Thompson sums up her father's past in one paragraph, noting that he "had had fair hair when he was a little boy down on the Old Thompson plantation in Virginia, for his mother, a freed woman, was a servant in the Big House, and his father was Old Thompson's son" (14). The true story begins with Era Bell Thompson's paternal grandmother, Margaret (Mina) Garrison, born January 19, 1821, possibly in Virginia. Apparently, she had been a slave on the Old Thompson plantation for many years, working in the "Big house" as the cook, Thompson tells us, even though she also tells us in *American Daughter* that she was "a freed woman" which obviously means that she was freed after the Civil War like the other slaves, indicating that this information had been purposely fictionalized or reimagined by Era Bell Thompson. However, working in the "Big House" Margaret Garrison was, like most slave women, sexually accessible to the white men of the house. She had lived in slavery for forty years and had given birth to twelve children. Her son, Stewart Caval Thompson (Tony) was born in Nelson County, Virginia May 19, 1856 when she was thirty-five years old. A point that Era Bell Thompson never addresses in

her autobiography is the fact that according to Virginia law at the time, the condition of a child, under the institution of slavery, *automatically* followed that of the mother, which would mean that legally, Tony had also been a slave.

Ultimately, Tony left home at eighteen years old; he lost contact and remained separated from his mother for twenty-eight years. It is telling that Tony never once returned to Virginia. Incredibly, Margaret Garrison, at the end of her long life, found her estranged son Tony, as well as her other son, Jim Garrison (from her marriage) after many long years of relentless searching. The story had apparently been local news as I discovered an original newspaper clipping, in very poor condition, among Era Bell Thompson's papers. According to Thompson's family history, I learned that her grandmother arrived at North Dakota in 1909, when Era Bell Thompson was four years old. At the time, Tony had become relatively well known by many people in the area, black and white, that aided his mother's extensive search to reunite with her sons. We are also provided with more insight into Tony's earlier years. The article headline reads, "Gets a Mother for Christmas," followed by a sub-heading in a smaller font size, "Treasurer of Union at Carbondale Finds Her," with yet another headline, "Were Separated 28 Years," in a slightly larger font size. The article reads as follows:

Tony Thompson, a colored miner, treasurer of the local union at Carbondale Mines, was vastly surprised as well as much delighted Thursday, when his mother, Mrs. Margaret Garrison, whom he had last seen at Stanton, Virginia June 4, 1874, arrived at his home after having been lost to his knowledge for twenty-eight years. Following the meeting at Stanton, Tony entered the railway service on the Baltimore & Ohio road. Thence, he drifted to Bellaire, Ohio, and later went to Freeport, Ill. where he was married, seven years ago. Mrs. Garrison, who had married meanwhile, left Stanton several years following the last meeting with her son and sometime afterward she journeyed to Seattle, on the Pacific coast. From Seattle, she went to Newcastle in Washington, and she later migrated to British Columbia. Several years ago, a man who had met her son at Freeport, Ill. happened to meet Mrs. Garrison in the town of Calgary, British Northwest Territory. He noted the marked resemblance between her

and Tony, and so strong an impression did it make upon his mind that he asked her if she had a son in Illinois. She told him she had a son some where unless he had died since she last saw him in Virginia in 1874, but that she had not heard of him for twenty-six or twenty-seven years. The inquiry of the stranger impressed her and suspecting the man referred to by him might be her son she made inquiries which resulted recently in locating him in this city. Tony and his family having previously removed from Freeport to Carbondale. Having satisfied herself that her son was still living, Mrs. Garrison started for Des Moines. She stopped over several days in Victor, Colo. to visit a daughter, and Thursday morning she arrived in this city. She went at once to Carbondale, where her unexpected appearance caused wild joy in the family. Mrs. Garrison will remain with her son until next spring.⁷

One can only imagine this elderly black former slave mother, almost ninety-years old, traveling such long distances in pursuit of her surviving children, many of whom were lost to her during four decades in slavery, notwithstanding the many difficulties newly freed slaves faced following the Civil War, during the Southern terrorism and violence of the Reconstruction and post Reconstruction periods.

Two years later, another newspaper article appeared announcing the death of Margaret Garrison who passed away May 21, 1911, two days after Tony's birthday, on a "Sunday evening about eight o'clock, of old age, aggravated by stomach trouble." She was noted to be "the oldest person in this vicinity" as she was a little over ninety-years old when she died. Sadly, most of her children had preceded her in death. Her obituary recalls her as "an entertaining old lady, remembering many experiences of her slavery days...she was a woman of consistent Christian character, and was liked by all our people." Her obituary had been published in the *Driscoll News* May 24, 1911; Era Bell Thompson was then six-years old.

One can only speculate as to why Era Bell Thompson never explored this incredibly rich, interesting family history. Margaret Garrison, a survivor of some of the worst crimes committed against humanity, remains unknown; she truly is an unsung hero. Since

Thompson was so young when her grandmother died, I suspect that she did not remember her very well, if at all. Perhaps emotionally, Thompson could not bring herself to investigate and write about such a horrific existence. Instead, in her autobiography, Thompson preferred a humorous approach. Yet, I am in awe of Margaret Garrison, ex-slave mother who actually succeeded in finding, after nearly two decades of searching, some of her children and grandchildren in the aftermath of slavery's brutality. Great art, music, dance and literature have been created from such real life experiences of many generations of black women living in the New World. However, Era Bell Thompson probably felt far removed from the encounters of Margaret Garrison; and it is probable that her father did not share stories with her regarding their lives during slavery while raising her, especially after his wife's untimely death, an event that devastated the family. Tony consciously protected his daughter's innocence, preferring to focus on the future, leaving behind the many wounds of his early past. Instead, he encouraged and supported her desire for education, and especially her ability to write. I believe that Thompson did not want to mar this image by bringing the past century into her unique 20th century narrative.

Decades later, as Thompson and two of her brothers stood at the Thompson family gravesite, visiting their parents and grandmother, Thompson recalls in her unpublished manuscript "The Rest of My Life," "The last gathering of the entire Thompson family had been 60 years ago, when we assembled beside the fresh mound of our mother's grave. Ten years later, I stood there alone, when the body of our father was laid beside her." Thompson would make three more trips to bury family in the Driscoll family plot as each of her brothers passed away—Hobart in 1981, Stewart in 1985, and Carl in 1986,

eleven months before her own death. Thus, Thompson died alone, answering the question asked in the poem she wrote when she was twenty-three: “Alone must I be/When I die?”

¹ Era Bell Thompson, personal letter, March 28, 1928

² Black Women Oral History Project, Interview with Era Bell Thompson March 6 and 10, 1978, Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe College

³ Sherman Briscoe’s obituary (*Chicago Defender*)

⁴ “Sherman Briscoe Provides Service for Farmers,” Gaylord P. Godwin (UPI)

⁵ Taped interview held by the Harsh Collection

⁶ Robert E. O’ Brian obituary

⁷ “Mrs. Garrison Dead,” Driscoll News, May 24, 1911, p. 5

Chapter Two

American Daughter's Laughter and Pain: A Close Reading and Discussion

A merry heart doeth good like a medicine.

Proverbs 17:22

Era Bell Thompson not only establishes her subjectivity as a woman in her first book, *American Daughter* (1946), but she underlines this key point in the book's title. Before the ideology of race enters into the text, the politics of gender is cleverly emphasized before the book is even opened. Race is first noted in the title of Chapter 1, "Go West, Black Man." However, Thompson defines herself by gender first in the opening lines of her text, when Pop utters, " 'My Lord, it's a girl!' Pop stumbled blindly out into the kitchen, slumped into a chair, and again said, "Oh, my Lord!" " The humorous manner in which gender is introduced seems to imply that this fact is somehow a problem, and not just for "Pop," but for the world. Through the strategy of humor, this "girl" is presented as being trouble, indicating the idea of femaleness as negative and that "Father" is somehow lucky to have had three sons. She writes, "Now, my Lord had heretofore been very good to my father, for he had three sons: Tom, Dick, and Harry."¹ The focus on gender and the use of humor and fiction in this unique autobiography offers a positive and much more effective technique in relating the black female perspective during a time when any kind of valuable black perspective was only seen as nihilistic black male rage, bitterness and anger at a white supremacist racial order as represented in Richard Wright's *Black Boy* (1945) and *Native Son* (1940), books with titles which also

emphasize gender, but from a male perspective; Wright focuses more on race and even places race before gender, as is reflected in his books' titles. On the other hand, Thompson's emphasis on gender is what defines her as a feminist.

However, the glaring issue that has been detrimental to Era Bell Thompson has been the fact that though black, her personal story does not fit the collective pattern of black female autobiography because she is *culturally* different, especially since she was raised in an environment lacking any black female role models. Black female relationships are usually a central factor in autobiographical texts going back to the slave narratives. Therefore, her work becomes problematic in that canon formation, as the canon moves toward general themes that were established in the 18th and 19th centuries. This circumstance has been the greatest disadvantage to Thompson's legacy as a writer, and to her position as a pioneering journalist who became a major figure in the black publishing world of the Chicago Renaissance (1930-1960s). That and the usual sexism, racism and ageism that most women, especially professional black women, experienced during this era added to Era Bell Thompson's obscurity. Many reviewers of *American Daughter* unwittingly contributed to her literary negligence as most could not help but compare her work--frequently referred to as "chatty," "bright," "happy," and "lacking bitterness" in many reviews--to Richard Wright's graphically violent, angry books in which he openly wields his outrage and bitterness at an unjust system, a strategy that induces fear in his readers. Besides Wright, other writers that reviewers compared to Era Bell Thompson and *American Daughter* include the work of Zora Neale Hurston, Willa Cather's *My Antonia*, Ann Petry's *The Street* and even Ruth Smith's *White Man's Burden*. Myopic literary reviewers--black, white, male, and female--of *American Daughter*, although

sometimes undervaluing the text's use of subtlety and nuance, managed to recognize that Thompson uses a humorous façade to mask what is understated; she employs the literary strategy of understatement or, more specifically litotes. Litotes "contains understatement for emphasis, and is therefore the opposite of hyperbole...usually with laconic and ironic intentions" (Cuddon 473). The effective combination of intermingling the various forms of humor with understatement as a way to mask the author's criticism is a hallmark of *American Daughter*, as there are many examples throughout her book. Humor became Era Bell Thompson's personal signature in her career as a writer and journalist. She once responded in a personal letter, "For a long time, I thought of myself as a humorist...so I write in that vein." Of *American Daughter*'s success, Era Bell Thompson commented, "There were over 200 reviews of the book and only three were adverse." Yet it seems Thompson's narrative not only fell from critical favor, it was practically ignored for decades, until it was reissued in 1967. I believe a big part of this neglect has to do with who reviewed the book, and the lasting image expressed by that prestigious reviewer—in this case Ralph Ellison.

In his review of *American Daughter*, "Stepchild Fantasy" which appeared in the *Saturday Review of Literature* June 8, 1946, Ellison concludes his article by stating, "It would be a mistake to take *American Daughter* as a serious contribution either to American biography or to the rising discussion over the damaging effect of our system of race relations upon Negro personality and our democratic health." Although Ralph Ellison's review pre-dated the publication of *Invisible Man* in 1952, I believe that because of his later literary fame as a result of *Invisible Man*, his unfavorable remarks affected the standing of *American Daughter*. Ellison had entered the literary scene in the

late 1930s when a meeting with Richard Wright in New York led to his first attempts at writing fiction. It is well known that he admired Wright and was impressed with Wright's work, especially *Black Boy* and *Native Son*. In his review, Ellison compares *American Daughter* with J. Saunders Redding's *No Day of Triumph* and Richard Wright's *Black Boy*. He writes, "These autobiographies stress negative aspects of being a Negro in the United States, although Miss Thompson accentuates what she believes to be positive" (25). Ellison correctly notes that Thompson

feels that she escaped the psychological scars that identify most Negro Americans...it was exactly her color which caused her to grow up with a strong sense of alienation even among her unprejudiced white neighbors. To deal with this alienation she developed her hair-trigger sense of humor and an insistent friendliness. Sometimes, however, she appears to have suffered more than she is willing to admit...And if this isolated position equipped her with a hardy individualism, it ill prepared her to live the life of the average Negro when, dissatisfied with being the only Negro among whites, she sought to escape to a life among "(her) own people." (25)

What Ellison fails to realize, though, is that Thompson hardly aspires "to live the life of the average Negro"; she realized years earlier that she was different and way beyond anything resembling "average," which is partly the reason why she is so interesting. Ellison admits that the tension Thompson experiences in her narrative with blacks and whites is reminiscent of "Richard Wright's conflicts with both Negroes and whites," yet Ellison apparently is taken aback by Thompson's demeanor, accusing her of indulging in " 'step child fantasies' of transcending the Negro predicament by becoming the symbolic daughter of a white family," what he calls "a form of symbolic [race] bleaching." He indignantly calls her writing style incongruous, "chatty," "superficial," and having a "false ring." Unable to imagine that an unknown little black "girl" from North Dakota could possibly equal him intellectually, Ellison seems irritated, maybe fearful of the

thought that she just might be his intellectual superior because he cannot seem to figure her out. He tries to ignore her complexity as an abstract thinker. In the black publishing world, Era Bell Thompson even may have been a threat to Ralph Ellison's own aspirations to write fiction; perhaps he considered her competition. What ever his reasons, Ellison tries to commit literary homicide at the end of his article. He writes:

For all its friendliness and optimism, *American Daughter* is not nearly so worthy a book as *Black Boy* or *No Day of Triumph*, despite their questioning pessimism. For while these autobiographies are probing and serious, Miss Thompson's is humorous and superficial; where they are deeply felt and passionate, she is strangely lacking in genuine emotion. There is such a contrast between Miss Thompson's obvious intelligence and her book that it is as though she has held back the better, more thoughtful part of herself. For although the work of a college major in journalism and the social sciences, *American Daughter* is amazingly lacking in political, sociological, economic, or psychological insights. Indeed one wonders at its publication by the very sociological University of Chicago Press—which does not usually publish autobiography. (26)

Clearly, it is beyond Ralph Ellison to seriously recognize *American Daughter* as the American masterpiece it truly is as he oversimplifies the text's ideas and dismisses the book's obvious importance. Ellison seems dumbfounded by *American Daughter's* mystique. Although he recognizes Thompson's intelligence and formal college education, he fails to acknowledge her literary brilliance.

Era Bell Thompson's predicament is hardly new in discussions of black women's writing and the damaging effects of black (and white) male devaluation of their work. Zora Neale Hurston is an important example of such treatment. Regardless of the impressive body of work that she published, especially what biographer Robert E. Hemenway considers "her best novel, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937), ...none of her novels sold more than five thousand copies before going out of print" (6). According to Hemenway, "Ralph Ellison and Richard Wright...reviewed her books and accused her

of caricature” (334). When Richard Wright reviewed *Their Eyes Were Watching God* for *New Masses*, he complained “bitterly about the minstrel image that he claimed she was perpetuating” (241). According to Hemenway, “the lack of bitterness offended Wright” (241). However, Wright was not the only critic that harshly reviewed Hurston’s work. Sterling Brown and Alain Locke also wrote hurtful reviews. As a result, Hurston’s work fell into literary oblivion. It was not until the novelist Alice Walker rescued her in the 1970s that she was restored to her rightful place in the literary canon as a writer, novelist, intellectual and anthropologist. Alice Walker notes in her book, *In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens* that “Zora was before her time, in intellectual circles, in the life style she chose” (89). Similar to Hurston, Era Bell Thompson was also misunderstood and unfairly criticized, contributing to her historical suppression. In ways reminiscent of Hurston, Era Bell Thompson’s assumed “lack of bitterness” was also found offensive.

Frances Smith Foster addresses some of the same issues in her discussion of Frances E.W. Harper’s book *Iola Leroy* (1893), which she recognizes as the first post-bellum novel written by an African American, and the first to confront the Reconstruction period; the novel is today touted as an important, historically significant contribution to the canon of African American literature. However, the book’s importance was not always appreciated by some of its prestigious male reviewers who contributed to its literary dismissal. In the book’s “Introduction,” Foster notes *Iola Leroy*’s “numerous editions and essentially positive reviews.” Yet, she writes,

But by 1911, the year Harper died, *Iola Leroy* had fallen from critical favor. W.E.B. Du Bois, as editor of *Crisis* magazine, wrote a eulogy in which he declared that Harper should be remembered more for her good intentions than for the success of their executions. Intoned Du Bois, “she was not a great writer, but she wrote much worth reading. She was, above all, sincere.” Such critical disfavor continued for the next several

decades (xxxv).

Besides the damaging remarks of Du Bois, Foster also scrutinizes negative comments made by Robert Bone in 1965 that not only attacked Harper's sex and race, but also her age, accusing her of being too "passive" in her writing and not "belligerent" enough. Foster says, "Bone's criticism is less easy to fathom since he attributes Harper's gentility to her advanced years" (xxxvi). Upon closer scrutiny, I learned that the literary homicide of black women's writing began at the outset of the African American literary canon.

In the late 1980s, Henry Louis Gates, Jr., in his essay "From Wheatley to Douglass: The Politics of Displacement" raises many questions "about the nature of the process of canonization and the issue of gender in contemporary literary politics" (47). He addresses Deborah McDowell's argument regarding Frederick Douglass and his 1845 *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave* "that Douglass's election as the 'father' of the tradition is central to the construction of an image of the black canon as both male engendered and male dominated" (47). Therefore, because of gender bias critics imputed inferiority to black women's texts. Gates points out that "for the election of Frederick Douglass as the 'representative colored man' of the tradition, an election effected by both black and white abolitionists in the middle of the nineteenth century, led to what we might think of as the cultural erasure of a female progenitor" (47-48). Of course that "female progenitor" that Gates refers to is Phillis Wheatley who "between 1773 and the middle of the nineteenth century...virtually *was* the canon of black American letters" (49). Gates writes:

What's more, virtually all commentators thought so, and were proud of that fact. Her poems and letters, her books and books about her life, were reprinted widely, reviewed prominently, and praised roundly as the work of the founding "genius" of

African-American letters. Nowhere was she held in higher esteem than within abolitionist circles, as a survey of the abolitionist press between 1827 and 1860 would suggest. (49)

According to Gates, Wheatley's downturn was dramatic and happened between 1845 and 1860, so that "by the end of the nineteenth century, her displacement was nearly complete" (51). Gates notes that "when the editor of an anthology of biographies entitled *Notable Negro Women* wrote to Douglass asking for the names of famous black women authors, Douglass wrote back, scornfully, to say that he could think of none, and he could think of none because there were none!" Unfortunately, Era Bell Thompson and other black women intellectuals have suffered a similar fate. Of course, as Gates points out, "What had happened in the second half of the nineteenth century...was Douglass' ascent as 'representative man of the Negro race,' whose works were widely thought to be pinnacles of African-American intellection. Douglass's prestige supplanted Wheatley's, and the critical establishment...has followed suit" (52). Similarly, Richard Wright, Ralph Ellison and James Baldwin have often been regarded as the representative 20th century writers of the African American experience, supplanting such writers as Zora Neale Hurston, Era Bell Thompson, Ann Petry, and Lorraine Hansberry.

Before the publication of *American Daughter* and before Thompson's journalism career was launched at *Negro Digest* and *Ebony* in 1947, Thompson's feminism and use of humor and understatement is apparent in the tone she uses in an article published in *Manpower Review* in 1943 entitled, "Placement Interviewer's Lament: A Plea for Deglamorization of War Jobs." As an Interviewer for the United States Employment Service in Chicago from May 1942 to November 1946, Thompson may have interviewed thousands of women during World War II. She is highly critical of the "Rosie the

Riveter” media campaign that was used to encourage women to help in the war effort. Tactfully, with her signature tongue in cheek humor, she criticizes the sexism, racism and ageism of this government effort. The piece teems with resentment toward the glamorization of jobs that were, in reality, very dangerous and physically demanding, even if they appeared to be well paying. She asks, “how can I make the ladies of our area understand that to help in the war effort they don’t have to get filthy rich; that there is more to this women’s war than a rivet gun and a welding torch; and that essentiality covers a multitude of occupations not found in the rotogravure section?” (15).

Era Bell Thompson bluntly tells women that a placement interviewer only has “six or seven much-mauled female orders, and that’s not a fraction over 65 cents an hour even if you are a Phi Beta Kappa, a perfect 32, and furnish your own core boxes.” She points out that “most of the unemployed females are the over-aged, members of minority groups, and personnel women.” As Thompson tells women “like it is,” she does so with a bit of humor. “The over-age, over-weight sisters are in a bad way, occupationally speaking, what with birth certificates and ration books flaunting life’s deepest secrets.” Yet, the reality that “factory life begins to diminish for the woman of 40, and the majority of our orders positively stop at 50 years” seems less devastating after the humorous aside. An argument can be made that Thompson’s use of those “much-mauled female orders” followed by age limits, implies the sexual harassment that many women faced while working in factories during the war who were themselves “much-mauled” females. It is obvious to me that Thompson, in her position as interviewer, probably heard many stories from the women she interviewed of sexual advances, harassment, and maybe even rape by male supervisors and foremen. However, when Thompson addresses the unemployed

Negro women, one senses the humor in the piece is used to mask what is negative or unpleasant and to “soften the punch” of her criticism because black women were specifically demoralized by sexual myths of promiscuity and prostitution.

The unemployed Negro women can be divided into two groups: the domestic worker who is grasping this opportunity to escape the hated servant life for that of the better-paying, shorter-hour factory job where she can go home nights and doesn't have to say “yes ma'am” to the foreman; and the college trained professionals and specialists who are still banging their heads against the closed doors of industry. (13)

Era Bell Thompson had been a member of both groups. Even though Thompson consistently stabs at the blatant prejudices against women's age, weight, and race in the war effort in her article, she ironically received favorable letters in response to her (masked) criticisms from other United States Employment Service offices. One Senior Interviewer, Stanley B. Weston, called Thompson's piece “a most amusing interlude” in an unpublished letter dated December 9, 1943. Of course, in Weston's mind, this is a compliment. In actuality, the serious and urgent issues that Thompson raises in her “lament” are basically dismissed by Weston's comment. This is an early example of how misunderstood Thompson's work has been. Therefore, it is no surprise that the humor--farce, satire and irony in *American Daughter* becomes a misunderstood strategy when used to represent black female subjectivity.

After distinctly establishing gender in *American Daughter*, the racial aspects of the Thompson family are delineated in the book's second paragraph and continue on for another page and a half as Era Bell Thompson uses humor to address a horrifying fact of the Southern slave holding class--the rape and torture of slave women. When Thompson describes another daughter that had been born but did not survive “a long time before, a

girl with fair skin and blonde hair,” she tells readers, “My father and mother said she ‘took back,’ ” adding her signature humorous aside, “Our white neighbors were taken aback, too. They didn’t blame the iceman, exactly...” (13). At this point, Thompson tells us that “there was something in the Thompson woodpile besides a Negro---and there was.” Era Bell Thompson reveals that her “mulatto” father was the product of the former slave master’s son on the “Old Thompson plantation in Virginia.”

He, too, had had fair hair when he was a little boy...for his mother, a freed woman, was a servant in the Big House, and his father was Old Thompson’s son...When his father was killed in the Civil War, his mother was free to marry Evans, a colored man, father of her son, John, and the three little girls. After Emancipation the family did not wait for the “mule and forty acres.” (14)

Suspiciously, there is a contradiction. If Thompson’s grandmother had been truly “free” she would have married Evans whenever she wanted, but instead she had to wait until Tony’s father, the master’s son, “was killed in the Civil War” before she could marry the man she truly loved. The strategic use of humor, presented right before and right after the above passage allows Era Bell Thompson to raise highly sensitive issues that affected her as a black woman. This painful aspect of her father’s life manifests itself in the racial tension that is strongly expressed in the animosity between Tony and his brother John’s Irish wife, Ann. “Father couldn’t quite forgive his brother for marrying a white woman---and Ann never forgot” (15). This stress is again apparent in the text when Tony is informed of the birth of another daughter August 10, 1905--Era Bell Thompson’s. She makes the point that her father’s main concern was whether the new daughter, like the previous one, would have blonde hair and white skin, perhaps reminding him of the predicament of his own mother on the Old Thompson plantation. The earlier slave narrators and writers of the 19th century, such as Harriet Jacobs, Harriet E. Wilson,

Frederick Douglass, William Wells Brown, and many others, directly addressed these painful realities. Yet through the use of humor, Thompson seems to make light of the horrifying fact that black females, including her own grandmother, suffered rape and other terrible injustices during American slavery. She writes of her father, “So when they told him he was again the father of a girl, he began to worry. He needn’t have. When I lost the newborn pallor, I began taking on racial traits so quickly and decidedly that Mother became alarmed” (15).

Apparently, Mother’s “alarmed” reaction here represents the colorism that Era Bell Thompson would later come to know very well living in black Chicago as she notes in *American Daughter* that she felt “uneasy” sensing “a color line within the color line” (256). Colorism can be defined as prejudice against the skin color of those within the same racial group; it can also be defined as an internalization of racism. Clearly, colorism had developed during the era of slavery. Indeed, the tentacles of the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade were far reaching, as noted by such 20th century writers as Ngugi Wa Thiongo, (*Petals of Blood*), Chinua Achebe (*Things Fall Apart*), Peter Abrahams (*Mine Boy*), and Frantz Fanon (*The Wretched of the Earth*), authors who address aspects of colorism as a result of European colonialism and exploitation in Africa and the Caribbean. In the United States, this phenomenon has been a painful reality in African American culture because it creates division and perpetuates ignorance. Many black writers, especially those from the antebellum era, such as William Wells Brown and Harriet E. Wilson, have explored the idea of colorism in their writing. Zora Neale Hurston also examined this concept in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. More recently, filmmaker Spike Lee unveiled the unsavory phenomenon in his late 20th century film *School Daze* by exploring the

connection between colorism and class on the campus of a historically black college. Certainly, when it comes to the birth of African American babies, no one consciously wants to be reminded of slavery's depravity through their child's light skin color, especially those who were historically closer to the event, like Thompson's father; on the other hand, there is a sense that a very dark complexioned child is not necessarily desired either, which was expressed by Mother's "alarmed" reaction. In *American Daughter*, the view that slavery's legacy could manifest in African American newborns at any time is clearly expressed.

Consequently, the "white blood" flowing through Tony Thompson's veins was not something he was proud of, especially considering the compromising situation of his mother as Old Thompson's son's mistress. Tony's abhorrence of the appearance of Old Thompson's bloodline is again underlined when Era Bell Thompson informs us that her parents "had worried about Tom, too. He startled everybody with his tight red hair and yellow, freckled nose. Pop would look hard at Tom and shake his head. 'You'd better go' way from here with that red stuff, boy, and come back lookin' like one of us' " (15). To soften the punch of what this reaction implies, Thompson humorously writes, "Colored storks are notoriously inconsistent." Era Bell Thompson then criticizes and ridicules the irrationality of "the one drop rule" regarding race when she facetiously tells us, "In father's mulatto veins flowed also the blood of a Dutchman, a Frenchman, and a couple of Indians. Pop had to claim two Indians to make up for the Cherokee chief who was my mother's grandfather, and to cover up that touch of Chinese he couldn't account for" (13). Of course, the underlying fear is that Tony would be forever reminded of his own mother's suffering every time he looked into the faces of his children if they

resembled his old master/father. Although Era Bell Thompson does not tell us how deeply she feels about her father's childhood trauma, it is apparent that she is profoundly affected because of what she chooses to leave *out* of *American Daughter*---the amazing story about her own grandmother's forty year enslavement in Virginia, emancipation and long-time search for her 12 children, many who preceded her in death, and ending in the reunion with her two sons in North Dakota when she was almost 90 years old, after being separated for twenty-eight years. Plausibly, Era Bell Thompson consciously wanted to transcend the slave narrative genre and create an autobiography that offered a different perspective as a black American woman, one that, as Joanne M. Braxton rightly notes in her book, *Black Women Writing Autobiography: A Tradition Within a Tradition* (1989), is "dignified and self-defining."

In Braxton's discussion of Era Bell Thompson and Zora Neale Hurston, she says,

The autobiographies of Era Bell Thompson and Zora Neale Hurston turn away from the restrictions and limitations of the slave narrative and extend the quest for a dignified and self-defining identity to include a search for personal fulfillment. These women represent the first generation of black women autobiographers that did not continually come into contact with former slaves. (144)

I agree with Braxton, one of the few African American literary scholars to actually correspond with and meet Era Bell Thompson before her death December 30, 1986. Braxton, whose correspondence I had photocopied from Thompson's personal papers, first wrote to her July 2, 1980 when completing her doctoral dissertation on black American women's autobiography at Yale University; she wanted to include *American Daughter* which she referred to as "one of my favorites." Era Bell Thompson, obviously pleased, responded on July 10: "I am happy to know that you wish to include me in your doctoral dissertation on black American women." As a result, Braxton became one of the

first American women scholars to closely examine *American Daughter* and note the text's importance as a major contribution to the genre of black American women's autobiography, thus supplanting Ralph Ellison's earlier damaging comments. In Chapter 5 of her book, entitled "Motherless Daughters and Quest for a Place: Zora Neale Hurston and Era Bell Thompson," Braxton compares and contrasts aspects of Hurston's autobiography *Dust Tracks on a Road* with Thompson's *American Daughter*. She notes: "Their texts reveal a growing sense of displacement that is geographic, cultural, and social; it is accompanied by a reevaluation and rejection of the traditional female role" (144). In terms of Era Bell Thompson, this sense of displacement is what aids in the search for knowledge of her "people" in *American Daughter* as well as in the search for her African ancestors in her second book, *Africa, Land of My Fathers* (1954). Thompson's search for this knowledge also provides opportunities to explore her own self. And since Thompson devoted herself to a professional writing career, traveling the world on assignment, she never married, choosing instead to *self-nurture* rather than to follow in her own mother's footsteps and accept the traditional female role of nurturer. However, Braxton focuses her discussion on the development of black female narrative forms. She explains, "More significant, for my purpose of looking at them [Thompson and Hurston's autobiographies] at a particular stage in the development in black women's autobiographical tradition, are the shared female bonding and conformity to a 'female' narrative mode—Thompson's narrative of isolation and transcendence, and Hurston's narrative of vision and power" (145).

Braxton correctly points to the root of Thompson's displacement, which is anchored in the struggle to "overcome the displacement she faces when the death of her mother

shatters her preadolescent world” (146). According to Braxton, this experience has created a response that “develops a special vision of wholeness,” one that is “central to the psychic wholeness of young women deprived of their connection with the primary source of their black and female identity” (146). With the loss of her mother, Era Bell Thompson became isolated from any “black and female identity” she could freely consult and relate to as a preadolescent girl. The few images she creates of her mother in *American Daughter* are understated, even mysterious. Early in her narrative, Thompson recalls observing her mother playing the piano during quiet, meditative moments. She writes, “Sometimes, after supper, Mother would sit down at the deserted piano and play slow, sad things. She never played from music—I doubt if she ever had lessons—but, as she played, her eyes had a faraway look, her small fingers responding to the song in her soul” (20). This image is reminiscent of the stifled creativity of the known and unknown mothers and grandmothers that Alice Walker addresses in her essay, “In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens.” Thompson’s mother’s expression of sorrow might represent the unrealized potential she may have had as a gifted musician or composer that perhaps Era Bell Thompson recognizes as the adult looking back. There is a strong sense that Mother, in some profound way, felt sadly unfulfilled, lacking any outlet for her own creativity and self expression. And the idea of being “self-defined” as a woman was non-existent to women, black and white, during the late 1800s when Mother had been born and raised. Unfortunately, because of Mary’s own isolation as a black woman living in North Dakota, and due to her early death, Era Bell Thompson was left displaced and isolated from a black female community. And it is apparent that Era Bell Thompson’s mother’s death traumatized her so deeply, she is unable to write about her with any depth in her

autobiography. Thompson once said that she recalls her mother “as a very quiet person” but that her memories of her mother are vague. She said, “I was with my mother when she died, and that frightened me, because I had never seen anyone die before. I wasn’t sure she was dying. All of that blocked out some of the memory of her” (Oral History, 2). This is a central part of *American Daughter*’s pain.

In *American Daughter*, it is disturbing to recognize how Thompson frequently refers to her mother’s quiet turmoil, especially once the family plans to move to North Dakota. She writes, “Sadly Mother sold the house and turned back the shiny veneer piano. All through the last day, white and colored neighbors came with gifts of parting and words of sympathy; for them our destiny was an untimely death in the frozen wilds of Dakota. Smiling through her tears, Mother packed our things, and at last we were on our way” (26). Of course, this move is also a foreshadowing of Mary’s early death. As they ride the train and the landscapes transform to miles of snow, something in the text profoundly changes that implies a negative impact on Mary, one that foreshadows the terrible blow to Era Bell Thompson’s life. Thompson again observes her mother’s sadness. She says,

All day long we rode through the silent fields of snow, a cold depression spreading over us. I looked at Mother. She tried to smile, but there were new tears in her eyes. She was thinking of the green hills of Virginia, thinking, too of the lush valleys of Iowa. All these things, these friendly things that she knew and loved, were far behind her now. I think she knew then that she would never come that way again. (27)

Easily distracted by the prose describing the changing landscapes, one nearly misses the sense of crossing over into another world, of crossing, for the Thompson family, a chasm or border, one that implies several meanings. Author Michael K. Johnson in his essay, “‘This Strange White World’: Race and Place in Era Bell Thompson’s *American Daughter*,” has appropriately captured this feeling of crossing a border in his exploration

of this crucial moment in the text.² Johnson correctly points out Thompson's clever use of allegory. He writes,

Thompson's realistic winter landscape descriptions also allegorically represent the social situation of herself and her family. The phrase "this strange white world," which she uses to describe the view from the train window, refers to both natural and social environments. In "American Daughter," the changed appearance of the physical world signals the crossing of the border from such settled and urban areas...to a frontier space recently opened for homesteading, and from a sense of belonging to an African American community to a sense of "exile" in a predominantly white western settlement. (102)

Allegory can be used as an extended metaphor, especially in terms of its use in *American Daughter* as there are many specific examples in these descriptions in which, interestingly, humor is completely absent. Instead, there is an intense sorrow that is foreboding. Perhaps the "white world" could also represent the unseen death of Mother in the sense that whiteness, especially in terms of snow, creates a "snow-blindness" that impairs one's eyesight by the glare of snow. Right before the snow appears, Thompson draws a sketch of the scenery that she says "gradually grew gray and hushed" with tree limbs that "looked sad and forlorn" while "the last flowers were withering and dying" (26). These images are reminiscent of a funeral. And the whiteness also possibly represents the idea of one "crossing over" into the light that represents heaven, or "the other side." North Dakota is referred to as "barren" and described as "vast, level, gray-brown country, treeless and desolate" in *American Daughter* (26). This language, these precise descriptions represent metaphorical writing that encapsulates the situation of the Thompson family, as noted by Michael K. Johnson, but these words also underline the disconsolate situation for Mary, an isolated black woman concerned about the future of her surviving daughter. Era Bell Thompson, as the adult woman looking back, re-

constructs her memory and re-imagines the moment in such a way that it becomes obvious that these words were written with her mother's perspective in mind.

After pages of beautiful, yet woeful text showcasing Thompson's literary skills, suddenly humor, through the use of irony, breaks the somber mood after the family is reunited in Driscoll. Thompson recalls her mother's first question to her husband, " 'But aren't there any colored people here?' asked Mother incredulously. 'Lord no!' said Father. 'What'd you want with colored folks, Mary? Didn't you come up here to get away from 'em? Me, I could do without 'em for the rest of my days' " (27-28). In terms of the isolation of North Dakota, it affected the males in the family differently from the females. Tony and his three sons could assert themselves as "men" without the fear of being persecuted or attacked simply because of their race. Men enjoyed mobility, while the women were much more restricted, especially Mary who may have dominated in the domestic sphere, but lacking any close connections with other black women in the North Dakota environment, she probably felt even more confined. Tony's response to his wife's incredulity upon learning that there were no "colored folks" in North Dakota indicates Mary's ignorance regarding North Dakota's racial and cultural populations; the lack of "colored folks" also implies a sense of relief, from Tony's perspective, as he wants to avoid the masses of black migrants leaving the South and flooding the northern cities during a wave of the Great Migration. Tony was well aware of the racial violence and terrorism that plagued African Americans, even in the cities, during these years; therefore, I believe he consciously wanted to avoid exposing his family to any negative conflict, seeking instead to shield them from race hatred. And he was very successful at keeping his only daughter completely ignorant about the lives of African Americans.

Undoubtedly, Tony never shared his past with his daughter because he probably considered the topic of slavery highly inappropriate for a young girl, especially his daughter. As a result, Era Bell Thompson had never realized that black authors existed until she was in her twenties. In *American Daughter*, she says:

It was during the height of the Negro renaissance in literature, in the late twenties, when Claude McKay, Langston Hughes, Rudolph Fisher, and others were at their creative best. W.E.B. Du Bois' *The Dark Princess* impressed me more than did any of the other books, for never before had I read of black people beautified, Negroes exalted. Much of his writing was over my head, but I liked the feel of it. His words sang, giving off a haunting cadence, a mystic something that set him on a separate hill. (198)

Reading texts by black writers gave Thompson some sense of a connection with black people, but with *The Dark Princess*, she became aware of a world outside the boundaries of America in which people of color fought for their rights globally. One day, she would cross those boundaries to explore the world as a pioneering journalist.

While living in Des Moines, Tony Thompson had provided a comfortable middle-class lifestyle for his family. Era Bell Thompson affectionately recalls in *American Daughter*, “the little cottage on the bank of the lake” that her family owned, and her father’s prominence in the community (15). Thompson presents the comical, happy, and contented lifestyle that she imagines her family shared. And as a former slave, family meant everything to Tony Thompson.

Another indication of the Thompson’s middle-class status was in the purchase of the piano. Thompson writes that the piano “gave the family a new social status...” (19). Mother wanted to “appeal to our aesthetic sense, if any,” Era Bell Thompson recalls, primarily referring to her three older brothers who were always getting into trouble. Here, Era Bell Thompson writes an incredibly funny description of the music teacher her

mother employed. It is a characterization that is reminiscent of Gwendolyn Brooks' *Satin-Legs* in her poem, "The Sundays of *Satin-Legs Smith*" (1945). In *American Daughter*, humor aside, there is, as with *Satin-Legs*, detectable a lingering sadness about P. Fauntleroy White.

She engaged for us one P. Fauntleroy White, professor of music and conductor of the Little Seraphim Choir at Colored Baptist, who also gave recitals when he wasn't too busy at the Drake Hotel, where he was better known as Bellhop Number Four. A petite man, was P.F.W., with his pince-nez glasses and thin, expressive hands. Professor White's name was somewhat misleading, but his vitality was good. When he gave a music lesson he became animated, activated, inspired; the stiff pompadour reared back from his perspiring temples in well-oiled unity, and the veins of his bony arms rippled for want of muscles. "One, two, three!" he'd scream, and musical scales were born—a bit deformed, perhaps, and often belabored, but born. (19)

Here, Era Bell Thompson uses a farcical name to emphasize the tragic humor of this character. The name P. Fauntleroy White is very laughable as it brings to mind the popular 20th century character Little Lord Fauntleroy with his long blonde hair and white skin. "Fauntleroy" can be divided and reduced to its Latin root; for example, "faun" is a Roman mythological being that is part goat, part man. Thompson's college transcripts verify that she studied Latin at Morningside College in 1931, which means she definitely would have read Roman mythology. And "roy" implies the royalty or majesty that the character obviously assumes while playing the piano, a royalty that is more dignified than being "better known as Bellhop Number Four" at the Drake Hotel. The title of "professor" adds to the character's prestige whether he had formal training and credentials or not as "professor" was the title bestowed on many church musicians—some jazz pianists, too. In addition, when Thompson tells us that "Professor White's name was somewhat misleading" and describes how his "stiff pompadour reared back,"

we get a visual image of this character that induces outright laughter. Sadly, though, we are also reminded of the colorist mindset implied in the undercurrent of this humor.

In terms of social class, I have also noted that Mary (Mother) Thompson's speech patterns differ substantially from her husband Tony's comical stereotypical "black" dialect in the autobiography. Perhaps Mary had received some formal education or training because her speech is portrayed in standard colloquial English in *American Daughter*. And perhaps Thompson connotes class status through speech patterns, a strategy that is reminiscent of the characters portrayed in other texts of the post reconstruction era, like Frances E.W. Harper's *Iola Leroy*, for instance. Aware that Era Bell Thompson fictionalized her autobiography to a certain extent, I believe Mary would have had access to the speech, dress, and social graces of her wealthy employers.

Era Bell Thompson clearly makes the point that the family's move north and west was a decision made primarily with the best interests of the males of the family in mind. Fearing for the lives of his black sons, and perhaps because of his own wanderlust, Thompson notes her father's words in her book, " 'We'll have to take them away from here; city's no place for growing boys, specially colored boys. I'm tired of the city, too, Mary. We worked hard and got this home, but we can work for another one, a real home this time, out in God's country' " (22). Thompson says, "Mother's silence was consent," a comment that recognizes her mother's subordinate position as a woman, and perhaps even her invisibility as Tony looks to "far-off North Dakota to find a new home in the wide open spaces, where there was freedom and equal opportunity for a man with three sons"; then, to break the tension, as well as to place her own self on equal footing with

the males in the family, Era Bell Thompson adds humorously, “Three sons and a daughter” (22).

Mother/daughter conflict arises in Chapter 3, “Testing Ground” when Era Bell Thompson first became painfully aware of gender difference. She noted the gradual alienation from her main childhood playmate—her brother Harry (Carl Thompson). She recalls, “He was thirteen now, growing straight and tall, growing away from me and my child’s world, seeking the companionship of Father and Tom, and I found it increasingly difficult to tag along” (47). Mary may have observed this situation and seen it as an opportunity to begin the domestication process of her daughter so she would learn to one day care for her own husband and children. Thompson writes, “ She found tasks inside the house—little girl tasks like setting the table, doing dishes, sewing my clothes, or endless pounding on the clabber in the stone churn...My dislike for housework often brought me into violent conflict with Mother” (47). Instead, Thompson hid and dreamed about traveling far away; she rode the horses and tried to keep up with her father and brothers. Though only ten years old, her labor was certainly utilized on the farm as if she were “one of the boys.” She relates how she learned to stack hay, “driving a horse that was hitched to a device called a stacker.” She adds, “When I had mastered this task, I was taught to drive the hayrack” (51). As a young girl, Era Bell Thompson preferred the freedom to work on the farm with her father and brothers. She resisted the proscribed “women’s work” of her mother’s world from a young age. Given her isolation from a black and female community and the oppression/subordination of women during this era, demonstrated through the situation of her mother, and having the added challenge of being the youngest, *and* the only female child in the family, Era Bell Thompson rejected

the idea that she had to conform to the expected female role. She always considered herself to be “different.”

In Chapter 4 of *American Daughter*, “Blizzard-Bound,” readers get an inside look at nearly the entire black community in the state of North Dakota as the Thompson family joins two other black families—the Williams’s, (actually the Johnson’s) their neighbors—for Christmas dinner one year. Era Bell Thompson writes,

Now there were fifteen of us, four percent of the state’s entire Negro population. Out there in the middle of nowhere, laughing and talking and thanking God for this new world of freedom and opportunity, there was a feeling of brotherhood, of race consciousness, and of family solidarity. For the last time in my life, I was part of a whole family, and my family was a large part of a little colored world, and for a while no one else existed. (74)

This “little colored world” further delineates Mary and Era Bell’s isolation as black females since these neighbors were almost a day’s ride away, traveling by horse drawn sled. Thompson would later recall that the Johnson’s (the Williams’s in *American Daughter*), the “two black brothers who farmed near Steele” had homesteaded and were there when the Thompson family arrived. Thompson later became friends with one of the brother’s daughter Helen Johnson. She said,

When she [Helen] was fourteen, her mother and father said, “This is no place to rear a black child, especially a girl.” The thing that they were avoiding was the thing that I didn’t avoid, because as things turned out, my mother died, and I was stuck in the country longer than I should have been, for social reasons. So they moved to Indianapolis, to a large city. Helen got married and has eight children. (Oral History 27).

According to United States Census Reports for North Dakota, “in 1910 and 1920, African Americans comprised merely .001 percent of the state’s population with 617 black residents in 1910, and 467 in 1920.” Kathie Ryckman Anderson, a North Dakota native

and author, and perhaps Era Bell Thompson's first biographer notes a jarring example as to exactly how remote North Dakota was, even for white Americans. In her essay "Era Bell Thompson: A North Dakota Daughter" she writes, "In 1910, only 28 per cent of the population of North Dakota was classified as 'native white of native parentage.' The majority were classified as either 'native white of foreign parentage' or 'foreign white' " (12). Considering the isolation, it is unnerving to read Thompson's words, "For the last time in my life, I was part of a whole family" because they foreshadow her mother's death on the one hand, but on the other hand, it is unsettling, even telling since Era Bell Thompson wrote these words from the perspective of a 40 year old single black woman. I found her observations of the other black females in the Williams family, also isolated like Mary and Era Bell, quite interesting. There is no mistaking the tension that Thompson notes in Mrs. Ted Williams, "the Maryland schoolteacher. She was nice—reserved and nice. Fifteen years, two children, and Mrs. Ted still made noises like a schoolmarm. It even showed in her fourteen-year-old daughter, who was full of 'Yes, mamma,' and 'No, mamma,' instead of turkey and ice cream" (74). Certainly, such isolation and restriction had many negative effects on the few black women of North Dakota. In Mrs. Ted's case, she was perhaps restricted from being able to teach in the North Dakota schools because of her race, gender, and marital status, not to mention there being enough black children to open a "Negro" school. Therefore, she had been relegated to the identity of her husband, as she is always referred to as "Mrs. Ted" in the text. Joanne M. Braxton comments on the effects of such isolation in her book, *Black Women Writing Autobiography*. She writes, "This sense of physical and psychological isolation, shared with forebears in black female autobiographical tradition, leads Era Bell

to perceive her difference and to attempt to transcend externally imposed limitations” (159). To add to Braxton’s point, I believe that Thompson’s desire to transcend limitations imposed by a racist and sexist society were further influenced by the modeling and unwitting encouragement she received through watching and listening closely to her father as he addressed his sons and other men in their rural environment. More than one reviewer of *American Daughter* recognized the close relationship that existed between father and daughter. One reviewer, Gerald W. Johnson, shares his intrigue regarding this close connection in the *New York Herald Tribune*. He says: “Era Bell tells about it in her autobiography, *American Daughter*, which is ostensibly her own story, but in which the vivid, dominant personality is that of pop. Technically this may be a flaw, but when a girl starts out to write about herself and winds up writing about her father there is something warmly human in the process that the reader can’t help liking.” Johnson’s comment here about the text’s being “warmly human” refutes Ralph Ellison’s earlier claim that the book lacks any “genuine emotion.” In addition, what Johnson calls a “flaw” is actually done intentionally by Era Bell Thompson.

Since Era Bell Thompson considered herself “one of the boys,” she probably did not realize then that limitations placed on her because of race and gender could seriously restrict her choices in life. The “new world of freedom and opportunity” and “of race [and gender] consciousness, and family solidarity,” which proves to be intensely important ideas for black families in the new century, also proves to be important in terms of gender. And somehow, Era Bell Thompson had been able to make her difference as a woman and an African American work to her own benefit throughout her life, thus

creating in herself an exemplary role model for generations of females. A great part of that difference has to do with humor.

To soften her criticism of the restrictive external world, Era Bell Thompson delves into the dimension of her signature humor, sometimes presenting an *Amos 'n' Andy* type of comedy, especially through the banter of her three brothers. This is apparent, for example, after the family returns home from Christmas dinner at the Williams's. Thompson's parodying of *Amos 'n' Andy* is a reflection of her historical moment. According to Mel Watkins, in his book *On the Real Side: Laughing, Lying, and Signifying—the Underground Tradition of African-American Humor that Transformed American Culture, From Slavery to Richard Pryor*, the *Amos 'n' Andy* radio show debuted on NBC March 19, 1928, less than a year before the stock market crash (275). The show, Watkins writes, was an immediate success. It “spotlighted two Georgia Negroes whose migration first to Chicago and then to Harlem humorously mirrored the plight of the nation's common man, caught in the transformation from an agrarian society to a complex urban one” (276). Mel Watkins explains this black humor: “The comic currency remained thick dialect speech, malapropisms, and the standard Negro stereotypes: naivete, impudence, venality, and ignorance” (276). Indeed, Era Bell Thompson enjoys recreating the past antics of her brothers using her own version of *Amos 'n' Andy* humor, which she demonstrates in her text after the Christmas dinner with the Williams family:

Far into the night we could hear Dick's voice and Tom and Harry's laughter. Dick was taking the Williamses apart, one by one. “That Mack, he's a bear. A bear, man!” “A black bear,” put in Harry. “Unquestionably!” Dick continued. “He could whip Jack Johnson and Jim Jeffries settin' down.” “An' never stop talkin',” said Tom.

“Stop talkin’? What you sayin’, son? That man stop talkin’, he’d die sure as you’re born. Drop dead as that old nag Ted calls a race horse.”

At that sally the boys broke out into unrestrained laughter.

“That mule? Lord today! That little yella Negro stand up there with his ugly face hangin’ out in this Dakota breeze and say that bag of bones was a racehorse?”

Dick settled down to his lies. “Why, son, he’s got papers, he’s got papers that say Sir John...”

“Sir who?”

“That’s right. Sir John. Honest to Gawd, that shine done christened that mule after some sweepstake nag. Well, this paper with the pedigree is ‘bout two feet long. He’s got it rolled up like a diploma, with ribbon and the gold seal stamped all around the edges.”

The boys went off into another gale of laughter. “What’d it say, boy? What’d this here thing say?” coaxed Tom.

“How’d I know what it says? I ain’t been to no Latin school. There’s about two feet of fine writin’ in Latin. So fine and so Latin can’t no one read it, least of all that fool from Tuskegee.”

“Tuskegee? What’d you mean, Tuskegee?” Harry had never heard of the school.

“Will you quit bein ignorant? Tuskegee is a college some place below the Mason Dixie.”

“What’s it for?”

“What you think it’s for? Didn’t I say ‘twas below the Mason Dixie? It’s for Zigs, that’s what it’s for.”

“Did Ted say he went to that school?” Tom asked interested.

“Yes, but what makes you think he stayed? Now tell me that?”

“What about the paper?”

“Didn’t I tell you the print was too fine to read? Nobody know what it says but the Latin who wrote it, and he threw away his book and glasses, give himself up.”

“If that’s a racehorse,” said Tom dryly, “I bane a blue-eyed Swede, aye iss.”

“Oh, Gawd!” moaned Dick. “Nigger, you and them blue eyes. Them baby-blue eyes. Father, father! I caun’t stand it!” (75-77)

Noticeably, Era Bell Thompson uses the ingredients that Mel Watkins recognizes as “comic currency” in her black humor, especially the quips regarding the racehorse and the “Latin” that are hilarious. I find myself laughing out loud every time I read it. But there also exists, even in the humor, an undercurrent that is critical, but also prophetic. For instance, earlier, Thompson tells us that Ted Williams, who had been trained at Tuskegee, “was filled with new farming ideas, advanced methods that Mack [his brother]

ridiculed but most of his neighbors respected” (75). As an educated black man formally trained in agriculture, Thompson tells us that he “read weekly farm journals and government bulletins, and his was the only library in the township” (75). Here, we recognize Thompson’s respect for formal education, and having lived in Chicago during the renaissance, she also recognizes the need for blacks to educate themselves in order to compete in the world market. Clearly, the Williams family is portrayed as successful, in a larger sense, at farming as a result of such education and training. And the desire to own a racehorse as a black man at this time was perhaps Ted Williams’s dream, yet it was ridiculed and devalued by the other blacks (specifically Era Bell Thompson’s brothers) in this remote environment. In a sense, Ted Williams looked beyond the limitations that the external world set for him as an African American man and Era Bell Thompson as a black female respected that.

The *Amos ‘n’ Andy* humor comes right before another difficult situation that affects the Thompson family, especially Mother. After Tony receives a telegram in January 1917 from Governor Lynn Frazier’s office, requesting him to report to the capitol “to be sworn in as private messenger to the Governor,” Tony immediately leaves his family for sixty days to serve in North Dakota’s fifteenth legislative assembly (79). Although his sons would take over the business of farming in his absence, I wonder how Mary Thompson felt being left alone for two months, having to manage on the farm while her husband had the freedom to travel and identify with the larger society. As a man, Tony Thompson had no trouble defining himself. However, Era Bell Thompson does tell us: “A week before the session closed Pop sent for Mother and me. After he fitted us out in new clothes, he took us to the Capitol and introduced us to the Governor and to all his new friends” (81).

Still, Tony and his family obviously could not stay in any Bismarck hotel because of their race; Tony had roomed with “one of the very few colored families living in Bismarck at the time” (79). Here, Era Bell Thompson is able to capture some of the peculiar contradictions and ironies that plagued black Americans at that time, even in remote locations like North Dakota: Tony had been sworn in to serve in the North Dakota legislature by the Governor on the one hand, but on the other hand, he was not allowed to stay in the hotels because of his race.

I believe that Chapter 5 of *American Daughter*, “Big Camp Meeting” is one of the most important chapters in Era Bell Thompson’s narrative. It represents the last year of Mother’s life, and is placed right before “Broken Dreams” (Chapter 6), which details her death and its terrible aftermath. “Big Camp Meeting” is brilliantly constructed in the way that it prepares readers for a traumatic event. The chapter is fun to read throughout and it ends hilariously as Thompson again mimics the antics of *Amos ‘n’ Andy* through her brothers’ escapades. Era Bell Thompson also begins the chapter on a high note. She says, “With spring came the excitement of the birth of living things...Our firstborn was a calf...Harry loved the colt. Out of his strange conglomeration of Negrowegian horse talk evolved the recondite and inglorious name, ‘Speevadowsky’” (82). In other words, Thompson wastes no time in making us laugh. But with new life, there is also death as Thompson describes the “eight squirming, squealing baby pigs and one runt,” a litter that had a high mortality rate. She says, “After the sow had lain on two, Mother took over the tiny runt, greasing his scaly sides and feeding him warm milk until he, too, died” (82). This foreshadowing of Mother’s death is also a criticism of the poor care Mother would receive from “Old Doc Reeves”; in a sense, Mother cared more for that baby pig than Old

Doc Reeves would care for her as she lay dying. Era Bell Thompson recalls, “Old Doc Reeves came out from town, felt her pulse, took her temperature, and left some pills. She’d be all right, he said; it was nothing” (93). But the next day Mother died. It is interesting that this criticism is nearly missed due to the manner in which Thompson uses humor to soften the serious issues of racism and sexism, especially the insidiousness of such biases in the isolated North Dakota environment. Kathie Ryckman Anderson notes in her article, “Era Bell Thompson: A North Dakota Daughter” that “Era Bell was 12 when her mother died from a stroke in 1918” (13). Considering the many notes and letters that transpired between Thompson and Anderson during 1982 as Anderson gathered information for her piece, especially her desire to “remove the fiction in *American Daughter*,” Mary’s death as a result of a stroke is plausible since Thompson herself had suffered from high blood pressure and had survived a stroke in 1978. I now wonder if Mary had also suffered, unknowingly, from high blood pressure, given the steady diet of high salt and fat found in the Southern cuisine her husband Tony was famous for cooking. Perhaps this contributed to her early death. Thompson writes in *American Daughter*,

There are a lot of parts to a dead hog, and we tried to eat them all. The good pieces were cut up and hung in the granary to freeze, and the odds and ends appeared upon the table in various forms. There was headcheese, soft brains, pig’s feet, chitterlings, sweetbreads, liver, maws, heart, and a tail. Then there was the rendering of the lard that brought on crackling bread. (90-91)

Era Bell Thompson’s struggle with high blood pressure may also have been a factor in her own death. According to her detailed health records and journal, which she began keeping in 1978 following the stroke, her blood pressure ranged from 160/84 to 135/84.

However, Era Bell Thompson lived until she was 81, unlike her mother who died when only 47 years old.

After Era Bell Thompson's mother's death (unlike Zora Neale Hurston), her father raised her into adulthood, becoming her main role model and the dominant figure in her life, which is evident in the many strong images she presents of him in *American Daughter*, as noted by reviewer Gerald W. Johnson. The use of portraiture, which Braxton also notes, effectively captures the essence of Tony Thompson. Braxton writes, "The intense bonding [Thompson] shares with her father is atypical of most autobiographies by black American women" (161). Apparently, Tony Thompson had been very unusual, attempting "to fulfill the nurturing role himself, raising his daughter to be an independent and high-spirited young woman," as Braxton correctly notes (161). But what Braxton was unaware of at the time was that in *American Daughter*, Era Bell Thompson purposely minimized the great impact that her father made as a Race Man in every community he lived in, which is evidenced by old newspaper clippings and letters found in her personal papers. The newspaper article written about Tony's reunion with his mother, and the two society pieces on his marriage, were not the only instances in which Tony Thompson became the focus of local newspaper articles, as I noted earlier. His involvement in politics—in Illinois, Iowa and North Dakota—had been reported in the local press and is now documented history. Having access to Thompson's private papers has made me aware of details that were merely hinted at, or completely left out of *American Daughter*, as noted. This is especially sadly true of details regarding Era Bell Thompson's mother and their relationship in her autobiography. However, after her mother's death, Thompson became even closer to her father who had tremendous faith in

his daughter's ability to succeed. She would later say that her father "had a blind belief in my ability to become a great writer, once I made it to the big cities" (Oral history).

Contrary to the negative comments of Ralph Ellison, regarding what he sees as the lack of "political, sociological, economic, or psychological insights" in *American Daughter*, Gerald W. Johnson of the *New York Herald Tribune* recognizes

that [Thompson's] story, from a national standpoint, is more nearly typical than that of a Negro who has spent all his life in Georgia. It may be that the South, with its huge concentration of Negroes, is the special case and that we must look away from the South to discover what is the normal attitude of the white man toward the Negro. The policy of segregation, for example, however unjust, has in the south flourished so long because of the practical argument that it tends to prevent breaches of the peace. In other parts of the country where the number of Negroes, in proportion to whites, is so small as to make a genuine race war entirely out of the question, even that value disappears; but it is replaced, to an alarming extent, by the theory that the Negroes are a caste of Untouchables. It is against this that Era Bell Thompson has had to contend all her life, and in some ways it is a more searching test than the brutality of the South...It is to the credit of Miss Thompson as an individual that with a clear comprehension of what she is facing she has been able to maintain not merely her sanity, but a blithe good humor in a pretty grim world...But it is not necessarily reassuring to the rest of us to realize how prejudice (not based on any danger, real or imagined) is seeping through the nation. Nevertheless, whether we like it or not, we should face the fact, for it is a reality that will not be abolished by being ignored.

The fact that Era Bell Thompson had underlined the last line of the above quote in her personal copy of the review is telling and indicates that her agenda in writing *American Daughter* had everything to do with revealing that it is not necessarily the Negro that is the "problem" in America; it is the political, sociological, economic, and psychological mindset of mainstream America that is the real "problem." Braxton points out that Thompson "does not back away from talking about whites or expressing her ambivalence about some blacks" (171).

In the *Chicago Daily Law Bulletin*, reviewer Bernice Langert, in her article entitled, "Testament to the Ability of an Individual" begins: "Let us say at once that *American*

Daughter is distinctive primarily for what it is not. The autobiography of a Negro woman, it is not representative of typical Negro experiences, it is not essentially Negro in its viewpoint, and it is not bitter. In other words, Era Bell Thompson is not an American daughter in the same sense that Richard Wright is a native son.” Langert goes on to say, “This testament to the ability of the individual to transcend sociological barriers is but another proof that it is stereotypes and symbols that are at the foundation of prejudice.” Langert’s comments further refute Ralph Ellison’s accusations that *American Daughter* is “superficial.” Perhaps what irks Ellison most is Era Bell Thompson’s ability effectively to observe, study, analyze and evaluate the situation of black people in America from the perspective of one who did not grow up in what he might call an *authentic* “Negro” environment, therefore, *she* is inauthentic. This is indicated by the title of his article alone: “Stepchild Fantasy.” Era Bell Thompson seems more “white” to Ellison because she is able to analyze both blacks and whites without expressing strong emotion or hatred in her autobiography, unlike Richard Wright. And how dare she use humor? Therefore, from Ellison’s standpoint, Thompson’s book is not valuable because it is not *Negro* in its viewpoint. Years later, when asked to respond to Ellison’s review, Thompson replied, “As for Mr. Ellison’s review, I respect him for his opinions. Had I lived all of my early life among Blacks, perhaps my rage would have been much like his.”

Arna Bontemps’ review of *American Daughter* in the *Weekly Book Review* proved to be a much more positive appraisal as he recognizes the book’s obvious worth. He writes:

The campaign for broader friendship and more complete understanding between racial elements in the United States will be strongly assisted by the publication of Era Bell Thompson’s cheerful and warm-hearted autobiography. Many readers will want to know where Miss Thompson has been all their lives. Such simple wisdom and virtue, combined with so pleasant a quality of self-expression, must have worked hard to keep from being noticed. (4)

Although Arna Bontemps acknowledges *American Daughter*'s sociological elements, his review merely scratches the surface of Thompson's book. Regardless, he and Era Bell Thompson became life-long friends as a result of his review. In a hand written letter dated July 9, 1948, Arna Bontemps thanked Era Bell Thompson for "that very good review of my Story of the Negro in the Chicago Sun-Times." He says, "Without your clipping I might have missed seeing it, for I was in Atlantic City at the time." As her private papers indicate, Thompson corresponded with and enjoyed both literary and personal friendships with Arna Bontemps for many years. She became, in addition, good friends with Jack Conroy who co-authored *Anyplace But Here* with Bontemps; they quoted *Africa, Land of My Fathers* (1954). In a letter dated April 20, 1980, Conroy writes: "Reading about the recent coup in Liberia, I recalled how Arna and I found your book on that country so useful in our 'Beloved and scattered Millions' chapter in *Anyplace But Here*." In an earlier letter dated September 4, 1973, following the death of Arna Bontemps, Jack Conroy laments:

So many of my dear friends and companions gone—Willard Motley, Langston Hughes, Richard Wright and now Arna. The latter blow was in some respects the hardest of all, for we had been close associates both personally and professionally for so many, many years. I didn't see him much during the last ten years—I think maybe the last time in 1968 when we were together at the University of Connecticut—but I always thought of him as being alive there in Nashville. Not too well, alas, as he had suffered a couple of heart attacks, one before he left Chicago.

Era Bell Thompson's long time literary connections to authors of both renaissances are clear. For example, Alain Locke, connected to the Harlem Renaissance, also favorably reviewed *American Daughter*. He reminded Thompson of that fact in a letter dated May 26, 1948 when preparing for an article to be published in *Ebony* magazine. He writes, "I enjoyed your Autobiography, as I indicated over a year ago in my review of it in *Phylon*."

The publication of *American Daughter* afforded Era Bell Thompson access to long-time literary and personal relationships that were interesting and diverse. After being hired by Ben Burns, the only white editor at Johnson Publishing, who said in a personal interview with me that he had been so impressed with her autobiography, he hired her to write for *Negro Digest* and *Ebony*, her importance in the black literary world of Chicago became well known. Langston Hughes, connected to both Harlem and Chicago, became a life-long friend to Era Bell Thompson, as indicated by their correspondence in her private collection. The poet and writer William S. Braithwaite, associated with the literature of the Reconstruction era and the Harlem Renaissance, was also involved with the Chicago movement; he was a very close friend to Era Bell Thompson and he had been encouraged by the rise of the black press during the Chicago Renaissance and its ability to uplift the race well into the 20th century. In addition, her longtime friendship with Gwendolyn Brooks, though not well known, is presented in a box in Thompson's collection of letters, notes, and family pictures that had been given to Thompson over the course of their forty year relationship, which encapsulate their long-time friendship, putting into perspective so much about the mysterious American daughter. Without question, Era Bell Thompson had made an impact in the Chicago literary world with the publication of *American Daughter*. As Arthur P. Davis notes in his review of *American Daughter* that appeared in the *Journal of Negro Education*, Thompson's book truly represents "something new under the sun" (648).

¹ Tom, Dick, and Harry, meaning "just about everyone," is a common expression that is very old. According to the *Morris Dictionary of Word and Phrase Origins* (1982), the expression is "so old that it is unlikely any specific Tom, Dick, and Harry were ever intended. As Charles Earle Funk noted in his amusing book *Heavens to Betsy!*: 'This group of names signifying any indiscriminate collection of masculine hoi polloi was a more or less haphazard choice.' He cited 'Jack and Tom' used as long ago as 1555, and quoted Shakespeare's *Love's Labour's Lost*: 'And Dicke the Shepheard blows his nails; and Tom bears logges into the hall.' So 'Dick, Tom, and Jack' was the way the expression appeared originally. The

American version first appeared in *The Farmer's Almanac* for 1815...in this fashion: 'So he hired *Tom, Dick, and Harry*, and at it they went.' " *The Three Stooges* comes to mind.

² Michael K. Johnson's essay was published in the Spring 2004 issue of *Great Plains Quarterly*.

Chapter Three

Africa Travel Narratives of the Twentieth Century:
Africa, Land of My Fathers and *Black Power*

Without knowledge there can be no morality.
Mary Wollstonecraft

My Negritude is neither a tower nor a cathedral
It delves into the red flesh of the soil.

Aime Cesair

In the fall of 1954, two African American writers from Chicago--Era Bell Thompson and Richard Wright--published books relating their observations, reactions, and analysis of Africa. Even though Era Bell Thompson's second book, *Africa, Land of My Fathers* was intentionally released on September twenty-third, two weeks before Wright's October sixth publication of *Black Power*, Thompson's book still felt the impact of Richard Wright. As noted earlier, Thompson's first book, *American Daughter* competed with the publication of Richard Wright's *Native Son*, an unfortunate predicament that Thompson remembered well. Therefore, the urgency of releasing Thompson's Africa book before Wright became a focus for Thompson and her editor at Doubleday & Company in New York, as expressed in their correspondence during June 1954. Ken McCormick, then Editor-in-Chief of Doubleday, expressed his concern in an early June letter that implored Thompson to avoid delaying her book's publication. He writes, "One of the reasons that it's important not to have anything hold up the book is Richard Wright's Gold Coast book in October. It's an utterly different book, of course, but we don't want to collide with it." Thompson responded: "Saw the Richard Wright announcement, and hope the two books will not clash. *American Daughter* followed close on the heels of his *Native Son*. I have no desire to compete again with a writer of his stature." Unfortunately, Thompson's publication date once again coincided with

Wright's, a cruelly ironic circumstance that I believe has contributed to Thompson's literary obscurity.

Richard Wright's bold title alone—*Black Power*—made a strong political statement for the black Africans who were establishing independence from European colonial rule. But it also became a statement that at the time echoed the climate of pre-Civil Rights activity in America. With such a powerful title, and given Wright's status as a critically acclaimed author who had already published nine books, including the unforgettable *Native Son*, Wright's African narrative became heralded as “the most powerful of Richard Wright's four major works of nonfiction from the 1950s,” according to Amritjit Singh in “Introduction to the HarperPerennial Edition” of *Black Power* (1995) (xxi).

Singh comments on the book's title:

[T]he startling title of this pre-Civil Rights era book on Africa evokes not the popular meaning the term came to signify during the 1960s, but the possibilities for empowerment of black Africans as they gained political freedom from European colonial control. While Wright's pioneering use of the expression “black power” partly explains why he is sometimes hailed as a precursor to the black nationalism of the 1960s and 1970s, there is little in the book to support such a claim. (xii)

To add to Singh's assertion, there is evidence that Wright had first chosen, perhaps as a working title, *Black Gold* for his Africa book, as noted in a letter that Era Bell Thompson sent to American friend and colleague, photojournalist Griffen (Griff) Davis who at the time was “Point Four technical assistance photographer” in Liberia.¹ Of course, Thompson had been more concerned with Wright's publication date rather than his book's title. She writes:

Understand the Wright book, *Black Gold*, will run almost neck and neck with mine. It is supposed to be a “brutal” and frank discussion of the Gold Coast. According to Ben Burns Wright did not like Africa. I had his *Native Son*” to contend with last

book...can think of a lot of competition I'd rather have.

Ben Burns, the white editor at Johnson Publishing responsible for hiring Era Bell Thompson in 1947, was a close personal friend of Richard Wright's; while traveling through Europe, he spent a good amount of time in Paris visiting Wright during the fall of 1953. Unbeknownst to Wright, Burns, also a close friend of Era Bell Thompson, kept her informed as to the progress of Wright's Gold Coast book. He says,

Also got over to Dick Wright's last evening to check something in his big library and spent about an hour chewing the fat. His book incidentally—I know you're interested since it might be competition—is about his stay only in the Gold Coast. He hopes to have it finished in March and it will be published by Harper in Fall. He took hundreds of pictures and will use a lot of them in his book. He is pretty fed up with Africa and the way he talks will say as much in his book. He thinks Americans who gear their thinking to Africa are nuts.

In a separate letter, Ben Burns tells Thompson: “Spent most of this afternoon at Dick Wright's house where we all had lunch—or should I say dinner since the midday meal is the big one—with his family. His wife and youngsters are quite nice and Dick himself is a far cry from his books, a pleasant, really jolly guy. He's about 200 pages into his African book now.” Knowing these private details, it seems odd that Richard Wright and Era Bell Thompson did not know each other.

In the end, *Black Power* became Wright's book's title, a title that I believe implies black male power, whether African or African American. Consequently, whether Wright's choice of title was an unwitting act or not, *Black Power*, though not as successful as *Native Son* and *Black Boy*, captured Richard Wright's literary prominence and moved it into a new direction; in comparison, *Africa, Land of My Fathers* though translated and published in German in 1957, seems to have been given a cursory reading, was marginalized, and summarily dismissed by many of its American reviewers. I believe

Era Bell Thompson may have been the first African American journalist to document the appalling conditions of the native women and children in the African countries she visited during those turbulent times. Thompson's status as the first black female journalist to travel through Africa was also noted by His Excellency, President William S. V. Tubman of Liberia, Era Bell Thompson's first stop on the African continent. At the end of the first chapter, "Little U.S.A.," Thompson reproduces a letter from President Tubman received after her interview with him; it provides his "message for the Negroes of America," but it also recognizes Thompson as being the first black journalist to embark on such a trip. He writes, "Dear Miss Thompson: It was a pleasure for me to have met and talked with you, being the first journalist of our race making a World tour that has visited Liberia, as far as I can recollect" (40). As I noted earlier, *Africa, Land of My Fathers* was also quoted in the book *Anyplace But Here* (1966) by authors Arna Bontemps and Jack Conroy in their chapter "Beloved and Scattered Millions" that recognized Thompson's first observations of Africa in Monrovia, the capital of Liberia. They quote Thompson:

As startling as was the nudity, and as pathetic the obvious poverty, what surprised me most were the Syrian and Lebanese proprietors behind the counters. It was a black man's country, but there was the same lack of business leadership found in Negro neighborhoods in the States. Even the better-class stores on the hill were owned mostly by white immigrants and staffed by white clerks. According to Liberian law, only the descendants of Africans could own property or become citizens (the President could make one a citizen on sight), but somewhere along the line control of their own trade had got out of hand. The question of white monopoly over a black country's business was a sore one, I soon found. (210)

Thompson's perceptions are jarring, especially as she compares the lack of black business leadership in Africa with the same lack of black business leadership in the United States which she says is "startling" and "pathetic." These comments come early in

her book and seem to imply the existence of an ordered system of oppression in Africa, similar to America. Richard Wright did not visit Liberia.

Amritjit Singh, who refers to the significance of other travel narratives published in the 1950s, failed to mention Era Bell Thompson's Africa book that, as demonstrated, uncovers so much more than just the African nationalism of the Gold Coast, which was Richard Wright's main focus in *Black Power*. Had Singh included *Africa, Land of My Fathers* in his discussion, he would have realized how each book tends to complement the other as each author provides perspectives on the Gold Coast (soon to be Ghana) that differ in focus and intent. After closely examining both authors' observations and reactions of the region, it becomes clear how different and how important each perspective truly is to extract a more complete picture of the detrimental effects of European colonialism on the native peoples of Africa. Taken together, the two perspectives offer a powerful statement about the devastating situation, especially in that area of Africa during the 1950s.

In "Apropos Prepossessions," the preface of *Black Power*, Wright explains,

This volume is a first-person, subjective narrative on the life and conditions of the Colony and Ashanti areas of the Gold Coast...The choice of selecting the Gold Coast for such an intensive study was my own and judgments rendered are not comparative. I felt that it was time for someone to subject a slice of African life to close scrutiny in terms of concepts that one would use in observing life anywhere. (xxxix)

Among his many keen observations, Wright's book focuses his intensive study on the political environment of Prime Minister Kwame Nkrumah and his Convention People's Party of the Gold Coast, considered to be the possible example for other colonized African countries to follow as they struggled for independence. But it is also made clear early in the book's preface that *Black Power* will be an outright attack on Western

precepts, complete with Wright's signature anger, bitterness and pessimism, including his criticism of Marxist Communism and the "relinquishing of membership in that party," an agenda which creates an undeniable tension (xxxvi). This tension is also noted in the book's subtitle, *A Record of Reactions in a Land of Pathos*, which warns that Wright's reactions to Africa will no doubt be disturbing, as he seeks to assign blame. He writes, "The issue of who is to blame in a colonial nation that is determinedly actuated by Western ideals to throw off the yoke of foreign rule is a tricky one." Therefore, he informs, "This book seeks to provide Western readers with some insight into what is going to happen in Africa, so that, when it does happen, they will be able to understand it." But he remarks, "Let me be honest; I'm not too hopeful" (xxxvii).

Era Bell Thompson, who also records her impressions of Africa, indeed produces an "utterly different" book as Ken McCormick noted in his letter. Rather than limiting herself to visiting only the Gold Coast, Era Bell Thompson for three months courageously traveled to eighteen African countries, partly on assignment for Johnson Publishing in which she agreed to write a series of articles that would appear in *Ebony* magazine. Unlike Wright, her approach to Africa seems to be more personal as she refers to her African journey as a "homecoming." This is reflected in her book's subtitle, *The Story of the Return of a Native Three Hundred Years Later*. She writes, "It would be interesting to see what would happen if I went 'home.' Would the folks welcome me back after three hundred years? And how would I feel about them?" (18).

Thompson's original ideas for her African book were outlined in a letter she sent to her New York literary agent, Jeanne Hale. She writes,

What I want to write is not a long-haired study of the country's cultural, industrial or economic aspects, but a rollicking account of the return of this native to the

Motherland, complete with mother's reactions. No problems, no social significance. I am neither a missionary nor an anthropologist turned dancer, but a magazine (*Ebony*) editor and an author (*American Daughter*) who is fed up with causes and propaganda. Pathetically few American Negroes have written about Africa at all, and fewer yet have written with lightness and humor about anything. For a long time I have wondered just what the reception and response of an ordinary American Negro with the usual text book conception of the "Dark Continent" would be if suddenly set down in the land of her forefathers.

Referring to Africa as "the Motherland, complete with mother's reactions" indicates Thompson's plan from the beginning to create a book that focuses on a female perspective. Originally, Era Bell Thompson's intention in writing *Africa, Land of My Fathers* had been to present a book that was humorous and fun. Although Thompson does incorporate some humor in her book, she does so to lighten the horrifying reality of her observations and treatment, and she seems genuine in her wish to bond with "her people."

In her "Introduction," Thompson aligns herself with other Americans who want to connect with their family roots. She writes,

My African safari was prompted by the same desire that prompts other Americans to return to Europe and Asia to visit their "Old Country," or that of their parents or grandparents. I, too, wanted to return to the land of my forefathers, to see if it is as dark and hopeless as it has been painted and to find out how it would receive a prodigal daughter who had not been home for three hundred years. And I wanted to know what my own reactions would be to my African ancestors. (10)

Era Bell Thompson presents for readers a common desire of many people--to discover lost information regarding their ancestry through travel, inquiry and exploration. By using this strategy, Era Bell Thompson, the "prodigal daughter," effectively reveals her intentions for going to Africa, and she does so without surface tension or negativity, which seems a very different project from that of the prodigal son, the Male/Novelist

Richard Wright. In addition, as a journalist, Thompson, the Female/Journalist is conscious of her vow to journalistic objectivity, and as the editor of *Ebony* magazine, she is aware of her international *Ebony* readership, even though such objectivity is often challenged, particularly in the two Rhodesias, South Africa, and even Portuguese East Africa where racial segregation proved extremely rigid. Still, she held tightly to her journalistic ethics, which is evident by her book's dedication, which states: "To My Boss, John H. Johnson."

Contrarily, Richard Wright, as a novelist, enjoys literary license as he admittedly fictionalized aspects of his *Gold Coast* book, another difference between the Male/Novelist and Female/Journalist. However, a close look at the unique manner in which each author relates similar experiences in the Gold Coast, especially reactions to the nudity, disease, poverty and illiteracy of Africa, impressions of Prime Minister Nkrumah and the Asantehene, and other unsettling realities, not to mention the American influence witnessed by both writers in the Gold Coast (and elsewhere), are perspectives that are, I think, fascinating to compare, given Thompson and Wright's most obvious dissimilarity--gender. For instance, as a black American man, Wright is referred to as "Massa" by the African "house boys" and other servants common throughout Africa. Needless to say, the salutation "Massa" is reminiscent of the term's use during American slavery. Wright is also referred to as "Dr. Wright" and more frequently "Sir" (spelled "Sar" in *Black Power*). In other words, Richard Wright, the Male/Novelist, is always regarded with great respect.

In comparison, Era Bell Thompson, oftentimes addressed rudely by the Asian and African servants, learned that it helps to be assisted by a male authority figure preferably

European, especially when making arrangements; and sometimes even that was no guarantee because of her skin color. Sometimes, her status as an American elevated her, as she points out at the end of her second chapter, “The Garden of Eden.” She writes,

From the pilot who found a seat for me coming over, to the stranger in an airport restaurant who reprimanded a boy for offering to sell me black-market money, British men had gone out of their way to ‘protect’ me from Africans. I was resentful of the superior attitude Europeans displayed toward “My People,” but I was also flattered by the deference shown me because of my American citizenship. (64)

Even though an American citizen, Thompson quickly learned that being a woman was often a great disadvantage in Africa. She recalls her disappointment when, eager to visit a nearby gold mine for an *Ebony* piece, Thompson is flatly refused and told that “African miners were superstitious about women, considered them *juju*...” (82). Richard Wright, however, had no problem visiting the gold mine because as a man, he was not “*juju*” or bad luck. Wright states, “I was told that *juju* interferes with the working day of the men in the mines to a surprising degree” (348). And this is one example of how *Black Power* complements *Africa, Land of My Fathers*; Wright’s many observations, descriptions, and comments of his experience at the gold mine are indeed fascinating to read, especially the unique manner in which the exploited native miners “stole” the gold, in particular, how they stuffed the bodies of dead rats with gold. He explains,

One ingenious method the Africans used in getting the gold out of the mine involved the utilization of rats. The boys would catch rats—the mine was full of them!—and kill them and disembowel them and secrete their corpses in nooks and crannies. While working, they would come across bits of gold, or sometimes they’d dig gold out of the quartz with their penknives...and hide it until they had a pile worth getting out. They’d take the dead rat, fill his rotting carcass with gold dust, and toss the reeking body atop a heap of debris to be carted upward and thrown away. Bound by clannish ties, they could work like this with little risk of detection by the British. (349)

Thompson also discovered early that being a journalist was not always appreciated in Africa, either, especially given the waning stability of European colonialism and increasingly unfavorable reports from the international press that criticized the racism, color bars, segregation and exploitation of the African people by European colonists. This tension is illustrated when Thompson attends a cocktail party in Kenya. She writes,

At the cocktail party that afternoon the subject uppermost in the minds of the guests soon came to the surface. Ill feeling toward foreign journalists who flocked to Kenya to feast on the sensationalism of Mau Mau atrocities was no secret, and I had heard stories of newsmen being roughed up by the irate townsmen. (212)

Era Bell Thompson, one of those “foreign journalists” in Africa, uncomfortably remained cognizant of her situation as a black American woman traveling for the first time in Africa. Her reflections of that time were recorded years later during an interview with the *Black Women Oral History Project* (1978). She recalls,

On my first trip to Africa in 1953, as a black American woman journalist, I was taboo to both African and colonial officials. As an editor, ninety percent of my mail was addressed to Mr. Thompson. In Ethiopia, a black journalist did not bother to meet my plane because he thought the magazine editor was a man. Being sent all that distance for a story, I must be white. He got quite a shock when he met me. (40)

Thompson’s unusual position added to her disillusionment with Africa. She had believed that she could travel anywhere in a “black man’s country,” but she learned the hard way that this was not so. She says, “There were places where, being black, I wasn’t welcome in Africa. I thought because it’s a black country, I can go there. But right after leaving Liberia, going south, it’s like going south in this country” (43). This predicament certainly affected Thompson’s original idea to make her journey a “rollicking account” of her return “home.”

Richard Wright establishes African women's status in the Gold Coast in "Part Two" of his book when he questions the woman's political involvement in Nkrumah's Convention People's Party. Wright is referred to "Mrs. Hannah Cudjoe, the propaganda secretary of the Women's Division of the Convention People's Party" (111). Wright asks her, " 'Just what is the position of tribal woman today?' " Mrs. Cudjoe responds:

We are chattel...Under our customs the woman is owned by the husband; he owns even the clothes on her back. He dictates all of her moves, says what she can and can't do...A tribalized African simply cannot, will not believe that a woman can understand anything, and the woman alone can do nothing about it. Tribal law is against her; her husband has the right to collect all of the wife's earnings...Almost all the women in our party are illiterate. In their homes, the women cannot speak about politics. (113)

This disturbing response gives readers a good sense of what Era Bell Thompson faced as a black female traveling alone through Africa in 1953.

Hortense J. Spillers presents an appropriate paradigm that addresses Era Bell Thompson's position as the (black) Female/Journalist in her essay, " 'An Order of Constancy': Notes on Brooks and the Feminine" (1990). Although Spillers' discussion focuses on the work of Gwendolyn Brooks, I found her paradigm to be an effective one for my discussion of Brooks' contemporary Era Bell Thompson, considering her emphasis and focus on the "feminine" in *Africa, Land of My Fathers*. Here, I would like to define the "feminine" as interest in and concern for woman, by woman, which for Thompson, who demonstrates a feminine consciousness throughout her book, is sometimes problematic as she is also "other" as a black female journalist in a white male dominated profession. According to Spillers,

The stage of interaction that arises between an audience and the visible aspects of a public performance sketches a paradigm for understanding the social dimensions of an aesthetic act, but it also brings into focus the most acute aspects of consciousness—to perceive, to be perceived. On the one hand the subject is acting; on the other, acted

upon. The distance between these related grammatical properties, mobilized by a single term, is precisely the difference and overlap between subjects and objects of interrogation, neither of which can be split off from the other with integrity. (244)

In other words, Era Bell Thompson, as a journalist and editor of the most popular and widely read black magazine in America was very aware of how she perceived her surroundings, observations and experiences, and how her responses would be perceived by her readers, her audience. Spillers points to “an image of Jungian resolution with the circumferences of double circles overlapping to form an altered distance through the diameters of both” (249). In this “altered distance” lay the unique perceptions of the same stimuli presented to Thompson, the Female/Journalist, and Wright, the (black) Male/Novelist. For both Thompson and Wright race remains a constant, but each writer’s reaction to and relationship with “race” exists within that altered distance.

An interesting example of how differently each writer “sees” based on the Male/Novelist and Female/Journalist trope is illustrated when each author first enters the Gold Coast and is welcomed by the Prime Minister’s secretary in Accra. Both Wright and Thompson describe this young woman in their books. Wright’s description is very brief; he writes, “A smiling but somewhat reserved mulatto woman who spoke clipped and careful English—she was the Prime Minister’s secretary—was on hand at the bus station to meet me” (51). Besides a few short, curt answers to Wright’s probing questions on the drive in, she is forgotten. Wright never mentions her name; he never mentions her again.

Era Bell Thompson, on the other hand, not only gives readers the Prime Minister’s secretary’s full name (Joyce Giddings), but she describes her affectionately, bringing her to life. She writes, “Miss Giddings, a mulatto Jamaican, was very efficient and very English in her speech. She said ‘petrol’ for gas and ‘transport’ for taxi and I got a bang

out of the way she would say, at the end of a story, ‘and you’ve had it!’ ”(44).

Thompson’s amusing portrayal reveals how much she appreciated Joyce Giddings who served as a tour guide and interpreter during Thompson’s stay in the Gold Coast. It also reveals Thompson’s journalistic penchant for closely examining her subjects (in this case Nkrumah), their family, *and* their employees, if possible to write pieces that are personal and include depth of perspective and perception. In a sense, she utilizes that “altered distance” to demonstrate to readers her abilities as a thorough journalist who seeks out and includes the perspectives of the women, including wives, sisters, daughters, and female professionals whenever possible, which highlight the female perspective in her book.

Aware of the African women’s status as “chattel,” Era Bell Thompson takes a genuine interest in the women and children. This is illustrated in her book when she befriends a young Nigerian girl who suffers motion sickness while traveling alone on board a cargo plane to Lagos. Thompson describes her:

For the first time I really looked at the Nigerian girl beside me. She was a tiny thing, wearing a wider, more feminine wraparound skirt with her loose cotton blouse than those worn by the Liberian aborigines, and a big piece of bright cloth was wrapped elaborately about the fine braids on her head. Deep tribal marks were on her cheeks. She smiled, indicating that she could not understand me. (46)

When Thompson notices that the girl looks sick, she assists her. She says, “Perspiration stood out all over her small round face. The kid was ill and frightened. I grabbed the end of her sash and began to fan her furiously. She looked at me with grateful eyes. ‘Hold on!’ I begged. ‘Don’t let go now.’ With my foot I located the shiny new basin. She made it” (46). Era Bell Thompson gives the young Nigerian girl status in this portrayal because she elevates her as a human being and reproduces her individuality, thus erasing the idea

of her being “chattel” or a sexual object, as Richard Wright might envision her. Wright, who recognizes the conditions of the men with little difficulty early in his book, cannot seem to get past the sexual implications of the women’s nudity--a recurring struggle for Wright--to consider the inference of the African women’s conditions. This creates an “image of circularity” that I note throughout *Black Power*. But just as Wright is fascinated by the female nudity sexually, he also presents grotesque images of the women’s breasts, which he sometimes describes as deformations. Wright’s attraction to the grotesque is underlined in his descriptions of the conditions of some of the men, too. For example, Wright openly admits to his revulsion after witnessing the conditions of the beggars “thick in evidence” in the city, and noting that they were “all men.” The Male/Novelist shares with readers his naturalistic observations in graphic detail, bordering on some of the same sensationalism recognized in parts of *Native Son*.

He writes:

So deformed were some that it was painful to look at them. Monstrously swollen legs, running sores, limbs broken so that jagged ends of the healed bones jutted out like blackened sticks, blind men whose empty eye-sockets yawned wetly, palsied palms extended and waiting, a mammoth wen suspended from a skinny neck and gleaming blackly in the sun—all of them were men...I wondered if they were professional beggars, if they had deliberately deformed themselves to make these heart-wracking appeals? If they had, they had surely overdone it in terms of Western sensibilities, for I was moved not to compassion, but to revulsion. (56)

In the Gold Coast Era Bell Thompson witnesses the same depravity as Richard Wright. However, from the feminine viewpoint, I believe Era Bell Thompson is so disturbed by what she observes and discovers about the tragic health situation and high illiteracy rates among the indigenous peoples, she is unable to always articulate an appropriate response; therefore, her reactions seem understated in her book. Instead, like any responsible professional journalist, Thompson chooses to address these concerns

early in her book with a physician, a female medical doctor that she meets while visiting University College in Ibadan, Nigeria. Thompson writes,

I spent the night with the Nicols, Dr. Davidson and his pretty wife Dr. Marjorie, who lived in a modern faculty unit nearby. The Nicols, both trained in England but surprisingly well informed about America, were like a letter from home. Dr. Davidson was a brilliant black man from Sierra Leone who was a lecturer in physiology and biochemistry and conducted a nutritional clinic. Dr. Marjorie was a Trinidadian with features more oriental than Negroid. She worked at the women and children's clinic. We talked until long after midnight, discussing everything from world politics to the Negro press and what was needed in Nigeria. Despite all their government schools and missions, literacy was appallingly low. In the North where the Moslems held sway, it was only 2 per cent, as against 18 per cent in the South. Women lagged a generation behind their men. At the University College fewer than 4 per cent (fifteen) of the students were women, yet Nigerian women had made more progress in business and the professions than most women in Africa. Disease, which gave the west coast its reputation for being a white man's graveyard, also plagued the indigenous peoples. The bloated stomachs so prevalent among children, said Dr. Marjorie, were caused by worms. The protruding navels resulted from improper care at the hands of midwives. "Over 90 per cent of the population," she said, "are affected by worms and malaria."(51)

What I find particularly engrossing in this portrayal is the manner in which Thompson refers to Dr. Marjorie Nicols, giving her professional distinction, respect and individuality as "Dr. Marjorie" instead of Mrs. Davidson Nicols, which was the common salutation for married women, regardless of other titles during this era. It is also noteworthy that Thompson finds blacks in authority to interview.

Richard Wright, consistently distracted by the nudity of the women, as noted, also manages to notice the health conditions of the children, but it is interesting that he does so half way through his nearly four hundred-pages. In two sentences, almost as an afterthought, he says, "I noticed that the children's bellies looked like taut, black drums, so distended were they. Almost every child, boys as well as girls, had monstrous umbilical hernias" (161). Era Bell Thompson, on the other hand, recognizes the same

disease and nudity, but she points it out very early in her text while in Monrovia. She says, "...I was fascinated by a baby, naked except for a string of blue beads around his little pot belly with its grotesquely protruding navel, and by youngsters of eight or nine with less than a loincloth to hide their maturing bodies" (26).

Richard Wright's reactions to the nudity of Africa appear in every part of his book. In fact, he seems overwhelmed with these images. Although both Era Bell Thompson and Richard Wright were exposed to the same nudity, Thompson sees the suffering; Wright sees the availability of sex, and he seems obsessed with the appearance of the women's breasts. He writes,

The bus stopped and I stared down at a bare-breasted young girl who held a huge pan of oranges perched atop her head. She saw me studying her and smiled shyly, obviously accepting her semi-nudity as being normal. My eyes went over the crowd and I noticed that most of the older women had breasts that were flat and remarkably elongated, some reaching twelve or eighteen inches (length, I was told later, was regarded as a symbol of fertility!), hanging loosely and flapping as the women moved about—and intuitively I knew that this deformation had been caused by the constant weight and pressure of babies sagging upon their backs and pulling the cloth that went across their bosoms... (42)

Wright, who sees breasts as sexual, not maternal, fails to realize that African women breast-fed their babies for three to five years, perhaps to improve the mortality rate of their young children, and for other health reasons unknown to him. Thompson reports: "Because there is no milk in the bush for her babies, an African mother nurses her young for three to five years" (146). To Wright, nudity and sex are synonymous; therefore, he is "amazed at the utter asexuality of the mood and bearing of the people!" He says, "Sex per se was absent in what I saw; sex was so blatantly prevalent that it drove all sexuality out; that is, it eliminated all of that evidence of sublimated and projected sexual symbolization with which Western men decorate their environment in depicting to

themselves the reality of the hidden bodies of their women” (44). In this way Wright trumps “race” as his sensibilities regarding the sexual nature of nudity are indeed Western; in other words, Wright reacts like any Western male, white or black. He comments,

Such uninhibitedness of living seemed to me to partake of the reality of a dream, for, in the Western world where my instincts had been conditioned, nude bodies were seen only under special and determined conditions: in the intimacies of marriage, in expensive nightclubs, in the clandestine rendezvous of lovers, in art galleries, or in the bordels...; and only men of undoubtedly professional stamp—doctors, artists, undertakers—were permitted...to deal with nudity, and then only behind closed doors. (43-44)

In *Black Power* Wright also describes visiting a bordel in the Canary Islands en route to the Gold Coast. In this setting, Wright is comfortable with the nudity. He tells his companions, who have agreed to visit such “a house,” “ ‘I’ll accompany you gentlemen,’ I said. ‘But I’m only looking.’ I didn’t come thousands of miles to pick up diseases from Spanish women in the Canary Islands” (27). In fact, Wright has so many comments and questions regarding nudity and its relation to sex in his book, I am convinced that had Thompson placed so much focus and emphasis on the nudity (like Wright) she would have been considered inappropriate, or even irresponsible as a Female/Journalist by her *Ebony* colleagues. Part of her gender identity (and racial identity as a black woman) made almost any mention of sexuality taboo. But Wright, of course, being a man gets away with this emphasis, or even indulgence as the Male/Novelist, and his reactions provide an interesting perspective. However, Thompson, as noted, does not openly discuss the nudity (or sex), though it is implied in her descriptions, as in her first impressions in Liberia, and at specific moments, like when she passes a creek in Lagos and she sees “women and children bathing beside the road, unabashed by traffic” (49). Obviously, the

Female/Journalist, conscious of being “observed” uses discretion and objectivity in consideration of her reading audience.

Another fascinating observation was revealed in the relationship each writer shared with Prime Minister Nkrumah. This is especially evident in *Black Power* as Richard Wright provides a copy of Nkrumah’s recommendation letter welcoming him to the Gold Coast, a letter that strategically appears at the very beginning of his book, right next to the Copyright page. The letter states:

This is to certify that I have known Mr. Richard Wright for many years, having met him in the United States. Mr. Wright would like to come to the Gold Coast to do some research into the social and historical aspects of the country, and would be my guest during the time he is engaged in this work. To the best of my knowledge and belief, I consider Mr. Wright a fit and proper person to be allowed to visit the Gold Coast for the reasons stated above.

Of course, for Richard Wright, this letter gives him an open door to the Gold Coast. But Era Bell Thompson, as the Female/Journalist, had no such official certification. Even if she had received such a letter, it might be misconstrued since she was a woman; plus, such a letter offered no guarantee that she would be protected from harassment. And indeed, she was duly harassed at the airport in Accra, even with Nkrumah’s personal secretary’s intervention.

Arriving in Accra early Sunday morning, Era Bell Thompson writes,

As soon as the hour was respectable, I called the home of Mr. Kwame Nkrumah. One of my *Ebony* assignments was an interview with the world’s first African prime minister. Before leaving the States, I had been approached about ghost writing his autobiography, which, because of other commitments, I was unable to do but had promised to help organize his material while there. That is why I was able to call Mr. Nkrumah on a Sunday morning and have his secretary, Joyce Giddings, take me to his home. (44)

This comment from Thompson sounds suspiciously like an explanation, considering her first impressions of Nkrumah, and the fact that she spent time completely alone with him. Thompson seems aware of being “observed” by her reading audience, which adds a slight tension in her reactions to Nkrumah. However, she seems captivated. She writes, “Bachelor Kwame Nkrumah, ‘Wonder Boy’ of the Gold Coast, looked exactly like his pictures, handsome, dreamy-eyed, and wistful. He wore the colorful robe of the Nigerian, a richly figured country cloth draped gracefully over one muscular brown shoulder, and there were sandals on his feet. He did look like a Moses, at that” (45). After being led “into a small, ordinary living room to discuss the book,” Era Bell Thompson reports, “It was agreed that I would return at the end of the week and he would move up his appointments so that we could work every afternoon for three days. He then ordered cordial brought in and we drank...” (45). Even so, when Thompson returns to Accra after a short trip to Ife, Nigeria for an *Ebony* magazine piece on “the descendants of the West African Adam and Eve,” she was confronted with a “contemptuous” African clerk that “held up” her passport at the airport; she was rudely told, “ ‘I have orders not to let you enter the Gold Coast! You have twenty-four hours to leave the country. You will sign a statement saying that you will not leave these premises and that you will take the next plane out.’ ” Thompson, who refused to sign anything, was not allowed to leave the airport, even though the Prime Minister’s secretary interceded. Suspected of being a Communist, Thompson angrily responds, “The fact that I possessed a U.S. passport was proof positive that I was not a Communist” (68). Yet Richard Wright, living in exile in Paris, had been a known Communist, even though he denounced his membership in his

book's introduction; still, Wright never mentions having any problems with authorities over his former political status.

Later, eager to interview Nkrumah for her magazine, Thompson is told to expect the Prime Minister's car "at four in the afternoon." She notes,

A little after five, Gregson called excitedly, 'Prime Minister car come for you!' I took my time...A man was sitting stiffly in the far corner of the back seat, and for a moment I did not recognize him, for it was the first time that I had seen Kwame Nkrumah in coat and pants. He was miffed because he had been kept waiting, but when I showed him the outline I had made for his book, he seemed both surprised and pleased. (75)

It is telling that Nkrumah, who had been kept waiting only minutes, failed to be considerate of the more than one hour that Era Bell Thompson waited for his late arrival. Worth noting is the fact that Nkrumah's autobiography, *The Autobiography of Kwame Nkrumah*, published in London in 1957, never once credited Era Bell Thompson for her work in preparing the book's outline.

In contrast to Era Bell Thompson's experience, except for being met on his first day in Accra by Joyce Giddings, Richard Wright describes on many other occasions being retrieved by Nkrumah's uniformed chauffeur or his personal friends to attend various political rallies at different locations in the Gold Coast, but he never mentions ever being retrieved by Nkrumah personally, like Era Bell Thompson. Nor does he complain about being kept waiting as Thompson had been. However, Wright's first impressions of Nkrumah were as strong as those of Era Bell Thompson's, although Thompson described Nkrumah's handsome looks and "boyish charm." Wright says,

I studied Nkrumah; he was fairly slightly built, a smooth jet black in color; he had a longish face, a pair of brooding, almost frightened eyes, a set of full, soft lips. His head held a thick growth of crinkly hair and his hands moved with slow restlessness, betraying a contained tension. His bodily motions were almost deliberate and at times

his face seemed like a blank mask. One could almost feel the force of his preoccupations as he would jerk his head when his attention darted. His questions and answers were simple and to the point; I felt that he had much more on his mind than he permitted to pass his lips; he was the full-blown politician whose consciousness was anchored in concrete, practical concerns pointing toward a fondly sought goal.... (58)

Thompson also recognizes the tension in Nkrumah and describes the same “mask” that Wright notes. As an experienced journalist, she knows how to question her subjects to get an intense response. She says, “I asked the Prime Minister when he first rebelled against the conventional” (75). After prompting Nkrumah to revisit his earlier struggles in trying to lead his party, including the time he spent at Fort James Prison, Thompson closely observes his responses:

The laugh that had faded into a faint smile now disappeared altogether. Nkrumah sat rigid and upright as he recounted those days of rioting and looting, of threats of banishment, of charges of libel and sedition; days when the chiefs, the African press, and even members of his own party turned against him. As he talked of clashes with the police—the killing and burning and looting—of those long months in jail, his eyes hardened, his face froze into a mask so ruthless that I could feel the steel in him, the cold, calculating calmness that lay so close beneath the boyish charm. And I was glad that I was not his enemy. (76)

Richard Wright considers Nkrumah to be “the full-blown politician anchored in concrete, practical concerns” in obtaining his goal; Era Bell Thompson describes him as “ruthless,” “cold and calculating,” which makes Nkrumah seem more frightening, even dangerous. Thompson’s fear is underlined when she returns to her house amid the many questions of the houseboys. She says,

When I walked into the house that night, the boys were full of questions. Did I know the Prime Minister before, was I related to his secretary, and would he be calling for me again tomorrow? Shortly after dinner my stomach began to pain. I did not pay much attention to it until a program on the radio described native fetishes and superstitions; then I began to wonder if I had been poisoned. Questions raced through my mind. How did the boy Wonder rate with the domestic workers’ union, and was

the cook anti-C.P.P.? Old pictures of Africa came flooding back. Despite its startling progress and its many Western ways, this was still Africa, land of black magic and political intrigue. I got so carried away with the gruesome possibilities that when I again remembered the pain it was gone. (77)

Thompson's sense of vulnerability is evident in the text on many occasions, but to break the tension, she often resorts to humor; here, the humor acts as a sense of relief.

Unsurprisingly, such feelings of vulnerability are never a concern for the powerful Male/Novelist Richard Wright in *Black Power* who can explore Africa unrestricted because of his status as an American male.

After her interview with Nkrumah, Thompson prepares to pursue a story on the Asantehene of Ashanti in Kumasi. However, as the Female/Journalist, Thompson is interested in gathering information about the significance of the famous Golden Stool for her *Ebony* readers and to inform them of what a matriarchal society is like; Wright, the Male /Novelist, also seeks an audience with the Asantehene, but he focuses on issues that fascinate him and are sensational, such as human sacrifice, a topic that Thompson never pursues, although she does criticize the practice of polygamy. This example of how both authors present their engaging perspectives through the paradigm of "altered distance" is revealed through the manner in which each views King Otumfuo, the Asantehene, Nana Sir Osei Agyeman Prempeh II, the King of the Ashanti.

Era Bell Thompson gives her first impressions of the Ashanti King. She writes,

He was a handsome brown man, lighter in color than most of his people, with intelligent eyes and finely chiseled features. He wore his toga with the dignity of an emperor, as indeed he was. As we shook hands, he greeted me pleasantly in easy English. Unfortunately, he had to attend an important meeting that afternoon. If I could return at five, he would be pleased to talk with me then and would also pose for pictures. (87)

Thompson's impressions are flattering and reveal her respect and admiration for the King. When she returned later, she found him "waiting" for her; she explains how she "talked freely with the nobleman" and "liked what he had to say" (89). In contrast, Richard Wright's impressions are more aggressively critical, even judgmental of the Ashanti King. They are reminiscent of Era Bell Thompson's impressions of Nkrumah. He observes,

He was of medium height, slender, about sixty years of age, not quite black in color but definitely Negroid of features, quick of expression, and flat of nose. His face was pitted with smallpox scars; his lips were clean-cut, his head slightly bald. He was poised, at ease; yet, like other men of the Akan race, he smiled *too* quickly; at times I felt his smile was artificial, that he smiled because it was required of him. During the meal, he had an occasional air of preoccupation and there was something definitely cold deep down in him. He was the kind of man about whom I'd say that, if there was to be a fight, I'd wish that he was on my side and not against me... (310)

Unlike Thompson, Wright recognizes "something definitely cold deep inside him."

Plausibly, the Male/Novelist Richard Wright felt threatened by what Thompson refers to as "probably the richest black man in Africa," as he digs for the negative, drawing on the sensational, which his readers have come to expect, especially as he imagines his fate if the King happened to die in his presence; he'd be killed. This segues into Wright's chilling discussion of human sacrifice.

In addition to visiting the Ashanti King, both Thompson and Wright also describe visits with the Ashanti Queen Mother; I found each portrayal to be quite fascinating. Oddly, while Wright meticulously described the Asantehene's appearance, he fails to provide any physical description of the Queen Mother, and he erroneously refers to her as "a daughter of the Asantehene" (313). Thompson correctly refers to her as "sister of the King" and provides a vivid description: "She was a pleasant-faced little woman, older

than her brother and darker. Her hair was cropped close to her small head...She smiled as we approached and invited us inside the square house” (87). As the Female/Journalist, Thompson is careful about so-called “facts” in the interest of her profession, but as a woman, she evaluates through the “altered distance” the feminine. This is noted in Thompson’s inquiries about the King’s wives and “the line of inheritance,” but since the Queen Mother, the Asantehemaa, did not speak English, Thompson had to rely on the men, who acted as interpreters, which was also the case with Richard Wright. However, Thompson’s criticism, though subtle, cuts deep after she “made discreet inquiry about the other female influences which figured in the life of the King.” She writes,

The current trend was toward cutting down on the number of inmates in the royal harems (former kings kept over three thousand), so the Asantehene had only about twenty active wives, girls between the ages of twenty and thirty-five. The rest were old women inherited with the stool. All were housed together in a compound deep within palace walls and were rarely seen, never photographed. Their children were taken away at birth and given to uncles to be reared. (88)

Here, Thompson’s use of “inmates” implies that these women are basically prisoners; and her use of “royal harems” indicates their status as sexual objects. But the chilling thought that these women were deprived of their rights to mother their children is a horrifying reality and reminiscent of slave mothers during American slavery. In contrast, Wright focuses his attention more so on the various chiefs, never once inquiring about the King’s many wives. Thus, both the masculine and the feminine find a voice in the “altered distance” and in this circular space, each author tends to complement each other in their engrossing observations and reactions of and to Africa’s Gold Coast.

Like many other travelers through Africa, both Thompson and Wright also recognize and comment on the destructive nature of the missionaries prevalent throughout Africa.

Thompson found the missionaries, especially their racist ideology, very disturbing. Thompson had been exposed to this mentality as a child in North Dakota as the same principles were used to “assimilate” American Indians, especially the children that had been forced from their parents and placed in missionary-run “Indian Schools.” In her autobiography, *American Daughter* Thompson criticized the missionaries that were co-conspirators with the American government in the intentional destruction of Native American families, cultures and traditions. While in the Congo, Thompson visits a mission headquarters and meets “Mrs. Baker, a Dixie novelist” who engages her in conversation. Thompson writes,

Our conversation by now had drifted from writing to race and the African’s capacity for assimilating European civilization...It was the old argument of the Negro’s “ain’t readiness” versus “the time has come”; an argument which in America is discussed as heatedly over urban conference tables as over country-store cracker barrels; an argument with five sides and seven answers. And like so many others who argue the question, we got nothing out of the debate but respect for each other’s stubbornness. (107)

Here, Thompson uses a bit of silly humor in the comment “an argument with five sides and seven answers,” which indicates to me exactly how disturbing the missionary involvement is to Thompson. In addition, when Thompson frequently points out the exploitation of Africa, she especially targets the missionary schools and organizations, which made many whites extremely wealthy. Unlike Wright, Thompson criticizes such exploitation in every African country she visits, but she does so in what seems to be a non-confrontational manner, which makes her criticism appear understated. For instance, Thompson points out possible corruption in the connection between the church and the education provided by the missionaries. She writes,

The church plays an important part in the educational development of the African, and

its schools were evident all over Liberia. But missionary work, I found, is not what it used to be. In Liberia twenty-five of those who preached about the angels had actually sprouted wings. They flew their own planes from one baked mud parish to another. None of the twenty-five was a Negro. (35)

But when Thompson provides a concrete example, complete with full name, she proves to be quite brave as she tells readers, “Probably the flyingest of the lot was R. G. LeTourneau, a white Mississippi businessman” whose “house-a-day scheme designed to upset the country’s thatched-hut economy” failed. Thompson notes that “LeTourneau did establish a settlement...but it was staffed by white technicians and there was a growing feeling around Monrovia that the object of his philanthropy was not the African” (35). In this example, Thompson recognizes how exploitation of the African comes in many forms.

Richard Wright also harshly criticizes missionary involvement in Africa, but he is more direct in his criticism. He says,

The more I reflected upon the work of the missionaries, the more stunned I became. They had...waded in and wrecked an entire philosophy of existence of a people without replacing it, without even knowing really what they had been doing. Racial pretensions had kept them from sharing intimately the lives of the people they had wanted to lift up. Standing outside of those lives, they had thrust their doctrines into them, gumming them up, condemning them, and yet they had failed to embrace those pagans who had turned Christian and who now yearned so pathetically to follow them into their world...(168)

Wright informs readers that Nkrumah had told him “with suppressed emotion that the missionaries had been his first political adversaries.” Certainly, considering the comments of Thompson, it is understandable why the missionaries would be adverse to the idea of African independence. But what stands out is that both authors basically arrive at the same conclusions regarding the damaging, self-serving role of missionaries

in the lives of black people. Here, it is apparent that, as stated earlier, the “altered distance” through which each author sees produces perspectives of the missionaries that are not only “different,” but they complement each other advantageously for reading audiences.

The presence of American “cultural imperialism” is recognized in *Africa, Land of My Fathers*. Although Thompson does not comment in detail on its presence, the fact that she points it out, regardless of how subtly, is telling. For instance, she tells us early in her text of a visit “at the home of Lamar Fort, an agricultural expert from the States” where she was served “the inevitable Cokes and ginger ales (they were served everywhere I went)...” (26). Later, while visiting the mansion of President Tubman, she mentions the “several private libraries and the President’s reading tastes” which “tended toward international affairs and the classics.” President Tubman tells Thompson, “ ‘I leave the novels and whodunits to my wife,’ he explained. ‘She can read them day and night. The American influence again. It’s getting so we can’t control our women any more,’ he said blandly” (39). Similar to America, such male chauvinism was common all over Africa, as Thompson often reveals to readers throughout her book.

In a 1955 review in *The Journal of Negro Education*, Rayford W. Logan, Professor of History at Howard University, discusses the issue of American imperialism in Africa in his article, “The Birth of African Nations.” Logan reviews *Africa, Land of My Fathers*, *Black Power*, and *African-American Cooperation* by G. Udegbumem Meniru in his essay. Logan begins his discussion with Meniru’s argument that “there ‘is no American imperialism in Africa,’” a comment that Logan completely discards. He argues, “It is true that the United States holds sovereignty over no African territory. But the political

influence of the United States in Libya, Egypt, Ethiopia, Liberia, for example, and in the European countries that possess African territories can hardly be denied” (157). As Era Bell Thompson has demonstrated, Logan notes that “many friendly observers are critical of American ‘cultural imperialism’—movies, Coca Cola, sports, slang, language, jazz, dress...” He adds, “But a sober view would suggest that ‘not much American imperialism’ would be more accurate than ‘no American imperialism’ ” (157). Logan, recognizing Era Bell Thompson’s “fascinating account of her travels” is hopeful that her book “may eventually merit inclusion in a volume similar to Allan Nevins’s *American Social history Recorded by British Travellers*” (160). He writes, “One must first admire the courage of a colored woman who ventured into countries where a dark skin, she well knew, would subject her to indecent discrimination” (160).

Addressing *Black Power*, Logan criticizes Richard Wright for his urging of Nkrumah “in his remarkable letter to him” that appears at the end of his book. He quotes Richard Wright: “ ‘Beware of a Volta Project built by foreign money. Build your own Volta, and build it out of the sheer lives and bodies of your people! With but limited outside aid, your people can rebuild your society with bare hands’ ” (158). Logan comments,

With due deference for the enthusiasm and judgment of Mr. Wright, this reviewer must state that this admonition is nonsense... Underdeveloped areas must face frankly and boldly the dilemma: Try to modernize with limited outside aid and remain limited partners in the family of nations; or seek substantial foreign aid with full realization of the dangers inherent in such a policy. (158)

Here, I think Logan hints at the probability that further Western interests and American influence and involvement can be expected in Africa in the near future, in consideration of economic gains for all. But when Wright tells Nkrumah, “Beware of a Volta Project built by foreign money,” I believe he has no choice but to stay consistent with his thesis

and remain suspicious of, and angry at Western precepts because that has always been the demeanor of the black Male/Novelist Richard Wright.

Humor, as noted earlier, is visible in *Africa, Land of My Fathers*, though it is not as prevalent as it had been in *American Daughter*. I believe that Thompson's original idea posed to her agent Jeanne Hale to write "a rollicking account" with "lightness and humor" could not be fully realized once Thompson, back in the States, sat down in front of her typewriter. The tormented Era Bell Thompson had experienced quite an eye-opening, fearful and sobering ordeal in this first trip to Africa. The fact that she was able to include any humor at all in her narrative is a testament to her genius in which she discovers in that "altered distance" a positive, creative space in which to respond, despite her harrowing experiences. Besides isolated moments in her book where splashes of humor jump out, as noted, I think the most insightful example of how Thompson uses humor to lighten extremely negative aspects of her story can be found in Chapter 7, "The Tall Watutsi." Keep in mind that this chapter has been placed right before the most riveting and terrifying chapter in the book, "Railroaded," in which humor, as we shall see, is completely absent.

In "The Tall Watutsi," Era Bell Thompson describes her journey to Ruanda-Urundi in search of "Watutsi land" located "150 miles into the mountains," a trip that required a guide to get there. Thompson says, "I engaged Carl Rupelt, a young Belgian guide, adventurer, and big-game hunter, to drive me there" (124). Once Rupelt felt comfortable speaking in English, Thompson discovers a very frank, talkative, and opinionated traveling companion; she exploits his perspective and comments, as his deeply entrenched white supremacist ideology serves her purpose as representative of the

European colonist mindset in Africa. Rupelt's viewpoint prepares readers for what Thompson must endure as she travels further into Africa.

During the long drive to "Watutsi land," Rupelt speaks openly about his experiences and his practices in dominating and controlling his African workers. His attitude reflects his sense of privilege, his right as a white man to attain his fortune by any means necessary. He tells her,

"I love it here...This is a wonderful country for a man to make his fortune. I like the blacks too. Get along with them fine, now. At first I was good, too good, and they lost respect for me. I had a farm in the bush when I came here three years ago. As I said, I was too easy. I let one of them go home sick, and the next day all of them got sick. Soon one of my men refused to work. He was trying me out. I had to beat him. If I had not, all three hundred of them would have struck the next day. They do not like weakness in us whites." (125-26)

Rupelt's perspective mirrors that of the American slaveholders who no doubt used the same or similar strategies to control, dominate and oppress their slaves; however, in this chapter Thompson goes even further in her denouncement of such practices by also making an understated reference to the then recently ended Holocaust, a horrifying reality that still simmered in the minds of Americans and in other nations recovering from the destruction of World War II. She writes, "All along the road walked silent Africans like dusky ghosts, their heads clean-shaven, their thin shoulders wrapped in drab blankets to protect them from the cold" (125). Here, Thompson's descriptions could easily be that of Holocaust survivors. To emphasize this point, she later notes that as the day warmed up, the peasants began to remove the blankets. She says, "Already the blankets were coming off the shoulders of peasants, revealing ragged shorts and shirts. Some wore ill-fitting khaki coats, war-surplus clothing stamped in big white letters 'PW' (Prisoner of War), and in their cast-offs, they looked like Mau Mau rebels on their way to prison camps in

Kenya” (127). Her observation that these people even lived like slaves, or animals, in “huts (slightly more than caves) in the sides of mountains” adds to their dehumanization (125). Thinking about the Mau Mau terror in Kenya, “only a colony away,” Thompson asks Rupelt “if there was fear of the East African terror spreading to the Belgian territory.” “ ‘No,’ he answered quickly. ‘We have no fear of Mau Mau here. Our natives are not political minded; they are not concerned. They have their land and no one is trying to take it away from them’ ”(127). When Rupelt mentions having to “beat” (or “whip”) one of his African workers, Thompson asks with her journalistic demeanor if it was “common practice to beat Africans. He said it was the only way” (126). According to Rupelt, who seems to imply that he, personally, is not as “bad” as other white men, “Some men are very cruel to them, but all of us must be firm. We must be right,” he explained...“a white man must never apologize to a native. He must never admit to him that he is wrong. If he does, then he will lose face and lose control of his men” (126). It is apparent to Thompson that Rupelt has been well trained in how to handle his black workforce; Thompson makes it very clear to readers that Rupelt’s strategies are indeed the rule in Africa. She aptly reports on such inhumane and irrational theories of ethnocentrism and white supremacy, based on her observations, which she shares freely with her reading audience.

Era Bell Thompson does not comment or judge or argue; she listens. Known for her dead-pan expression, an expression she says she purposely perfected over the years so that it would be difficult for anyone to determine her feelings, was probably used in her dealings with Rupelt, as she probably wanted to project a sense of journalistic objectivity. Focusing on Rupelt’s conversation and perspective, especially his use of violence against

the natives and his dangerous sense of privilege, Thompson recognizes that his point of view perhaps mirrors that of the European colonialists, a viewpoint reminiscent of the early American slaveholders. However, there is a positive and negative experience with Rupelt as he was a good guide and he provided lots of useful information to Thompson, but his entrenched prejudices were grinding. Her criticisms come subtly as she notes how Rupelt explains, more than once, his preference for the ignorant, illiterate “peasants” over the more educated, “professional” Africans. Era Bell Thompson notes,

A man dressed in European clothes was coming up the steep road, wheeling his bicycle. He spoke politely as we passed. “That is one of the educated ones,” said Rupelt. “He is a clerk in the village. I speak to him in Swahili and he answers me in French. It is perhaps the only French he knows, but he prefers it to his own language. It makes him feel big. Yes, give me the peasant anytime!” (126)

Here, Era Bell Thompson points to the blatant hypocrisy of the European colonialists whose propaganda—in the form of publicity pamphlets, brochures, and other materials—have been read and evaluated by Thompson throughout her travels. The pamphlets, which often laud the many “improvements” of the natives, are revealed by Thompson to be outright lies. What Rupelt sees when the clerk speaks to him in French is insolence, not progress; how dare the clerk purpose to “own” the white man’s language? Rupelt believes that the clerk speaks French to him because it makes him “feel big.” However, I believe Thompson implies that the clerk simply places himself on equal footing with Rupelt as a human being, which Rupelt misunderstands and resents. The mere idea that Africans might seek equality with whites seems to be unnerving to Rupelt who prefers the natives ignorant, illiterate, and poor, making it easier to dominate, control, and oppress them, as he openly admits. As Thompson was well aware, this attitude is reminiscent of many white Americans who attacked educated and professionally

successful black Americans; blacks were even killed for being “uppity,” especially in the southern parts of America during this period.

In addition, Thompson is able, through her interaction with Rupelt, to subtly point out the destructive nature of colonialism on the colonialists, as it has eroded any sense of morality and ethics on their part; and this is also true of the missionaries as well. This is apparent when Thompson, newly arrived in Ruanda-Urundi, is approached by a mulatto boy at her hotel, an African that “spoke English” and who anxiously wanted to talk with her. With a “serious” expression, he said, “ ‘But you must be alone. Not with the white man.’ ” The “white man” mentioned here probably implied Rupelt, as Thompson had just made travel arrangements with him. Thompson comments,

The boy was undoubtedly one of the mulattoes I had read about in the publicity pamphlets back in Leo. A college had been established at Kabinda in 1945 for “recognized mulattoes.” The nonrecognized were placed in special boarding schools or Catholic missions. There was no place for the “raceless waifs” in either society, the white or black, it said. When I had asked the missionaries what happened after they left school, the answer was a shrug of the shoulders, a shake of the head, and, “What a pity!” With few exceptions, the Portuguese were the only Europeans who intermarried or accepted their mulatto children. (124)

The reality of what happens to mulatto children in this situation hits close to home for Thompson, considering the tortured childhood of her own father as the slave master’s son. Her genuine interest in race, especially the intermixing of races, is an interest that she explores quite a bit in her journalistic writing, which will be discussed in the next and last chapter of this dissertation.

After tolerating Rupelt’s frank, brutal, and insightful comments, when the humor does come it is as a result of Rupelt who has, as Thompson discovered, a sense of humor. This becomes apparent when Rupelt, pointing out the women walking “along the highway,”

tells Thompson, “ ‘There is a legend up here in the mountains...that white men eat native women. If I speak to them, they will run from me.’ ” Thompson says she “scoffed at the tale.” But to prove his point, Rupelt “stopped the car and called to three women walking nearby and they vanished into the bush like so many frightened rabbits.” Rupelt responds, “ ‘See!’ he crowed. ‘They are afraid of me.’ ” But what made this reader burst out laughing more than anything is Thompson’s reaction. She says, “My presence in his car probably gave added credence to the story. To those quaking women, I had already been caught” (127). The humor here has the effect of not only lightening the increasing tension apparent in the text, but it also tends to soften the character of Rupelt a bit, making him seem more human.

Another joke was one that Rupelt played specifically on Era Bell Thompson. After hiring Rupelt to serve as her guide, she mentions meeting him for their excursion the next morning “dressed in shirt and shorts, as Rupelt suggested.” She recognizes that “there was a flurry of activity as hotel boys ran to put me and my belongings into the car.” However, it isn’t until later that Thompson realizes how Rupelt had played a joke on her after she asks him about the native men. He responded, “ ‘They have no fear of me and they think that you are a goddess from a strange country. They have never before seen a dark woman’s legs.’ ” Thompson says, “I thought he was kidding me, but he was serious. ‘Didn’t you notice the boys at the hotel this morning? When you went out to the car they went crazy’ ” (127). Thompson admits that she thought the attention was attributed “to pride in having a Negro woman as guest in their hotel, nothing else.” Thompson’s bare legs were contrasted with how the native women covered themselves, adding a bit of

humor. She notices how “their bodies, including their breasts, were so well covered that I, with my bare legs, began to feel like a hussy” (127).

Nearing the end of her stay in “Watutsi land,” Rupelt, who has closely observed Thompson, abruptly asks, “ ‘You aren’t all Negro, are you?’ I admitted that, like most Negroes in America, I am a mixture of three races—black, white, and red. ‘That’s it,’ he said triumphantly. ‘Indian! I can usually tell a person’s race by the bone structure of the face, but the bridge of your nose and your high cheekbones had me puzzled.’ ” Here, I think Thompson’s question, “Are you an anthropologist too?” is sarcastic because in a way the question brings to mind the ill intentions of ethnological studies provided by white men that were included in American school textbooks and taught as fact, which Thompson addressed in *American Daughter*, as noted. Her question also points, sarcastically, to the idea that white males are the so-called authority on African and African American people. But Rupelt laughed at her question. She reproduces their conversation:

“No, but I am interested in people. I like to study them. You represent a group I’ve never met before.” “Among my forefathers were Africans just like these people.” Rupelt looked at me and laughed again. “You are hundreds of years ahead of our Africans. Not only are your ways, your speech, and mannerisms different, but your face is intelligent. Look at the next African you see and notice his stupid expression!” Then I laughed. (136)

Although Rupelt demonstrates a good sense of humor, Thompson is careful to note his sense of ownership of the Africans; he frequently refers to them as “our Africans” which connects to the idea of their being “slaves.”

Undoubtedly, Rupelt, like so many others who encountered Era Bell Thompson in her African travels, did not know *what* to think of her. This is most evident when Thompson,

meeting with some coeds at Makerere College in Little Uganda, noticed how the students kept staring at her. Thompson asked one of the students, Florence, for an explanation.

Thompson explains,

She and I were dressed alike, we were nearly the same color, we both spoke English—I could not understand why these intelligent young people should consider me such a novelty. “Your hair, for one thing,” she said. “We keep ours cut close to our heads. And,” she searched for the right words, “the African woman here gets little attention. She does not travel around the world alone as you do. She is not treated with such deference by white men.” (227)

In a sense, Thompson represents a “different kind of black woman” in Africa, one that raises eyebrows, even in America. Thompson represents an *otherness* that exists beyond “other” in this example, a position that one can comprehend in the “altered distance” as a “feminine consciousness” which in the order of things “is neither cause for particular celebration nor certain despair,” as Hortense J. Spillers notes in her essay (250). This makes sense in the context that Thompson, raised with a male point of view, having lost her mother at twelve, and reared into adulthood by her ex-slave father presents an ordered perception of her self in which the “‘feminine’ is manifest as an emphasis, neither hostile to ‘masculine’ nor silenced by it” as Spillers points out (249).

The most frightening, engrossing chapter in this sixteen-chapter travel narrative is, in my opinion “Chapter 8,” “Railroaded.” Thompson’s editor, Ken McCormick also considered this chapter to be “One of the very best chapters in this book” because it “builds up dramatically in a wonderful way to the terror that lies ahead.” The humor introduced in the last chapter, used to break the tension, actually does little to prepare readers for Thompson’s terrifying experience on the train ride to Rhodesia. Placed in a single, completely private compartment at the far end of the car, Thompson prepared

herself “for the long two-day ride to Victoria Falls” (150). She laments that had she not missed her plane, the trip would have taken “only a few hours...when four young men boarded the coach” (150). She states, “As soon as the train was underway, the four got together in the middle compartment and began to talk, their voices carrying clearly through the partition...They spoke English...a welcome sound after two weeks in the French-speaking Congo” (150). Focusing on the beautiful landscape, Thompson pays little attention to these four white men at first. But “When their talk turned to the African, I pricked up my ears,” Thompson says. Seeing their conversation as a journalistic “opportunity,” Thompson writes, “being a reporter, I began to take notes” (151). She describes the four travelers: “I gathered that one young man was from Southern Rhodesia—he was the most vocal of the lot; another, a Flemish youth who had difficulty with his English, was from the Belgian Congo; and a third was from the Union of South Africa. The fourth voice was distinctly British, but I could not determine which country he called home” (151).

Terror enters the text when the men launch “into the inevitable race question.” This conversation is key to the book’s central idea as the “Land of My Fathers” appears ironic in the sense that Thompson’s forefathers seem no longer the owners of the land, as these European men discuss the “problem” of what is to be done with the “Eleven million” blacks, when there are only “two million five hundred whites” in, for example, South Africa. The South African confides, “‘The idea now is,’ he lowered his voice, ‘to exterminate the blacks, to break them, to smash and destroy and starve them out!’” (152). Their conversation stems from the rising fear of revolt, a fear turned to terror as European colonialists learned of Mau Mau attacks happening in nearby Kenya. But when the

“explosive question of miscegenation” was broached, Thompson says, “They were talking so rapidly that it was difficult for me to identify the speakers. All were incensed. There was no mistaking how they felt” (153).

For Era Bell Thompson, the most terrifying reality of her own vulnerability as a black woman traveling alone in an environment that was extremely hostile come to fruition as she overhears the appalling comments of the four young men about black womanhood. Their conversation was sparked by what had been shocking news then—the marriage of Sir Stafford Cripps’ daughter, Peggy, to the son of a native chief, Joseph Appiah who served as London representative of Prime Minister Nkrumah.² Thompson captures this long conversation in detail:

“ ‘Did you hear about Sir Stafford Cripps’ daughter?’ asked somebody. ‘She is marrying an African! Only about ten days ago it was announced.’ ‘No!’ they chorused. ‘Goddam!’ exclaimed one. ‘And she is going to come to the Gold Coast to live with the black bastard!’” Thompson notes, “that tidbit...was also news to me” (153). However, as their conversation continued, one can only imagine Thompson’s horror upon hearing their odious, impassioned, emotional exchange:

“I don’t see how a white woman could do it! It couldn’t happen in my country. If a black bastard rapes a white woman, we simply kill him. Take him out and hang him quick. That is the only way to handle the black peril. Even if a European woman consents to sexual intercourse, according to law, he can still be hung.”

“And if a white man rapes a black woman--?” It was the Congo boy.

“That is unfortunate.” Such an act was not wrong, they agreed amiably, but the results were unhappy. “It is bad to beget mulattoes.” (15)

After hearing these remarks, Thompson writes, “I eased my door shut and bolted it, but I could still hear their voices. I was alone with four white men who had no regard for black

womanhood, riding a slow train through the heart of Africa, a million miles from nowhere. The thought was sobering” (153).

Earlier in the book, Thompson indicates how on two occasions attacks against the native women were not pursued by the authorities and were perhaps not even considered “crimes” by colony officials. In the first incident, Thompson had returned from her trip to “Watutsi land.” That night, she says,

Just as I was about to retire, I heard a piercing scream. It seemed to have come from the parking lot across the road from the hotel. The hysterical babbling that followed was unmistakably that of an African woman. Switching off my light, I went to the window and saw people from the hotel walking unhurriedly toward the cars. The voice subsided to a pitiful whimper, but it sent chills down my spine. (140)

Thompson’s fear is underlined as she notes, “No policeman arrived...I could see a man and a woman lead a second man,” who “swayed drunkenly” “away from the cars. Eventually, the sobbing stopped and the people casually drifted away” (140). Thompson writes, “I closed and bolted the windows opening off the inside ledge which permitted easy access to my room from the adjoining suite, and dozed off to troubled sleep” (140). The next morning when Thompson inquired about the horrifying incident, no one knew anything about it, indicating the total lack of regard for black womanhood. This is further emphasized in Elisabethville when Thompson is told by the Director of Native Affairs, “a jolly Flemish man who had come to the Congo twenty years before” that in 1951, “there was a cry of rape, but I think the girls were more scared than bothered” he said dismissively (148). Obviously, this disregard for the safety of black women—from rape and other assaults—is established in the book early to prepare readers for the frightening perspectives of the four European men on the train. Therefore, when Thompson herself is later sexually assaulted by a Portuguese immigration officer in Portuguese East Africa,

readers are prepared by these earlier incidents. In fact, Thompson felt so unnerved by the overheard conversation on the train that when they stopped in Lusaka, “the capital of Northern Rhodesia,” Thompson, “noticing that the post office was still open, decided to write a letter to her brother. She explains, “It would be good, I thought, to let somebody know where I had last been seen. The fears friends had expressed for me and the horrible things I had heard about South Africa began to crowd my memory” (156-57).

After being harassed and uncivilly treated in the Rhodesias and South Africa, Era Bell Thompson compares herself to American slave women: “I felt like Eliza crossing the ice, like Harriet Tubman on the Underground Railroad, for the train I was riding was taking me out of the land of *apartheid* to the free soil of Portugal” (178). However, Thompson would soon discover, similar to freed slave women, black womanhood was still disregarded, and her race remained a factor in obtaining decent room and board in Portuguese East Africa. Using such foreshadowing, Thompson prepares readers for her own experience being sexually assaulted in “Chapter 10,” “Promised Land.” Thompson explains how a Portuguese immigration officer that boarded the train “was delighted” to see her. She says, “He took my passport, put it in his pocket, and walked out. A few minutes later he returned” (181). Thompson writes,

The officer’s command of the English language left much to be desired. When he found that I spoke not one word of Portuguese, he elected to give me ten easy lessons. All questions expressing concern over my passport were brushed aside with a reassuring smile. I relaxed, but not for long. Taking my hand in his, he singled out my little finger, and pointing to it said, “Finger,” followed by the Portuguese equivalent. I repeated the word after him, and he was pleased. He kept my hand and patted my ankle. “Foot,” he said. That was slightly offside, but I repeated it, and asked him to release my hand. He could not understand. Taking my finger, he put it against my nose and gave me the word for that too. By the time he got to his lips, he had one arm half around my waist, was breathing hard on my cheek and closing in. I stood up. That kind of education can lead to disaster.

“You don’t love me?” he pouted in very good English

“I don’t love you,” I repeated and went out looking for my passport. If this was Mozambique’s answer to apartheid, I should practice up on my screaming. (181)

Here, Thompson, to lighten the horrific implications, includes a bit of humor. She says “I should practice up on my screaming.” This example speaks volumes to the reality of what African women faced in their own land, which is probably why African men preferred their women to “stay home,” which Thompson observed in her book. And this is where the difference between *Africa, Land of My Fathers* and *Black Power* truly lie; Era Bell Thompson tells her story as no man, black or white, could tell it. But since both books were released basically at the same time, it was difficult for reviewers to *not* compare these two perspectives.

One Chicago reviewer in 1954 who compared Thompson’s *Africa, Land of My Fathers* with Wright’s *Black Power*, a *Chicago Sun-Times* writer named Fletcher Martin, actually sent his unpublished article to Thompson, perhaps for editing, given the editing marks that are clearly those of Era Bell Thompson. Martin had scribbled a note across the top of the first page: “Scheduled for Sunday, but no doubt it will be shaved down.”

Martin writes:

Africa is the subject of two timely books by Chicago authors Era Bell Thompson and Richard Wright. Both went there hoping to find a working knowledge of Africa on the basis of a common “racial heritage,” because Africa is a vast land full of “their people.” They sought some vestige, some heritage, some vague but definite ancestral reality that would serve as a key to unlock the hearts and feelings of black people they would meet. Both carried an abundance of investigative know-how gained from years of writing experience. Loaded with inoculations, credentials and questions, they started their interesting safari. However, these writers were soon to learn that the black man, the Indian and the European there would acknowledge their presence with a polite but firm “Yanks go home!”

Martin’s pairing of the two writers seems appropriate until the final sentence when he uses the term “polite” because as Era Bell Thompson reveals in her text, she was

oftentimes met with harassment, threats, outright hostility and even assault during her travels through the African continent. Richard Wright, on the other hand, mentions few if any such experiences. And this is where it becomes quite clear to me exactly how vastly different the two books truly are, especially since Martin spent the rest of his review discussing each text separately. He notes that “as a guest of Prime Minister Kwame Nkrumah, many doors were open to Wright” in the Gold Coast where he focuses his book. But Era Bell Thompson dangerously ventured much further into Africa. Martin writes, “The young Chicago woman proved a Negro Problem to both whites and blacks in Africa. Each group was suspicious of this well-dressed intellectual who went poking around for answers to the color problem in a land where the whites were hugely outnumbered.” Even more than that, a big part of the “problem” was also due to Thompson’s gender, which Martin fails to appreciate.

Other reviewers of *Africa, Land of My Fathers* in the fall of 1954 included Roi Ottley, Peter Abrahams, William S. Braithwaite, Saunders Redding, as well as other writers connected to the Chicago movement who knew Thompson professionally, and even personally. Although some of these writers did not always live in Chicago, similar to Ann Petry and others, they all participated in the Chicago movement. Reviews worth mentioning include Peter Abrahams who wrote an insightful review in the *New York Times*. He says, “Making this journey was an act of courage, and the description, in subjective terms, of the psychological torture suffered by an educated Negro in multi-racial Africa today gives her book a rare importance” (28). At the *New York Herald Tribune*, reviewer Frances Witherspoon says this about Thompson’s book: “Graphic, penetrating, this is a highly pertinent contribution to current thinking” (8). And indeed it

is. But the most impressive response was that provided by William Stanley Braithwaite who sent Thompson a hand-written review that I transcribed and reproduced below.

Braithwaite, born in 1878, influenced generations of black (and white) poets and writers in America. His friendship with Thompson is understandable as he himself offered a “different “ perspective, one that refused to ponder the negatives of “blackness” which elicited many critical responses of his work over the years. His obituary notes him as “A major force behind the American poetry revival of the first three decades of the twentieth century.” His influence includes the literature of the Reconstruction, the New Negro Renaissance, the Harlem Renaissance, and the Chicago Renaissance; he died in 1962. He writes:

I was amazed at the vividness of your impressions; one not only saw what you were describing, but felt and shared the mood of your experience. Your descriptions of the natural scenery were impressive and framed persuasively the personalities whose characteristics you were drawing. There were some terribly dark Hereros in all this weaving but they were a balance to the whole design of your tapestry of Africa. Your fine sense of humor should be an example to all who would attempt to penetrate the inseverable surface of the human race, especially whereas in our modern world, it is so mixed and unbalanced as in Africa. It is fatal to be too serious in the attempt to comprehend and explain the myths and background of a foreign land and its people for it tends more to suppress and delude the facts, for the truth lies in the abstract realms of the spirit, and these are only to be invaded by a spiritual insight. This wise power is what you carried into Africa, coming out with a somewhat bruised flesh but also with a shining chronicle.

Indeed, *Africa, Land of My Fathers* is a “shining chronicle,” one that is only beginning to receive the scholarly attention that it clearly deserves.

¹ Griffin (Griff) Davis and his wife Muriel were good friends of Era Bell Thompson, as noted in her personal papers. Griff Davis was murdered “by Guatemalan military in 1985 while attempting to interview left-wing guerrillas,” according to the New York Times Personal Name Index (1975-1996).

² Peggy Cripps Appiah was the mother of Anthony Appiah.

Chapter Four

Black Journalism During the Chicago Renaissance: Era Bell Thompson's Impact

Woman in stepping from the pedestal of statue-like inactivity in the domestic shrine, and daring to think and move and speak,--to undertake to help shape, mold, and direct the thought of her age, is merely completing the circle of the world's vision.

Anna Julia Cooper

Era Bell Thompson had been living and working in Chicago for fourteen years when, after the publication of her autobiography *American Daughter* (1946), her big break in journalism finally came a year later in 1947. And just in the nick of time since her government position, as senior interviewer for the United States Employment Service would soon come to a close with the end of World War II. Publisher John H. Johnson's wife Eunice Johnson had read *American Daughter* and highly praised the book. After an excerpt of Thompson's book appeared in Johnson's first magazine, *Negro Digest*, Thompson was asked to write an article on black men for the magazine. The article was titled, "What's Wrong with Black Men?" Thompson recalls, "Below the picture of five dark heart-breakers, I had penned, 'Which one can I have?'" Thompson's humor caught the attention of *Negro Digest* Executive Editor, Ben Burns and she received another assignment in the mail. Burns's letter offering her the opportunity to write a second piece for *Negro Digest* recalls Thompson's humor,

I don't know whether you will remember it, but you penned a little note on the Ebony questionnaire about the five most exciting men, about like this: "This is fun...now which one can I have." In wracking my mind for someone to write a piece to counter-balance the "What's Wrong With Negro Men" article which appears in our March

issue, *and which has brought a flood of letters to the editor*, I recalled your good humor in that footnote. [My emphasis]

I emphasize “and which brought a flood of letters to the editor” to note Thompson’s instant impact with readership. Ben Burns continued, “It occurs to me that you could do a most fascinating and colorful piece with the title, ‘What’s Wonderful About Negro Men.’” As a matter of fact, Thompson did such a superb job writing this article, she managed to dupe readers for decades with her satirical humor, a feat that presents another glaring example of how Thompson has been misunderstood. As a result, the article’s title will always remind me of an ironic circumstance that is worth mentioning to make a resounding statement about how respected scholars can sometimes compromise their academic integrity by failing to be thorough, and by making certain assumptions. This has been an important lesson for me. In her 1983 essay, “Rage and Silence in Gwendolyn Brooks’ *Maud Martha*,” Mary Helen Washington argues that some early black publications presented articles or imagery of black women that was derogatory, even “condescending to obscene” (463). But when Washington attacks Era Bell Thompson’s “What’s Wonderful About Negro Men” in her essay, and presents Thompson as if she was a traitor, I suddenly realized that Washington, who described the August 1947 issue of *Negro Digest* in her essay, had not actually *read* Thompson’s article. Had she done so, she probably would have laughed, recognizing the “tongue-in-cheek humor” as Thompson cleverly implies that Negro men are only “wonderful” because of Negro women. This satirical example represents classic Era Bell Thompson humor, the kind of humor and wit that got her full-time employment as a writer and editor at Johnson Publishing Company during the height of the Chicago Renaissance. Mary Helen Washington’s negative appraisal of Thompson’s “work,” an appraisal that was apparently

based on the article's title and not on the text, indicates a more recent example of how Thompson has been misunderstood, and even undermined. Considering Washington's stature as a scholar of black women's writing, I think it is irksome that she may have aided in Era Bell Thompson's literary obscurity.

However, recently, in the article "*Ebony's* Era Bell Thompson Travels the World To Tell the Story" published in *American Journalism* (2009), scholars Jinx Coleman Broussard and Skye Chance Cooley at Louisiana State University have identified and examined "approximately thirty articles Thompson wrote for *Ebony* magazine between 1953 and 1974," which focus on her impressive work as a foreign correspondent. The authors recognize and elevate Thompson's importance to American journalism history being "a foreign correspondent at a time when women and African Americans were not traditionally found in these positions." They write in their Preface,

Thompson's work is significant because her foreign correspondence framed blacks worldwide positively when the black press believed mainstream press international reporting either ignored or framed them negatively. By illuminating Thompson's work and perspective, this article elevates an obscure, pioneering female African American in journalism history and contributes to the discourse on the elite area of foreign correspondence. (7)

This excellent study closely examines Thompson's writing as a foreign correspondent, using the theoretical concept of framing "[w]ith a goal of trying to determine how Thompson framed issues of race and power, as well as people, places and events abroad" (9). The study also recognizes Thompson's agenda, "of educating *Ebony's* readers about other people of color worldwide and positioning them positively, given the mission of the magazine and the black press to counter negative representation of blacks in mainstream press" (9). I believe Era Bell Thompson's agenda became a commitment, a marriage in

which she discovered the opportunity to explore the idea of “truth” in numerous contexts globally. Her well-documented articles educated her readers and provided them with a broader view of the world. The study correctly notes, “The fact that the stories and large pictures that accompanied them ran three to four pages and were often announced on the magazine’s cover indicates the significance *Ebony* assigned to global journalism” (9).

Magazine publisher John H. Johnson recognized something significant about Era Bell Thompson. He recalls in his autobiography *Succeeding Against the Odds* (1989) how he came to recruit Thompson in 1947. He says, “I spent a lot of time in the late forties recruiting editorial talent. One of my first discoveries was Era Bell Thompson...I was always on the lookout for authors and graduates of journalism school, and I went to her small apartment under the ‘El’ ...and persuaded her to join our staff,” but Thompson told Johnson “that she knew nothing about Negroes.” Johnson replied, “That’s all right...we’ll teach you” (192).

Era Bell Thompson would later relate her impressions of that meeting, as she remembered how one day, John H. Johnson showed up at her door. She says he asked, while sitting in her tiny Southside apartment, “How would you like to work for us?” Instead of asking how much the job paid, Thompson only wanted to know if travel would be involved. It would, he had said, and gave her a week to think it over (McNeese 57).¹ Even though Thompson had been warned against taking the job by a black friend because “none of *our* magazines have ever made it commercially,” Thompson followed her own instincts and accepted the position of *Ebony* editor, working in a four-desk office in Chicago’s South Parkway Community Center, an early home of the Johnson Publishing Company. It was a decision Thompson would never regret. Little did she know then that

Johnson's series of magazines would remake the world of black journalism, a world in which Thompson found herself at the center during a renaissance of black art, music, theater, dance, literature, and political awareness. Ben Burns, who recalls Thompson in his book, *Nitty Gritty: A White Editor in Black Journalism* (1996) later elaborated on his comments about her "chip-on-the-shoulder bravado and super-sharp wit that was a plus in her writing style" when I managed to interview him on May 18, 1998 in Chicago (101). An ill, aged and frail Ben Burns had just returned home from the hospital the day before. But after a Chicago Public Library curator called him to arrange a possible telephone interview at my bidding, Ben Burns, learning that I wanted to know about Era Bell Thompson insisted on meeting and speaking with me in person. He invited me to his beautiful home where he reposed on a couch, his wife Esther at his elbow, and he spoke to me in nearly a whisper about Era Bell Thompson and the early years at Johnson Publishing Company. Taking notes and using an old tape recorder I had brought, I managed to capture some impressions of Thompson's professional life at Johnson's publishing company. According to Burns, John H. Johnson was a very tough employer. Burns clearly emphasized the constant threat and fear of being fired that the staff was subject to. He indicated that Thompson also felt job insecurity even though she was a member of Johnson's core. Burns recalled her as a very private person, an "introvert"; he described her as being "uncomely, petulant, inscrutable, multi-racial." But Burns remembered her best as "a humorist, with super sharp wit." He said, "It wasn't very often to come across people like her. I thought she was an excellent writer; she turned out clean copy."

More personally, Burns remembered that Thompson “never had any boyfriends” and that “she was very unattractive.” He remarked, “She had no sex appeal,” and “She was very short.” Of course, this was Ben Burns’s perspective, but Thompson almost says as much, as she reflected in the *Black Women’s Oral History Project* (1978) of her early desire to be a writer. She said, “Sex, along with my race, short stature and plain looks presented writing obstacles” (39). However, what Burns referred to as Thompson’s “somber, glum” demeanor may have been part of her professional armor, an armor that allowed her to maintain a “safe” emotional and physical distance as a woman working in an all-male environment. Therefore, I think it is reasonable to assume that Thompson deliberately put up a barrier to diminish her sexuality on the job and protect her privacy because as noted in her biography, Thompson indeed enjoyed a private love life, especially the long one she shared with the unhappily married Sherman Briscoe.

As a result of Thompson’s decision to accept the position at Johnson Publishing Company, she established an extensive writing career that lasted over forty years. And for John H. Johnson, it proved to be one of the best business decisions he made in building the success of his multi-million dollar publishing empire. Clearly, Era Bell Thompson’s world travels as a foreign correspondent for *Ebony* opened the international market to Johnson Publishing Company where Thompson managed, through her many national and international contacts, to elicit magazine subscriptions, even trying in countries where the magazine was banned. In fact, the first six articles that appeared in *Ebony* bearing Era Bell Thompson’s byline were the result of her first trip to the African continent in 1953, when she produced her second book, *Africa, Land of My Fathers* (1954), and established herself professionally as a foreign correspondent.

Thompson's feature articles in *Ebony*, for which she is probably best known, made an unprecedented impact on readership in ways that engaged, educated, and influenced the thinking of many people globally, but especially among the black American readership. Thompson enlightened her readers about various countries, their cultures, economies, geography, social behaviors, racial attitudes, and conditions mindful of America's increasing consciousness of racial equality. In addition, Thompson's multicultural perspective, which Ben Burns referred to as "multi-racial," offered unknown, unexplored possibilities to masses of African American readers who had only been aware of two "cultures" in the South—white and black. I believe that Thompson's emphasis on the benefits of a multicultural sensibility, perhaps as an answer to racism, was a progressive thought at that time. Era Bell Thompson felt more attuned to various cultures having been raised among different European immigrant cultures living in North Dakota, with neighbors from such countries as Germany, Poland, and Russia, not excluding the indigenous people of the Dakota area.

As a foreign correspondent, Thompson was in the best position to reveal to readers a multitude of cultural and racial perspectives in her drive to dispel ignorance and prejudice. Her impact on readership is evident by the many, many letters and responses to her four decades of committed work. Broussard and Cooley offer some textual analysis of Thompson's international work in "*Ebony's* Era Bell Thompson Travels the World To Tell the Story." Recognizing that Africa "featured prominently in her reporting," they also note that the themes of independence, race relations, and acceptance of African Americans globally was explored by Thompson. They write:

Independence and its impact in other countries under colonial rule also were subjects of Thompson's output. Likewise, race relations and the extent to which people of

color were accepted or welcome in other countries was a theme that permeated her writing. Professional and personal achievement was an additional stream reflected in the profiles of leaders and ordinary people Thompson believed were doing extraordinary things. In focusing her foreign correspondence on these themes, Thompson was continuing the tradition of the African American press and the mission her employer set forth...(16)

I think Era Bell Thompson's journalistic work, in a sense, falls in the tradition of crusading journalism, like that of Ida B. Wells in the 19th century, who, according to the *Norton Anthology of African American Literature*, is considered to be "one of the first female newspaper owners in America and a leader in the fight against lynching and Jim Crow" (596). Wells used the press as a powerful weapon, similar to the earlier black abolitionists that attacked slavery. Thompson's approach differs in that she does not appear to openly "attack"; instead, she covertly uses the journalistic genre of expose to educate readers by revealing the existence of sex, race, and color prejudice all over the world by interviewing people from all walks of life, giving readers a broader understanding of these complex ideas. In this way, Thompson effectively "attacks" the many stereotypes and myths about black people globally especially those demeaning to black womanhood.

This emphasis on the condition of black womanhood and the fight against the dangers of stereotypes also proved a consistent battle of Ida B. Wells's crusade, as noted by Paula Giddings in her book *"When and Where I Enter": The Impact of Black Women on Race and Sex* (1984). In the chapter "To Sell My Life as Dearly as Possible" Giddings points out that Wells "stated publicly, that while Black men were being accused of ravishing White women, "[t]he rape of helpless Negro girls, which began in slavery days, still continues without reproof from church, state or press" (31). According to Giddings,

“Wells’s campaign, by undermining the stereotype of Black men, also challenged presumptions of the immorality of Black women” (31). These stereotypes, continuously presented in mainstream press as “fact” and “truth” were seen as attacks on black womanhood and on black people. This problem continued to be addressed in the 20th century by writers like Era Bell Thompson, who as a black woman traveling alone, was sometimes mistaken for a prostitute, or assumed to be as Wells puts it, “morally obtuse” or licentious simply because of her race and gender. According to “*Ebony’s* Era Bell Thompson Travels the World To Tell the Story,”

Research confirms the existence of racial stereotyping by mainstream news outlets and posits that the created frames support status quo positions on social and political issues. According to Margaret Spratt and her colleagues, frames and references beyond that of mainstream media outlets by the African American press provide readers, “an important alternative narrative that ultimately helped to provide a historical balance to the static story of racial superiority told through voices of ‘official sources.’ ” (10)

Clearly, Era Bell Thompson wanted to be the one to provide *Ebony* readership with an “alternative narrative,” one in which African American people could feel pride. Thompson focused on presenting “the truth,” highlighting the positive aspects of her themes. It is true that “the African American press sought to counter negative images and present their own perspective” (10). Many black writers during this era consistently protested the racial stereotypes presented in the mainstream press in their writing. For example, who can forget the manner in which Richard Wright attacked the racist mainstream press in *Native Son* in his portrayal of Bigger Thomas’s arrest, court trial, and execution? The study also recognizes “that mainstream media framing perpetuate stereotypes and undermine the self-concept of minorities,” a reality that Thompson tirelessly countered throughout her journalism career (10).

For *Ebony*, Era Bell Thompson wrote over forty-six articles that appeared between 1948 and 1978, including those that have brought her deserved recognition as a pioneer, as with “I Was a Cancer Coward” (September 1971); “Australia: Its White Policy and the Negro,” a two-part series (July 1966 and September 1966); “Does Amalgamation Work in Brazil?” (July 1965); and “The Plight of Black Babies in South Vietnam” (December 1972), to name a few. In fact, “Does Amalgamation Work in Brazil?” was reprinted in a school social studies textbook entitled *Tradition and Change in Our Society: An Inquiry Approach* (1966?); another of Thompson’s *Ebony* articles, “The Smallest Richest Nation in the World” (May 1968) used material from Nauru that was reprinted in *The Book of Knowledge Annual* (1969). These *Ebony* articles are all well-documented, serious works that tend to make readers feel on the one hand uneasy, even disturbed by what Thompson unmask, but on the other hand, readers also feel a sense of relief because of Thompson’s multicultural point of view which offers hope for achieving a more egalitarian society. In fact, I believe that Thompson’s multicultural viewpoint was influenced by W.E.B. Du Bois’s novel, *Dark Princess: A Romance* (1928), a novel that his critics called “a failure,” but that Era Bell Thompson called her favorite book.

Humor, of course, is never too far away from Era Bell Thompson as is evident in one of my personal favorites, the hilarious “Instant Hair” (November 1965), in which Thompson draws readers in by presenting a funny, yet discomfiting connection between race, class, and hair texture in Brazil. And, addressing her own short stature, “Short People, Arise” (October 1975) offers a later example of Thompson’s use of humor towards the end of her journalism career. Here, Thompson moves beyond attacking only racial and sexual stereotypes in her work; it is evident that Thompson also emphasizes

other kinds of prejudices that Americans endure, making her readers aware of yet another perspective. Interestingly, I have found that what Thompson wrote and when she wrote it had everything to do with the balancing of her personal life with her professional world.

In *Negro Digest*, besides the excerpt from *American Daughter* and the first article on black men, Thompson produced several other articles for *Negro Digest* that include her byline besides “What’s Wonderful About Negro Men” (August 1947), such as “Lots of Room for Negroes” (March 1947), “Bill Robinson as She Knew Him” (June 1950), “A Message From a Mahogany Blond” (July 1950), “Crusade In Children’s Books” (August 1950), “How the Race Problem Embarrasses America” (November 1950), and “Girl Gangs of Harlem” (March 1951). In addition to her books and magazine articles, Thompson also maintained a column in *Negro Digest* from June 1949 through November 1951 called *Bell’s Lettres*, in which Era Bell Thompson uses a casual demeanor that is very personal and intimate in order to comment critically, oftentimes using a form of humor. Some of these editorials are reactions, reflections, and critiques of events, circumstances, and idiosyncrasies of popular culture and of people, focusing primarily on a wide range of topics and issues related to race, class, and gender among other interesting realities. Two entries, December 1949 and January 1950 are, I think, fascinating because they describe Thompson’s experiences as a Bread Loaf Fellow in Middlebury, Vermont where she was the only African American Fellow; other examples show how Thompson observes what appears to be ordinary circumstances and realities of life to comment on serious issues, many times incorporating different kinds of humor to sometimes offset an uncomfortable tension. Thompson primarily focuses on people in “Bell’s Lettres,” as noted when she spends a day in the life of poet Langston Hughes. But most importantly,

Era Bell Thompson, by way of her columns and other written work, had discovered diverse ways to use the journalistic lens to express her self, which speaks to who she was as a person, and as a black intellectual woman intent on breaking through barriers and crossing boundaries to enlighten readers.

Thompson's consistent use of the autobiographical "I" in her journalistic writing offers a challenge to Virginia Woolf's assertion in *A Room of One's Own* that the use of "I" is "only a convenient term for someone who has no real being" because Thompson's use of "I" represents many "beings," as she has demonstrated in her work as early as her teen years when she used the cowboy moniker Dakota Dick in her *Chicago Defender* columns. Thompson's unique perspective presents this sense of "being" from a multi-faceted field of view in her journalistic style when she uses the first person narrative "I" to explore a multitude of views, a strategy that I think is an important contribution to the genre of women's narrative writing, dating to the woman's slave narrative because it expands the "conventional" universe and experiments with style. Thompson perfects this ability in her journalistic writing as a master of using understatement and humor to enlighten readers; she induces laughter, but at the same time she criticizes the male dominated rules, traditions, and conventions of the period from a global context. Thompson's approach to writing expands thinking about issues of dominance, sexism, racism, class-ism, and so forth. Throughout this dissertation I have given many examples of Thompson's eagerness to break the rules, traditions and conventions in her personal and professional endeavors, as expressed in her two books. Thompson demonstrates taking ownership of the language, experimenting with form and style and enjoying the act of writing itself, as Thompson's use of humor in her work indicates, dating back to her

earlier high school and college writings. She once said, “My hobby was writing, that turned into my occupation. That’s probably why I enjoyed it so much” (Oral History 43). And Thompson, as noted, had been experimenting with literary form since she was a teenager.

Besides her books, articles, and columns, Era Bell Thompson published many book reviews and other published articles. The book she co-edited with Herbert Nipson, *White On Black: The Views of Twenty-Two White Americans on the Negro* (1963) is a collection of twenty-one essays, which had first appeared in *Ebony*; it is a unique project, given the white authors who contributed to it, such as Eleanor Roosevelt, William Faulkner, and Billy Graham. More importantly, it reveals how Era Bell Thompson approached changing racial attitudes, offering readers yet *another* perspective on the relationship between blacks and whites. Once again, Thompson manages to educate readers in order to eliminate racial stereotypes and myths. Thompson writes in the book’s Introduction, “The purpose of this volume is to provide a resume of some of the thinking of the past two decades, as it touched on various aspects of the white-black theme” (ix).

To add to Thompson’s body of written work at Johnson Publishing Company, I recently discovered that Thompson, from 1951 to about 1963 also wrote editorials anonymously for *Ebony*. “And everybody thought it was a man writing it because first of all they just assumed that a man wrote them and they couldn’t tell by the writing it was a woman,” Thompson admitted in a 1983 interview. “The last one I wrote...I told them on that last line that I was a woman” (McNeese 70). Apparently, Thompson continued to enjoy crossing gender boundaries in her professional writing, as these anonymous “male”

articles are reminiscent of her Dakota Dick moniker. In terms of production, I think Era Bell Thompson worked harder than most other employees of the company.

Considering the earlier warning of Thompson's black friend in 1947, that a black magazine has never made it commercially was not unfounded given the history of the black press, but in Chicago during those years the rise of the black press forever changed America, and Johnson Publishing Company was at the center. According to a May 16, 1998 Chicago *Defender* article,

“By the end of World War II, Johnson Publishing Company's *Negro Digest* and *Ebony* magazines made Chicago the undisputed center of Black journalism” Chicago in the period of the Renaissance was, quite arguably, the center of black journalism in the United States. Bronzeville's residents could choose their newspapers from among the Chicago *Defender*, the Chicago edition of the *Pittsburgh Courier*, the *Chicago Bee*, the *Chicago Whip*, and several smaller community papers. All of these papers printed articles from the national black wire service, Claude Barnett's widely-respected Associated Negro Press, also a Chicago-bred institution (21).

Journalism historian Doris Saunders, a former chair of the Department of Mass Communications at Jackson State University and the first librarian hired at Johnson Publishing Company, was interviewed in the above *Defender* article. She comments, “Chicago's Black newspapers shared the achievements of the Renaissance with their readers. Music, literature and art combined with a new political awareness.” A Chicago *Reader* article notes, “During the mid-40s [Doris] Saunders worked at the Chicago Public Library's Hall branch, where she became more intimately involved with the tremendous cultural boom that had been coming out of Bronzeville since the early 30s.” The article also says that Doris Saunders “got to know many of the major journalists of the period” (47). However, Saunders, considered an expert of the era who presented at a Chicago Public Library exhibit and program I attended called “The Chicago Renaissance, 1932-1950: A Flowering of Afro-American Culture” in the late 1990s surprisingly told me that

although she of course knew who Era Bell Thompson was, she did not know her at all. I found this to be odd, considering the few black women that worked for Johnson Publishing Company in those early years. After a conversation with Saunders at a reception following the program, I began to suspect that Saunders had somehow alienated Thompson, especially if Saunders approached Thompson pretentiously. Given Saunders's demeanor and her own journalism background, having gotten her "big break when she was still a junior at Englewood High School in 1937" at the *Chicago Defender*, and who described in detail the extreme difficulty black women faced in seeking journalism jobs during that era throughout her presentation, it may have seemed strange to her that Era Bell Thompson, an unknown in the black literary world of Chicago before 1946 who knew nothing about the American Negro could become the editor of *Ebony*, which soon became, "the most widely read black magazine in the world" (47). I found it peculiar that Saunders never once mentioned Era Bell Thompson during her lecture, though she discussed writers and editors at Johnson Publishing Company at length.

Era Bell Thompson did not particularly like black class-ism, as she stated in the *Black Women Oral History Project*. For instance, Thompson recalled how a black doctor's wife could not get over how well the O'Brians, her white stepfamily, treated her. Thompson reflected, "She sat there, trying to figure it out. She says, 'I can't understand it. You have no background, you aren't good looking, and you don't have any money. What do they see in you?' " In another example, Thompson said, "I remember I was blackballed by the black branch of the University Women's Club here [Chicago] because some woman doctor, they told me later, said that I didn't have background" (25). Thus, Thompson always avoided such individuals and institutions. Therefore, impolite questions about Era

Bell Thompson's background would be one sure way to alienate her, particularly in the workplace where she had no time for socializing and gossip. Considering the many, many articles and columns produced by Era Bell Thompson for Johnson Publishing Company, I believe John H. Johnson's early success with his commercial magazines can be attributed, in large part, to Era Bell Thompson who once said, "Being black and being a woman, I've had to work more than anybody else and work harder to make it" (McNeese 70).

To establish Thompson's relationship with her employer, John H. Johnson and present a jarring example of the hostile working environment in which Thompson managed to survive, I carefully evaluated and studied the correspondence provided in Thompson's personal papers. Ben Burns had pointed out in his book that Thompson became a fixture on Johnson's staff; the question is how did she manage it? What tools, what strategies did she use? Besides being one of the most prolific writers on Johnson's staff, the answer to that question best resounds in who raised Thompson into adulthood. Fortunately, the strong black male influence of a loving and protective father like Tony Thompson proved to be the best role model for Era Bell Thompson. As discussed in the earlier biographical chapter, Thompson closely observed her father while growing into a young woman. Lacking any black female role models living in North Dakota, Thompson, in fundamental ways, adopted the composure of her father, molding this image and using it to achieve her own successes. Tony Thompson, as a former slave who achieved notoriety as a "Race Man" and "Race Hero" reproduced in his daughter a "Race Woman," to use once again Hazel Carby's idea; in other words, Thompson became a "Hero" in her own right. This demeanor is best described by Sherley Anne Williams in her essay, "Some Implications

of Womanist Theory” in which she discusses the stature of nineteenth-century black men.

She writes,

Nineteenth-century black men, confronted with the impossibility of being the (white) patriarch, began to subvert certain of patriarchy’s ideals and values to conform to their own images. Thus the degree to which, and the basis on which, the hero avoids physical aggression was one means of establishing the hero’s noble stature and contributed to the hero’s intellectual equality with—not dominance over—the collective white man. (71)

Using in her argument Frederick Douglass as an example, Williams’s description of the image of nineteenth-century black men can certainly be applied to Tony Thompson, and also to John H. Johnson, considering both men’s many accomplishments. Era Bell Thompson, as the “reproduced Race Woman” of the twentieth-century, had chiseled a stature appropriate to her own needs in the professional world. Williams further comments,

The pattern of self-restraint, of physical self-control as an avenue to moral superiority and intellectual equality vis-à-vis white society, dominates male self-portraiture in the nineteenth century, where achieving heroic stature is most often the means by which the black male hero also assumes the mantle of the “patriarch.” (72)

In this sense, similar to Tony Thompson who was patriarch of the Thompson family, John H. Johnson served as the “patriarch” as head of the publishing company while Thompson used the idea to create a place for herself. Era Bell Thompson was one of the few editors at Johnson Publishing Company with a college degree, and who had also attended Northwestern University’s graduate school of journalism; she occupied a position in which, as the only female in charge of male writers and photographers, she had no choice but to use the model provided by her father. In other words, to survive in the professional sphere, Thompson had to “subvert certain of patriarchy’s ideas and

values” to conform her own image to establish intellectual equality alongside the men she managed as editor. She no doubt recognized the example of her father in her employer, John H. Johnson, whom she says was “very liberated” in hiring her because of her gender, and who was probably more concerned with the success of his businesses; Johnson also “reproduced a Race Woman” as he groomed his own daughter, Linda, to one day run the company in his absence. Today, she is listed as “Linda Johnson Rice, Chairman and Chief Executive Officer” on the magazines’ mastheads.

In his autobiography, John H. Johnson, after revealing his most fortunate discovery of Era Bell Thompson in 1947, explains how he hired “several major writers, artists, and photographers” over the next two years. He writes,

Among the best known were Edward T. Clayton, who came from the *Louisville Defender* and was the first executive editor of *Jet*; photographer Griffith Davis, who was recommended by Langston Hughes; authors Roi Ottley (*New World A-Coming*) and Dan Burley (*Original Handbook of Harlem Jive*); art director Leroy Winbush and artist Herbert Temple; and librarian Doris Saunders. In March 1948, the company had close to one hundred full-time employees and more than four thousand independent distributors. (193)

In an interview, Thompson was once asked if she received any harassment in her editorial position. She replied, “Well...there were people that worked under me, men...I was one of the few college graduates that he had on the staff. So when I would give orders, it was always that thing about not taking orders from me...I had to become very assertive and tell them, ‘Look, I’m running this show’” (McNeese 67). Faced with having to battle with male staff members not happy about having a female boss, Thompson, in order to be successful in this circumstance had to adopt a “pattern of self-restraint, of physical self-control as an avenue to moral superiority and intellectual equality,” as Williams says in her essay, but I add in place of, or in addition to “white society” vis-à-vis *black male*

culture. As noted in the last chapter, Thompson, as “other” sometimes represents another kind of *otherness* that is, even in terms of professional women today, difficult to sometimes navigate. Part of Thompson’s “self-portraiture” included her ability to keep her emotions hidden. During the *Black Women Oral History Project*, Thompson said, “I was always able to keep a straight face, I don’t allow my emotions to show...normally, I’m not emotional. It started when we were living on the farm. I wanted to be out with my brothers, and I used to cry a lot. Then I wanted to be tough like the rest of them, so I stopped crying and started fighting” (22). I believe that this attitude helped Thompson, as the first and then only woman executive at Johnson Publishing Company, to survive and become very successful in her career as a foreign correspondent and as a writer. Her elevation as a pioneer in the journalism profession recognizes Era Bell Thompson as the first African American woman to break through some very tough barriers, barriers that have made it possible for contemporary celebrities like Oprah Winfrey and so many others who attained their professional success through the field of journalism, to excel.

In addition to the stress Thompson faced as the superior of most of the men on John H. Johnson’s staff, Era Bell Thompson also had to navigate her relationship with the “boss.” As a successful “Race Man,” and honored “Race Hero” of the twentieth-century, Thompson respected and admired John H. Johnson who built Johnson Publishing Company into the world’s largest black-owned and black-operated publishing company. Johnson, also a pioneer, “broke ground by bringing positive portrayals of blacks into a mass-market publication and encouraging white corporations to use black models aimed at black consumers.” I think Thompson was proud of being a major figure at *Ebony*, which “was created to counter stereotypical portrayals of blacks in white-owned

newspapers, magazines and broadcast media,” a mission she championed. Also, I think Johnson sensed that Thompson, given her unusual background and penchant for humor, would add a unique perspective to his publications. Thompson said in an interview, “Having lived in a white community, and in white homes, made me less prejudiced against whites than the average urban black. Working for *Ebony* made me think black for the first time. I took the job to learn about ‘my people’” (Oral History 39). Thompson’s importance in the decision-making process on the staff is illustrated by Ben Burns in his book. He writes,

The photograph of a Negro kissing a white British woman lay on my cluttered desk. It was the kind of graphic shot never seen in any conventional magazine or newspaper in the America of the late 1940s, what the staff of *Ebony* called a “hot” photo. Seated around my office were Johnson, and assistant editors Era Bell Thompson and Herbert Nipson... The delicate question before us: should we publish the picture? “It’s just the kind of thing white folks always think Negro men dream about—to have a white woman. I know it will get us circulation but I don’t like it” Era Bell said sullenly. As the only female executive at *Ebony*, her opinion regarding any story on mixed marriage carried much weight. She was a formidable antagonist in any wrangling over articles concerning sex or interracial romance, and we crossed swords frequently. (139)

Apparently, Thompson’s perspective as a woman was crucial to Johnson Publishing Company’s publications because it could positively influence readership and increase magazine subscriptions, which Johnson pressured staff to increase. Although Era Bell Thompson proved to be a loyal and ethical employee, in the early years her relationship with John H. Johnson was not always a smooth one, as demonstrated by their correspondence. Thompson had to not only “fight” her male subordinates at the office, but she also had to confront the “boss” to achieve fairness and equality at Johnson Publishing Company, which I don’t believe she ever fully received. As noted, in her first four and a half years at the company, Era Bell Thompson had only received one *Ebony*

byline, whereas the male employees received bylines, were paid more, and were given more opportunities. In Thompson's following letter to Johnson, which merits quoting fully, she is direct and to the point, and what she reveals in this letter is the undeniable stress and tension she faced in her career at Johnson Publishing Company as a victim of exploitation, harassment, and sexism. The letter, addressed to "Mr. Johnson" and dated February 18, 1952 states:

There are a number of things troubling me, which I wish to call to your attention. I am sorry that you did not think it necessary to have me present at last week's meeting of managing editors, especially since my work was criticized. No matter how the meeting began, it lasted long enough and was important enough to have called me in to answer for myself. Such unusual procedure certainly leaves a question in my mind as to my position here.

My production work habits are as unsatisfactory to me as they are to you. For the past three years I have taken work home with me every weekend and practically every night. Recently I have been working on part of my lunch hour. I cannot continue to work day and night without even an out-of-town assignment for diversion. My health is worth more to me than any job.

The thing that made your offer attractive to me in the first place was the promise that it would entail travel. At a recent meeting I asked if being managing editors would change this. You said no, if we got our work far enough along, we could go.

According to Mr. Williams...*Ebony* is in better shape than it has been, so now you feel that Mr. Nipson and I haven't enough to do, that we should be writing more stories.

When I offered to do the Nassau story as a break before Mr. Burns leaves for the summer, you said you could not afford to send anyone that far for one story. How much did it cost you to send Mr. Smith to New York to get his furniture? How much has it cost for Mr. Smith to gather information on sex in the army? How much did it cost to send Mr. Duckett to California? Florida?

I understand that you also object because I am reading papers on Thursday and Friday, that I am not typing enough. I also get up extra early each morning so that I can read the morning paper and have from one to five clippings to hand to Mr. Burns for *Jet* when he arrives. Aside from reading *Time*, *Newsweek*, Thursday's *Courier* and the *Defender*, which I bring with me Friday mornings, I know of no other way to get ideas for "Forecast." May I add that I am the only managing editor who has regular columns in all three publications, none for which I receive credit or recognition—which brings me to another sore spot.

When I came to this job, I was a published author with a following of 200,000 readers, but during the four-and-a-half years that I have been in your employ, I have had only one *Ebony* byline. On the other hand, Mr. Clayton has had 8 in 3 years, Mr. Burley 5 in 9 months, and in the May issue, three editors, all with less than a year's tenure, are

being given bylines.

Surely such stories as Christian Scientists, Lepers, Prophet Jones, Creoles, Ministers, etc., have warranted the same recognition. Not even the best selling articles which I wrote for *Negro Digest* during the last two years, and which increased circulation by 66 percent, resulted in a voluntary raise or a bonus, although others spend double time on assignments, spend your money freely being big shots and violate every rule and regulation in the place, are given bonuses for work well done.

As the oldest employee, I share titles with and receive only \$5 more than Mr. Nipson who has been here only half as long. Yet I am expected to do (and am doing) layout at \$115 a week, which Marty couldn't do satisfactorily at \$150—and was offered more to remain.

In an organization as large as this, it is impossible to keep salaries a secret. I think you should know, Mr. Johnson that the weakest point in the morale of the office is the feeling that you believe a white man is worth more than a Negro.

I write all this because it is only right that you should know how I feel. We have talked things over in the past and I have not won an argument yet. I don't want to argue now. I have enjoyed my work here and the experience has been a rich one. "I ain't mad at you." I admire you immensely as a businessman and an employer, but with dissatisfaction on your part and mine, it is best that we come to an understanding or a decision.

With what I am putting into my job and what I am getting out of it, I would be better off staying at home working on a book as my publishers suggest.

If I hear nothing from you on this matter by Friday, I shall assume that my job here terminates with the end of this pay period.

I have reproduced this particular letter because I think it best illustrates Era Bell Thompson's hostile work environment within her first five years at Johnson Publishing Company. The letter reveals blatant sexism, outright exploitation, jealousy and corporate sabotage, and a lack of respect for Thompson's production work habits. Thompson calls into question Johnson's own work practices and ethics, pointing to his failure to honor his word. She indicates that "the boys" are taking advantage of him (while she is not), hinting at the unfair and unorthodox treatment of her that he allows. The "white man" she refers to is Ben Burns (who was hated by the staff). The letter also effectively informs Johnson that Thompson may have discussed her unsatisfying situation at Johnson Publishing Company with other (mainstream) publishers, reminding him of her value as a

writer, one that could also do the magazine's layout, if needed. At the end of her letter, she cleverly praises Johnson, indicating corporate sabotage by the "others," certain male editors that may have had Johnson's "ear," perhaps those who were jealous of Thompson's success, especially since it apparently was her work in *Negro Digest* that increased circulation by sixty-six per cent. In addition, I believe that the letter reveals Thompson's own sense of value as a human being and as a professional; she is so confident of her abilities she is willing to risk being fired rather than to accept maltreatment in the workplace. But of course, Johnson did not terminate Thompson; instead he prepared her and Herbert Nipson, also a college graduate, to take over *Ebony* as co-editors, eliminating Ben Burns's position entirely.

Still, as evidenced by her correspondence, over the years Thompson sought other positions while employed by Johnson Publishing Company. For example, in 1962, while visiting Spain, Thompson, writing to a friend at the United States Information Service, confides, "My six months of freedom will be up, and I'll be faced with the decision of what I want to do in the future; go back to the Johnson Plantation to cope with all the old tensions and bickering and jealousies, or try something new...seriously...I do not want to go back." Wanting to leave Johnson Publishing Company to focus on writing books, Thompson maintained dialogue with three publishing houses, including McGraw-Hill, St. Martin's Press, and Dodd, Mead & Co., all eager to receive the outlines of book ideas that Thompson had produced. For instance, she sent one outline to Robert Gutwillig at McGraw-Hill in March 1961; it was an idea inspired by Roi Ottley's *New World A-Coming*. She writes, "I propose to write a book about a *New World, Now*," emphasizing the "inside-Negro-America theme." Thompson, who wanted to focus on "black

nationalism” in the United States explains, “What I wish to do is interpret the progress of our largest minority in terms of recent advances and to evaluate his position in America today as did Ottley in 1943 and Walter White (*How Far the Promised Land?*) in 1955.”

In 1963, in a separate letter to McGraw-Hill, Era Bell Thompson broached another book idea. She writes, “I do want to write a book about around the worlds acceptance—and lack of it—of an American Negro woman...Also could be included my reception in Africa before independence and after.” Unfortunately, with the upstart of *Ebony Africa* in 1963, in which Thompson was assigned editor, she realized, with the demanding workload at Johnson Publishing Company, that she might not be able to write any of the books she had outlined. Still, she held onto hope. In a response to McGraw-Hill’s inquiries in 1964 of one of her book ideas, Thompson writes, “Am still planning to do the book I discussed with you, but have just plunged into the editing of *Ebony Africa*, an extension of our domestic issue. Right now I hardly have time to think, let alone write creatively.” Unfortunately, overwhelmed with her many duties at Johnson Publishing as well as devastating and life threatening health problems, Era Bell Thompson never got to write the books she had imagined.

In November 1968, John H. Johnson sent Era Bell Thompson the *Ebony* Circulation Audit Report that noted the magazine’s growth in circulation from 1958 to 1968; it had increased from 480,826 in 1958 to 1,200,000 by 1968, reflecting the years that Thompson served as foreign correspondent. The *American Journalism* article quotes Johnson’s 1989 autobiography, noting that “Ebony in July 1947 became the first African American publication the Audit Bureau of Circulation assessed” (12). Focusing on more recent years, the study recognizes,

During the latter half of the 1990s, *Ebony* maintained a position of dominance with a paid circulation of 1.8 million and a ranking of thirty-eight among the Audit Bureau Circulation's one hundred largest circulating magazines. The ranking during this decade has ranged between thirty-eight and fifty-five, with *Ebony's* circulation ranging from 1.6 million to 1.4 million, and its readership estimated to range from nine to twelve million monthly. (13)

Much of this success, I believe, should be attributed to Era Bell Thompson's pioneering reporting as a foreign correspondent, writer and editor. Johnson, who I believe knew she was responsible for the magazine's lucrative increase between 1958 and 1968, which contributed to the magazine's overall success, did not openly admit it. Thompson, because of her unique background, was able to elicit many more white American subscribers than ever, not to mention the subscribers in all the countries she had visited between those years, and the articles she produced as a result. I believe this was instrumental in boosting circulation of *Ebony* during those earlier years. Apparently, John H. Johnson also recognized the reason why *Ebony* circulation had increased. This is evidenced by Johnson's August 1969 letter, in which Johnson granted Thompson "a one-year leave of absence." He writes, "During the period of this leave, you will be paid a salary of \$10,000 per year...you will also receive all other benefits of the company, including Blue Cross-Blue Shield, life insurance, etc." After reassuring Thompson that she would receive her pension payment when she chose to retire, he says, "In addition, we would like to employ you as a consulting editor doing a maximum of four stories per year on subjects of your own choosing. Payment for these stories will be made at the rate of \$1,000 per story..." However, the final paragraph of his letter is more personal as he recalls their first meeting.

He writes,

Time passes so fast that I did not realize until you mentioned it that you began work for the company 22 years ago today. I well remember going to see you at your apartment on 62nd and South Parkway when we had our first conversation about coming to work for Johnson Publishing Company. Enthusiastic as I was, I did not envision that it would be the beginning of a 22-year business association and friendship. I have made quite a few decisions of which I am rather proud, but I don't think I've made any that I value more than the one I made to engage your services as a writer and editor. My only hope is that you have been as pleased to work with the company and with me as I have been to know and work with you.

Obviously, Johnson chose to acknowledge Thompson's outstanding, superior service in his own way—quietly, and maybe that is the way Thompson preferred it to be, given her desire to preserve her privacy.

Nearly five years earlier in March 1964, Thompson had confided to Johnson that she had been diagnosed with breast cancer and had to undergo a radical mastectomy. No one, not close friends nor even her family knew about her ordeal until seven years later when Thompson wrote "I Was a Cancer Coward" and it appeared in *Ebony* magazine September 1971. She writes, "Besides my doctor, only three people knew the truth: the executor of my will, a neighbor who was herself in a hospital secretly having a cataract removed and my boss, Publisher John H. Johnson." Thompson recreates their conversation in her article. She writes:

" 'I have to have an operation,' I told him, trying to be casual. 'I'll be back at my desk in 10 or 12 days. But please, I don't want anyone to know where I am.' 'All right,' he agreed. 'We'll just say I'm sending you East on special assignment.' He gave me his private telephone number, should I need him" (64). Indeed, Johnson kept Thompson's confidence; in fact, he protected her privacy so well during her recovery period (which included skin grafting and physical therapy), he even kept her from being disturbed by a death in her family. Thompson reveals, "A week after the operation my executor friend

called to tell me she had heard that a favorite cousin of mine was dead. I used the private number for the first time and called my boss. It was true, he confirmed. The funeral director tried to make him divulge my whereabouts, but all he would say was, ‘I’ll see that she gets your message’” (64).

Thompson’s bout with cancer proved a turning point in her life as she says in her article that she was “Face to face with the reality—not the fear—of death...” But what is most important here is the effect that her article had on readers in America and all over the world. Thompson even admitted that this article was the one of which she was most proud and the one about which she received the most reaction from in her journalism career. She commented, “and that was after I retired...because cancer was something that no one talked about, before all the famous people started writing about it. I came out with it and was explaining it. It took me a long time—seven years after the operation—before I was able to write about it and it was therapeutic. After that I was able to talk about it, and before that I couldn’t” (58). Once again, the pioneering Era Bell Thompson breaks from convention and reaching out, helps to educate readers, white and black, men and women, about cancer. This is reflected in her comment: “I was more proud of the fact that in one of the cancer clinics downtown, the fellow who operated on me was a speaker and he recommended the article and said that it should have been in a larger, white magazine where more people would read it” (59). In her piece, subtitled “By telling own story, *Ebony* editor hopes to help others facing radical mastectomy,” Era Bell Thompson takes readers along with her through the harrowing process, from the first detection of a “lump” while reclining, to the removal of “the breast, auxiliary lymph nodes, underlying muscles of the chest wall and the glands,” including seventeen days in the hospital, and

holding nothing back (64). She writes, “ I hope that the telling of my personal story will help to remove the curtain of silence and the shadow of fear from the estimated 70,000 American women and men—yes, men—who will get breast cancer this year. And having more knowledge of the disease, some of the 31,000 now doomed may be saved.” The article includes an illustrated chart showing and explaining how women (and men) can self-examine their breasts for lumps, discharge, or other abnormalities, which was shocking information in 1971.

As a result of her pioneering essay, the American Cancer Society’s Reach to Recovery Program lauded Thompson for her research and article about her experiences. As a matter of fact, the Illinois Division ordered 10,000 reprints of the article to be distributed nationally. Cecile A. Gagan, Public Information Director for the Illinois Division wrote to Thompson in October 1971 regarding her cancer article. She says, “Our National office ordered 10,000 of them, and we have taken 1,000 to date for distribution in Illinois, starting with our fine Reach to Recovery workshop.”

In “I was a Cancer Coward,” Thompson reassures readers when she says, “The seven years since my mastectomy have been happy, productive years in which I have been around the world twice, have been big game hunting in East Africa and have received two honorary degrees. Like 1 ½ million other Americans, I am clinically ‘cured’ of cancer” (70). After her article appeared, Thompson was interviewed on a local Chicago television program about her bout with cancer, which reached millions of viewers and documented her as a pioneer, being one of the first, if not *the* first celebrity to openly discuss her experience on live television. This is just another example of how Era Bell

Thompson made an impact on readership, crossing over into mainstream national media, thereby completely transcending issues of race.

Era Bell Thompson's journalistic writing, especially those titles mentioned that I consider to be hallmarks and that have contributed to the success of Johnson Publishing Company, specifically to the success of *Ebony*, offers an opportunity to explore aspects of the genre that have made a mark in journalism history. However, here I would like to briefly examine some of her lesser known early writings in *Negro Digest*, specifically her monthly column "Bell's Lettres" (1949-1951) that may have been a factor, along with her other *Negro Digest* articles, in the sixty-six percent increase in subscriptions disclosed in Thompson's letter. As a result of "Bell's Lettres," Thompson received many, many letters of response and support from black (and even white) readers all over the continent. Each "Bell's Lettres" entry has an interesting, mysterious, or playful title; as noted, Thompson enjoyed creating titles that use sarcasm, wit, and satire. Thompson's observations, descriptions, and commentary are sometimes fascinating and funny as well as frustrating, as she evaluates racism, sexism, colorism, elitism, and other topics common to her readers. Some of the thirty columns are reactions, reflections, and critiques of popular culture and of people, locally and nationally. But most importantly, Thompson provides a perspective that broadens her readers' viewpoints. For instance, what is most fascinating is the reality that Thompson, though of African American descent, knew nothing about black people, the South, or any of the racial situations common to black existence in the southern states, and this in itself must have been hilarious for her black readers to consider.

Thompson's first entry, "For White" (June 1949) reveals her anomalous position in the American South where she was sent to learn about the African American perspective. Completely ignorant of Southern Jim Crow and frightened by the many stories of violence and death against innocent black people by white mobs, Thompson says, "I diligently sought to stay within the rigid lines of the white supremacist's law." Meanwhile, because she was "scared silly in the South," she failed to realize that the buses, all labeled "white" were actually meant for all riders, black and white, and that the "white" label merely meant "White Bus Company." Clueless, Thompson waited four hours for a bus that was labeled "black" before she realized her mistake. This bit of humor prepares readers for what is an uncomfortable ride on a segregated bus in New Orleans. Recognizing what she refers to as "Dixiecratic Law," Thompson evaluates the deeper meanings attached to the well known and much hated "'screen' that little wooden movable sign on the back of the seat that says 'For Colored Patrons Only.'" She writes, "There are probably more tales told about these hickory boards than any other barrier in the Crescent City. Surely no other sign is more used and abused. According to Dixiecratic Law, Negroes fill the bus from the rear and whites from the front. Where 'ere the twain shall meet, there is placed the sign." Thompson goes on to point out the many complications that arise from what is apparently a confusing, irrational system because Negroes live "all over the town, side by side with their Nordic brothers (they have no restrictive covenants there)..." Thompson informs readers using a humorous tone.

After Thompson moves from her discussion of the "screen," she turns to the complications of segregation when trying to determine who is actually white, and who is black. She says, "Probably the funniest thing about this voluntary method of segregation

is what happens to the border-line cases—the light blacks and the dark whites of which there are so many in New Orleans.” Thompson’s comments remind readers of historical miscegenation, that subtle glimmer of the rape and sexual exploitation of black womanhood during slavery, a memory that is quickly lightened by humor. However, I believe Thompson captured the pain of black Americans in this column (and in many other columns) who at the time suffered constant daily reminders of their so-called inferiority by a brutal white supremacist ideology, an oppression represented here by a simple wooden board. Sadly, the demoralizing effects of such absurd ideology is reflected at the end of the column when Thompson admits that in New Orleans and many other places in the South “white means white”; the last line of the entry emphasizes this: “And if the telephone company hadn’t spent millions of dollars making black telephones, they too, would be labeled white.”

In the July 1949 column, Era Bell Thompson continues to observe and analyze southern American culture while visiting Memphis in “The Thing.” The mysterious title draws readers in as Thompson reveals the less than desirable conditions of the typical segregated “best Negro hotel in town” where she spends an unforgettable night with “something big and raw red with beadie eyes, too many legs and too few inhibitions.” Situated directly above a “Boogie hot spot” that literally “jumped” all night, Thompson describes her overnight experience using humor even though it is clear that Jim Crow is a very serious matter in Memphis. Still, Thompson admits, “In a few short weeks I had overcome my Jim Crow jitters...” She instead turns her attention to the nuances of Southern dialect as she notices, “For the life of me I couldn’t distinguish between the voice of a white person and that of a Negro. Amos ‘n’ Andy aren’t necessarily imitating

Negroes.” Although Thompson apparently appreciates the various rhythms of the dialect, she concludes with a feeling of ambiguity. She writes, “Yes, the language of the South is colorful and descriptive, but the ways of its people sometime defy description.”

Besides her enlightening and very funny entries regarding the segregated South, Thompson also reveals her experiences as a prestigious Bread Loaf Fellow in Middlebury, Vermont during the summer of 1949. In “Bell’s Lettres,” Thompson writes about her encounters as the only “Negro Loafer” of almost 200 participants using two entries: December 1949 and January 1950. What is fascinating to me is the straightforward titles Thompson creates for these two entries, which simply read “Bread Loaf Conference I” and “Bread Loaf Conference II,” unlike the other twenty-eight playful column titles. In addition, these are the only entries that include a preface, which is written in third person, thereby eliminating Thompson’s favorite pronoun “I” to address herself as “other,” in order to inform her readers of a terribly degrading reality. I also suspect that her experiences were so distasteful that Thompson moved to third person to distance herself even more from the staggering ignorance of many white conference attendees at Bread Loaf that summer. The preface states:

This article was particularly interesting because most Negroes have come in contact with whites who have had limited or no contact with Negroes, and have found themselves in the same harrowing experience of trying to analyze the Negro or listening to the some-of-my-best-friends-are-Negroes type conversation. Even more interesting is the atypical and very matter-of-fact method the writer used to combat this annoying situation. By relating the incident, she leaves the message that we neither have to bear it bravely nor insult the speaker when correcting his, obviously unintentional, mistake.

To offset the thought of being in such an uncomfortable position, Thompson rubs a bit of humor in her “very matter-of-fact method” used to handle such an “annoying situation.”

Here, Thompson makes it clear to readers that regardless of such overwhelming bigotry, her experiences at the conference were not completely tainted. She says early in the first entry that the two weeks she spent “at famed Bread Loaf” with “other practicing and aspiring writers from all over the United States and Canada” were the most rewarding two weeks she had ever experienced. She says, “What I learned about writing filled two notebooks and the slick side of a blotter.” But Thompson, consistently pestered by other conference attendees with these “racial recitals,” as she calls them, had to develop a “method” of self-defense for her own sanity. She writes, “As the only Negro Loafer, I became a walking race relations delegate. Never have I met so many people in so short a time who wanted to talk so much about ‘the problem’—something I had come halfway across the continent to forget.” Thompson demonstrates her “method” at the end of the article when speaking to “a navy man” who “eased into a Negro routine via the servant method,” which Thompson finds particularly demeaning, so she asks him, “Don’t you get tired of being called a sailor?” When he replies, “Yes,” Thompson responds, “Well, I get tired of being a Negro, too. All day long I’ve been talking about this color business. Can’t we just talk about people for a while?” After an apology, the navy man “launched into a most entertaining yarn about his experience as a sailor!” In this way, Thompson enlightens her readers by providing a different perspective on handling a complex situation. And she also reminds readers “that all southerners aren’t bigots,” thereby ending on a positive note.

In “Bread Loaf Conference II,” Era Bell Thompson, once she has addressed the race issue in “Bread Loaf Conference I,” seems able to focus on the activities of the two week conference that she enjoyed, including “lectures on the short story, novel, non-fiction and

poetry” conducted by “famous authors and editors” such as historian Bernard DeVoto, who became a close friend of Era Bell Thompson, publisher William Sloane, novelist A.B. Guthrie, Jr., and poets Robert Frost and John Ciardi, among others. Of the nearly 200 attendees, Thompson was one of nine Fellows. She writes, “We Fellows were supposed to be a select group of advanced writers, each one with at least one book behind him and working on another.” Besides serious discussions about writing, Thompson appreciated the recreation and entertainment that was provided. She says, “There was swimming and tennis, as well as hikes up the mountains and to the Snow Bowl, a famous ski resort. With a little cooperation from short-story writer Louise Reinhardt Smith who had a station wagon and a penchant for bridle paths, I managed to get in some good horseback riding.” Thompson explains a high point of her experience, a “traditional Bread Loaf Custom,” which “is the picnic and baseball game at the home of Robert Frost, dean of all living American poets.” Thompson adds humorously, “Mr. Frost, with all his seventy-odd years, can swing as mean a bat as he does a ballad.” Awed by her first trip to “Vermont or New England,” Thompson is reminded of her North Dakota homeland because of the beauty of the surrounding Green Mountains of Vermont. However, the highlight of the experience was in knowing that it was *her* manuscript that had been chosen for criticism by A. B. Guthrie, Jr., author of *The Big Sky* (1947) and “one of the most popular people at the Loaf.” This was considered a great honor among the Fellows.

The fact that Thompson can easily share her literary experiences as a Bread Loaf Fellow with *Negro Digest* readers sends them a positive message about the possibilities that lay ahead for African Americans in the changing political environment, a message that promised to eliminate barriers and limitations and erase ignorance and prejudice. In

other words, Thompson gives readers a model and a formula to succeed in mainstream America that emphasizes connecting to others by way of their humanity, as she demonstrated with the navy man. She ends by informing readers, “The lions of the literary world were as normal as other people and twice as human.”

An enlightening column, “The Writingest Man in the World” (July 1950) is an inside look at what it is like to spend a typical day with the poet Langston Hughes, a long time friend of Era Bell Thompson. Although Thompson calls it an interview, she gives readers a peek at Langston Hughes’s work habits, which reveal the 48 year-old poet’s ability to multi-task successfully. For example, while he converses easily with Thompson, a commissioned artist captures him on canvas while he generates inspiration for his “collaboration with musician David Martin” by the continual playing of records on his phonograph. In the midst of these activities, Hughes also answers the phone. Thompson writes, “Song writing is a side of multi-talented Mr. Hughes of which few people are familiar, although his *Freedom Road* is known all over the country. Other works range from gospels to boogie.” Thompson observes and comments on Hughes’s “attractive room and marveled at its orderliness.” She says, “Langston Hughes, the writingest colored man in the world, has authored eight books, dozens of plays, thousands of poems, Cuban and Haitian translations, radio scripts and innumerable newspaper and magazine articles.” Thompson goes on to describe a “typical day with the Bard of Harlem” which “begins at noon.” She quotes Hughes: “ ‘My work day begins at 2 P. M. with time out for dinner at 8 and a recording or two for relaxation,’ said Hughes.” But Thompson notes that Hughes is “strictly a night writer, burning the bulb until 4 A. M.” The “five-five,” “174” pound Hughes shares with Thompson his “[f]unniest literary experience” which

was “ ‘[t]he autograph I left in the bathtub of a private home. The son had painted *everything* in the room before my arrival, and unwittingly, I took a bath.’ ” Such intimate reporting in “Bell’s Lettres” allows readers to savor the great success of “one of their own”; it also inspires readers to consider the possibilities available for black writers, artists and musicians to excel at the beginning of a new decade.

Other columns in “Bell’s Lettres,” besides those addressing racism, often face down rampant sexism in America. This is evident in Thompson’s April 1951 entry “Women Drivers,” in which Thompson compares women and men drivers; she attacks sexism, masking her criticism with wit and humor. She relates several funny anecdotes to make her point. Thompson’s lead-in begins, “Fluttering eyelashes I do not have. I cannot produce a quivering lip or shed a plaintive tear. If I had a well-turned ankle I probably would not know which way to turn it, but as a woman driver, my sex—even without such blandishments—has kept me out of many a jail.” However, Thompson’s deep criticism follows quickly in the next paragraph when she says, “When I make a U turn on a busy street or change my mind after signaling; when I nip a fender or bang a bumper, I am glad that God made me a woman. Of women such things are expected.” But the side-splitting humor throughout the piece softens much of Thompson’s criticism. For instance, when Thompson says, “I have had men flee in terror or flatten themselves against garage doors when they see me approaching on wheels” readers are induced to laughter at the thought, which distracts them from the critical undercurrent. Thompson admits throughout that women drivers indeed exploit their sexuality, especially when confronted with sexist police officers that have been socialized to believe in women’s innate inferiority. Clearly, Thompson has great fun attacking sexist stereotypes in this entry.

In her June 1950 entry, Era Bell Thompson revisits a troublesome topic, one that she had addressed in the 1920s in the poem entitled “My Clowning Glory,” in which Thompson laments her finely curled “Negro” hair, especially when compared with the straight, silky hair of the women in her isolated North Dakota environment. Using the same title for her “Bell’s Lettres” article thirty years later, Thompson continues to struggle with her uncooperative hair. She bemoans, “There are two kinds of women in this world: those with beautiful silken tresses and women like me. Me and my clowning glory.” In fact, Thompson may have been one of the first, if not the first black woman to publicly reveal her harrowing experiences with “a special very secret process” used by black women to straighten their ringlets, and she does so using humor, making fun of herself as well as the process. Thompson contends that hair is “the Negro’s most defiant problem, and one of his most lucrative commercial enterprises” that “will someday emerge from the realm of the hush hush and cease to be a phenomenon, a thing of shame.” Here, it becomes clear to me exactly how much Thompson’s hair was tied to her feelings of shame, which constantly assaulted her self-esteem, a reality that, like skin color, deeply affected black people in America. She admits, “The grade of hair, like the color of the skin, is still important to the Negro’s popularity. All descriptions begin with these two physical features.” However, Thompson goes on to hilariously explain how she lived “a deceitful life” while working her way “through an all-white college and living with an all-white family” where her hair became her “Number One headache.” She writes, “We had no swimming pool, thankgodamighty, but there was the shower after gym, the problem of ‘fixing’ my lusterless locks in privacy—and rain, rain everywhere.” Needing at least an “hour and a half to wash and iron” her hair, Thompson explains how

she used what she calls “Plan A” or “Plan B” to maintain secrecy in the straightening of her “glory.” Thompson relates a funny story about going to the lake on a hot summer day with her step-family (the O’Brians), but refusing to go into the water to avoid getting her hair wet. She writes,

The temperature soared to 98. I was hot and sticky. Reluctantly I went along, but balked at water’s edge. The head of the family thought I was being my own hellish self. No one with an ounce of sanity would refuse to go swimming on a day like that. The head of the family insisted. He coaxed. He threatened. Never had I come so close to being publicly walloped. *They could not understand it and I could not explain.* [My emphasis]

I emphasized the last line of the above quotation to comment on how Thompson’s shame of her racial characteristics literally dominated her life and created a mysterious barrier between her and her white family. Thompson was unable to share her angst over her curly hair, even though it is clear that the O’Brian family loved and accepted her regardless of whether her hair was ironed straight, or left naturally curly. Therefore, beneath the outrageous humor in this column, Thompson reveals how important hair is to the African American women’s psyche, an issue that continues to be explored today.

Fifteen years later, Thompson again writes about her “hair” in the November 1965 issue of *Ebony* in the hilariously unforgettable “Instant Hair,” one of several articles that Thompson produced while investigating the race policies of Brazil. It seems that with Era Bell Thompson, the funnier the piece, the sharper the criticism because in this article, Thompson uses common racial attitudes and practices in Brazil to lead readers to her main discussion—the profitable hair industry of wigs and hairpieces. Using this approach, Thompson unmask for American readers some jarring realities and similarities regarding race, hair texture, and skin color, realities that she had addressed

four months earlier in her groundbreaking July 1965 *Ebony* article “Does Amalgamation Work in Brazil?” But in “Instant Hair” Thompson underlines the irrationality of racial superiority based on physical characteristics using her signature humor. Thompson, known for her startling and engaging lead-ins never misses a beat as she captures her readers’ interest; then, within minutes, she has them laughing out loud. Consider how Thompson effectively draws her reader in:

“ ‘You are a mulatto,’ said my Brazilian visitor.
 ‘Heaven’s no!’ I smiled. ‘I am a Negro.’
 ‘You are a mulatto,’ she repeated. ‘You are dark, yes, but your hair is good. Do you always wear it that way?’ she asked, critically eyeing my old-fashioned bob.
 ‘Why, yes,’ I stammered.
 ‘Now you go to a good beauty parlor, get a fashionable hairdo and you can go anyplace in Rio that I can go. Hair,’ she lectured, ‘is very important.’
 ‘Oh, but this—I blurted, stopped short and ended lamely, ‘is something I must take care of later.’ Awkwardly, I brushed a strange lock from my eye. Inwardly, I was cracking up. That fool wig! She thought it was my own hair!’” (139)

After hooking her reading audience, Thompson keeps them chuckling as she says, “Twenty-minutes earlier I was a Negro. Now, with no thought of deceiving or desire to misrepresent, I was a mulatto.” Thompson admits that after having a chemical straightening process done while in Hong Kong, her “hair turned a burnt red—then total fallout.” Thompson laments that her “scalp was a major disaster area.” With no other choice, she tells readers that she sought “instant glamour” in the purchase of an expensive wig, in which she humorously bemoans, after “putting out 125 of my hard earned dollars for a coiffured hank of store-bought hair, I found myself in the embarrassing position of perpetrating a hoax upon the public. I was passing and I was trapped.” Focusing on the racial idiosyncrasy of her predicament, Thompson exclaims, “My picture had appeared in the papers, I had been interviewed and entertained. Firmly fixed in the minds of all Brazil, was a woman of undeterminable age, with rough brown skin, practically no eye

brows and *silky black hair*.” However, once readers stop laughing at Thompson’s comedic portrayal, they are treated to an engaging, informative, interesting article about the lucrative wig industry, including the historical relevance of the industry, going back to “the days of Cleo and Hannibal.” Clearly, Thompson predates comedians like Chris Rock who recently produced a documentary film that focuses on black “hair” (*Good Hair* 2009) that is, in some ways, reminiscent of Thompson’s 1965 *Ebony* article.

After Thompson retired, she had hoped to write about her experiences as a black female journalist at Johnson Publishing Company in a book titled *The Fifth Estate*. I actually discovered the unfinished manuscript in a lone box in the archives of the Vivian G. Harsh Collection. The manuscript includes a seven-page outline of eleven chapters (numbered I-XI) and three chapters--a total of thirty-one typed pages. In addition, beneath *The Fifth Estate* manuscript were four typed pages, the last of Era Bell Thompson’s private collection. These pages comprised a “Tentative Chapter Outline” of a nineteen-chapter book, titled *P. S. or The Rest of My Life*, a book that apparently would have focused on her world travels.

In 1983, when Era Bell Thompson was asked, “Why haven’t you written more during the past twelve years?” She responded, “For one thing I guess I had just written myself out. There was something a football coach said the other day when he quit and he said that he was just footballed out. I used to do the editorials [for *Ebony*] for about twelve years and that was the hardest thing because you never got through. By the time you finished one, you started thinking about the other one, gathering material” (McNeese 69). Indeed, Thompson had been exhausted by a long, intense writing career that included extensive research and world traveling. Also, surviving breast cancer and experiencing a

stroke, I think, changed her perspective as she aged. Perhaps the final book would have filled in some of the silences often felt in Era Bell Thompson's writing, silences frequently occupied by humor. I suspect that Thompson sometimes contemplated completing *The Fifth Estate* because interestingly, she kept her typewriter set-up right by her bed where it was found after her death on December 30, 1986. Thompson spent her later years more focused on helping other people. Working as a hospital volunteer, Thompson described in 1983 how much she enjoyed talking to people and helping them whenever possible. She said, "I feel that all of my life people have given me things—an education, a home—people have done things for me so long that I feel that for the rest of my life I can do something for other people" (McNeese 72-73). And Era Bell Thompson spent her final years doing what she had always done throughout her extensive writing career and throughout her life—she continued to help others.

¹ LaVern Arnetta McNeese interviewed Era Bell Thompson February 11, 1983 as part of a master's thesis project in journalism at Southern Illinois University August 1983. Her complete project is held in the Era Bell Thompson papers at the Vivian G. Harsh Collection archives.

Era Bell Thompson: Chicago Renaissance Writer

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